

# Afghanistan: Is Winning Possible?

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## *Summary*

Is winning possible in Afghanistan? In 2002, no one really asked this question. Afghanistan was woven against 9/11 and we were freeing the country. “Of course” we would win. “Certainly.” But now, people are actually starting to ask the question. Some think we are losing the “good” fight. Three components to “winning” were discussed.

### *A Military Victory is not Possible under Present Circumstances*

The first component revolves around the military. In December, British Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed his troops in Kandahar indicating they were “fighting in the location of the war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” If we do not win, all will pay a very big price. The British, Dutch, and Canadian forces have lost more soldiers in Afghanistan in the last few months than any fighting in the Second World War. And the Taliban believe that they will not accept much more in terms of body loss. In particular, the Canadian government might fall.

Suicide bombing has increased exponentially, from 27 attacks in 2005 to 39 in 2006. The Afghans are shocked by this—“We do not do this.” Remote-controlled devices are also increasingly being used, and it is expected that we will be experiencing a very deadly spring. In fact, departing US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, remarked “there is tough fighting ahead.”

A military victory is not possible under present circumstances. As long as young men gather to their faith and have no expectations of a better life, you will have more and more “martyrs.” The word means “blessing.” Our soldiers are volunteers—they do not believe if you die it is a “blessing.” The Taliban feel they will defeat us just like they did the Soviets. The Pashtun Wali culture, the traditional code of the Pashtun tribe, is still intact. It centers on a 2,500-year history marked by war, fighting, and battles. Afghanistan is also cursed by its location. Author, Louis Dupree, asks, “Where in the world is Afghanistan? It is not north, south, east, or west. It is all of them.” It does not appear that our US military leaders understand these hard facts, or even the Department of State, according to many Afghans.

Some say, “What does old history have to do with us?” For instance, Badakhshan shares an 18-mile border with China. The Silk Trail could re-emerge as the opium trail. For 2,500 years, fighters (like Alexander the Great) have rampaged through the country. The British and Russians referred to subduing Afghanistan as the “Great Game.” Our leaders go into battle without learning from history.

We have also not understood, or accepted, one factor of the current war—the Afghan war on terror is superimposed on a civil war. By placing Hamid Karzai in power, we have temporarily interrupted a civil war. There are several major ethnic groups in the country, among them the Pashtun, Tajik, and Uzbek. The capital city of Kabul is populated by a mix of peoples.

Karzai is Pashtun—and a Pashtun had to be named president as the Pashtun believe Afghanistan is “their” country. The group believes it comprises some 50-55 percent of the population, though the actual number is likely not as high as they would like to think.

In 1893, the British drew a line (the Durand Line) through Pashtun lands in what is now considered eastern and southern Afghanistan and Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, Federally Administered Tribal Areas (F.A.T.A.), and Balochistan province. More Pashtuns are present in present-day Pakistan and it is possible that history will see this period as the rise of Pashtunistan. Pakistan is a fragile state. President Pervez Musharraf’s recent accommodation of Waziristan, in the F.A.T.A., denotes *de facto* recognition of the territory’s independence.

In Kabul, when you ask residents, “What would happen if foreign troops left?” without exception they say there would be an outbreak of war within half an hour. The city would explode into civil war with ethnic group versus ethnic group and powerbrokers versus powerbrokers. Kabul had not been destroyed by Soviet tanks or bombing campaigns—but Afghans fighting Afghans.

And these ethnic tensions are increasing. We are sitting on a powder keg of ethnic tension plus a situation where hundreds of thousands of Pashtun men (on both sides of an international border) are desirous of fighting, and have a heritage of fighting and losing family members. The Taliban make it easy. They give out money and motorcycles. The Afghan Army merely pays its soldiers. If the view of history says “outsiders lose,” how do we become “insiders?”

### *The Need to Win Hearts and Minds*

The second war we need to win is for the hearts and minds of Afghans. Governments and over one hundred and fifty nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have spent billions of dollars of assistance in the country since 2001. In early 2002, we had “won” that war. Back in 2002, one could walk freely in Kabul without fear. Strangers would say, “Thank you.” I would ask, “For what?” And the response would be, “For saving/freeing our country...for removing the Taliban.” Taxi drivers refused to take fares—“We owe it to you...thanks America!” While 3,000+ people died in 9/11, we subsequently freed some 23 million people.

A new and worrying mood was present in Afghanistan in the spring of 2006. In May, there was a major riot which sent a message to the Karzai and US governments. There was an accident in which US troops traveling in vehicles struck Kabul resident pedestrians. The Afghan people regularly view the foreign soldiers as afraid of them—pointing to how they drive their vehicles at high rates of speed through the streets. In the demonstration, there were several types of people but most were disaffected youth—Afghans with no hopes or prospects for the future. They viewed the contrasts between themselves and foreigners, or even themselves and fellow Afghans with jobs. In this riot the central government even lost control of its capital for awhile.

The economic situation is frightening. And the international community has made a mistake by not focusing on this sector. The US Agency for International Development (USAID)

head in Afghanistan, nominally concerned with developing the poorer areas of the country on behalf of the US government, cannot even leave his compound in Kabul without an armed convoy. Afghans do not see sufficient positive impacts on their lives, or change. Many are offended because they are not consulted on projects seemingly for their benefit. The Kabul-Kandahar road serves as an example. This three-year infrastructure project was touted as a means to promote community development in rural areas. The thought was that local producers would benefit from the road to carry their goods to market. Now, Afghans and members of the international community cannot traverse the roadway safely as it is dangerous.

Poppy cultivation was record-breaking in 2006. Money had been rushed through the US Congress as a high priority, but no one stopped to consider the desperately poor people residing in the poppy-growing provinces of Afghanistan. This production is over 1,000 years old (and part of the culture), and no one offered immediate alternatives for these families—many with 10-12 children. One should remember this is not just a war in a remote desert of the Pakistan border. The hearts and minds struggle is likely to be lost too across the country unless there are significant changes made.

*The Only Significant “Winning” is if Afghans Believe they are “Winning”*

The Afghan people must believe they are “winning” this war—not members of the international community. They have to feel that their lives are improved, that they are respected, and that there can be a better life for themselves and their children especially after three decades of catastrophe. The number one issue right now is security. Even in Kabul there have recently been rocket strikes, so even there people do not feel safe. Life expectancy for women is currently 44 years, and men 46. One-fifth of children die before they reach five years of age. The percentage of women dying during maternity is the highest in the world, and literacy rates among the lowest.

Kabul contains some 3.5-4 million people. There were only around 750,000 before the war. Projections indicate that the population in the valley could grow to 10 million in the next 15 years. Despite the buildings that have been constructed over the last several years, over 80 percent are without water and electricity; and if they have these services, it is for only around three hours every other day. There are few paved roads. Sewage and waste flow into most residential streets. Provision of water will be a significant problem in the future.

With all these facts and figures, one esteemed writer has called Afghanistan “the most wretched place on earth.” While most Afghans could agree with this, it is their homeland and they love their homeland. Afghans may be poor, but they are proud. They remark, “Americans hate Afghans. Look at how they avoid us. They drive in big, closed vehicles. There are no interactions.” In 100 years, history may well record that the current era was one of American “fear”—Americans afraid to leave their “fortress” and afraid of Afghans. If we continue as we are, we will soon find ourselves at the airport—dis-invited and wondering what happened. It seems like that time may be rapidly approaching.

Pessimism is increasing among average Afghans. Some believe the mullahs will destroy everything. Fathers have told me: “Our children may have only two options, selling drugs or hiring out as mercenaries. Some have even said recently that the Russians were better. Memories are being distorted as fears increase. Many feel a sense of being let down following the elections. There had been large amounts of money and international effort placed on democratic elections, and the process went well. However, corruption has corroded peoples’ belief in the Karzai government. A Washington Post article published in 2006 reflected that his rule was at the tipping point. People are asking whether the US government has supported him for too long?

Perhaps all might have been different too if Karzai had arrived back in Afghanistan with 5000 Pashtuns, rather than on a US transport plane with only a few retainers. The Pashtun attitude is “Where are his men?” because warlords have men. They respect strength. People cannot understand how the government can be so corrupt. Pakistani President Musharraf recently remarked Karzai did not understand his country, and has lost 50-55 percent of his people’s support. Many believe he should not stay.

### *How Can Afghans and the International Community “Win”?*

Being “brave and simple” is the way to win. Afghanistan is at a crossroads. It is moving from a warlord state to a narco-state. Ninety percent of the world’s opium is produced there. At this late stage, any idea for winning needs clarity of purpose. We must be straightforward, honest, and direct. And we need to overcome fear. Security restrictions placed on the foreign community dooms us to failure.

There are few successful efforts to garner the support of the Afghan people. The Canadians are interested in working in conflict resolution, but it should be the US. From the Afghan-American community, there are some small projects taking place but overall there is no mobilization. Many elements in society are cross-cutting and in Afghanistan people-to-people programs need to be formed outside the Embassy walls. We should be looking to engage returned Peace Corps volunteers who worked in Afghanistan. American universities should be involved with exchanges of their Afghan counterparts. This foreign people-to-people effort should be paired with Afghans networking among themselves. Networking is needed in order for Afghans to build civil society. And society is silent—except for its distant, corrupt government. If technology were used for innovation, there would be unlimited opportunities for people-to-people programs. Development of Afghan communication teams establishing technology and entrepreneurial centers in remote villages to help connect people would be useful. And this should be done with the young people otherwise many talented people will begin leaving the country. Back in 2004, US President George W. Bush stated that America would stand with Afghanistan until its hopes for security and freedom were realized. What Afghans are looking for is the “WITH” in this statement: cooperation is what they *most* desire. The international community must be brave and simple. It must work with, listen to, and interact with the people of Afghanistan. If we do this soon, it is possible to “win.” If Afghans feel they have won that respect, involvement, and cooperation, we “win” also.

***Recommended Reading:***

*Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence* by Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls (2006)

*The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* by Sarah Chayes (2006)

*The Pathans: 550 BC - AD 1957* by Olaf Caroe (1984)

*The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* by Gilles Kepel (2004)