

The meaning of setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan for counterinsurgency, counter-terrorism, and intervention

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For the past sixteen years, the United States has been focused on intervening in foreign lands in order to fight terrorists and insurgents. The main theaters have been Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States invested great effort into the endeavor and developed new doctrines of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. The best lessons from the 20th Century informed US strategy. Between 2011 and 2014, after some success, the United States drew down its military forces in both countries. The Iraqi and Afghan governments, and their armies and police, were entrusted to take over and provide security. In the aftermath of drawdown, renewed insurgencies inflicted severe defeats on the two governments. Gains that had come at high cost and sacrifice for the United States unraveled.

The unraveling of Iraq and Afghanistan bears significance for the study of strategy. The hope of the time was that the United States would enable new governments to stand on their own. The notion is fundamental to America's strategic theory of intervention. The same notion informs US strategy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere today. It falls into a general sense that American intervention can do good. The defeats open this to question.

The argument of this paper is that Iraq and Afghanistan show it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, for a short intervention to yield lasting change. The success of each intervention was bound to sectarian, ethnic, cultural, and religious forces that proved insensitive to a few years of US presence. There was little that US decision-makers could do to escape a long-term commitment if the goal was to prevent insurgents or terrorists from taking over large portions of either country or overthrowing the government itself.

The meaning for strategy is that intervention—including counterinsurgency and counterterrorism—may often best be conceived as a costly, near-indefinite endeavor. There may not be success as traditionally conceived, just “forever war,” to use Dexter Filkins' apt phrase. Tactical successes that do occur may only be sustained through a prolonged commitment of troops. Afghanistan and Iraq are, of course, particular cases. The same outcomes will not pan out in other situations—think El Salvador and Colombia. Sometimes outright victory or negotiated settlements are possible without an extended presence. Still, the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences—coupled with Vietnam—should cast doubt on the whole cost-benefit relationship of intervention. The fact that such a commitment is costly should change strategic thought on intervention. Light and long-term strategies should be favored when intervention is necessary. In many cases, the prospect of an indefinite commitment should deter intervention in the first place. Letting countries find their own path may have unappreciated virtues.

The research for this paper comes from years spent as a civilian advisor in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recent repeated trips to each country. Some of the research has already appeared in two books—*War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan*

Frontier and Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State. Other research is part of an ongoing book project on the entire Afghan war.

Successes in Iraq and Afghanistan

Between 2006 and 2011, the United States made substantial progress against insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the United States was fighting al-Qa‘eda in Iraq (AQI), the Sunni resistance, and the Shi‘a Jaysh al-Mahdi for control of the cities. In Afghanistan, the main enemy was the Taliban, which had resurged in 2006 to overtake much of the countryside and threatened the viability of the state. To overcome the insurgencies, the United States sent tens of thousands of reinforcements and developed sound counterinsurgency tactics. The first “surge” took place in 2007 in Iraq; the second in 2009–2011 in Afghanistan. US troop numbers peaked at 185,000 in Iraq and 100,000 in Afghanistan.

The surges were designed to suppress insurgent activity and set the conditions for the host governments and their militaries to stand on their own. The Iraq surge was to be a temporary year-long boost of 30,000 troops. In his speech that announced the 2007 surge, President George W. Bush set forth:

Victory in Iraq will bring . . . a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people . . . it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them . . . If we increase our support at this crucial moment, and help the Iraqis break the current cycle of violence, we can hasten the day our troops begin coming home.¹

The Afghan surge was 54,000 troops. President Barack Obama decided the goal would be to break Taliban momentum in Afghanistan and enable the Afghan government to stand on its own so that the United States could pull back the surge reinforcements.² Obama set a firm date of the end of 2011 to begin drawing down. In both cases, the presidents believed the way out of indefinite commitment was to enable the government to stand on its own. Indeed, the notion could be considered an enduring component of US strategic thought on intervention. Their thought is strikingly similar to Vietnamization strategy of the Vietnam War in which the US military was to enable the South Vietnamese government and military to take over the war and allow US forces to withdraw.

The Iraq surge succeeded in bringing down violence. Steve Biddle, Jake Shapiro, and Jeffrey Friedman have shown in their article “Testing the Surge” that attack numbers fell throughout Iraq and Iraqi civilian and US military deaths fell by 92 percent.³ At the same time, Marines and soldiers introduced innovative tactics. A tribal uprising known as the “Anbar awakening” accompanied the surge. Tribes and Sunni communities rose up to resist AQI,

¹ “President Bush Addresses Nation on Iraq War,” Transcript, *Washington Post*, January 10, 2007.

² Gates, *Duty*, 498.

³ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007,” *International Security*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–11.

starting in Anbar and eventually spreading to Baghdad and elsewhere. US leaders in Anbar backed the awakening with fire support, money, and advisors. The Sunni militias were dubbed the “Sons of Iraq.” Roughly 100,000 stood up. They helped turn the tide against AQI. By the middle of 2008, AQI was on the run and Iraq’s cities and towns had become peaceful.

In Afghanistan, progress was less stark. US troops again implemented sound counterinsurgency tactics. The number of attacks dropped only slightly because insurgents continued to operate in inaccessible hills and mountains and Pakistani safe havens. While many tribes stood up against the Taliban, there was no sweeping awakening akin to what had happened in Iraq. Nevertheless, the key provinces that had been in danger—Helmand, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Ghazni—were largely secured. In the key population centers and farmlands, violence plummeted.

The Achilles’ Heel of Iraq and Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaigns was their cost. Deploying one soldier for one year cost roughly \$750,000 to \$1,000,000. For the whole 100,000 in Afghanistan, it came to approximately \$110 billion. This was the same time that President Obama was trying to rebuild the US economy amid the great recession.⁴ In 2011, the White House was preparing a deficit reduction plan of \$1 trillion over ten years. Reducing the number of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan was a significant component of the expected savings. Obama had always opposed the Iraq war and entered office determined to reduce forces there. When Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki would not come to terms on a legal arrangement for US presence at the end of 2011, the US administration pulled out all the troops. In Afghanistan, the drawdown was more gradual. In 2011, the administration decided to decrease the number of troops by 33,000 by the end of 2012 and then to an undetermined “advisory presence” by the end of 2014. In June 2014, it was decided that the advisory presence would start with 9,800 troops and then wind down to a small contingent of a few hundred or so at the US Embassy. The Afghan government and military were expected to stand on their own from that point onward.

The Fragility of Success

After 2011, US successes in both Iraq and Afghanistan collapsed. Almost to the day that US troops pulled out of Iraq, Maliki and the Iraqi government intensified persecution of the Sunni population. Between 2009 and 2011, Maliki had already stolen the 2010 elections from the Sunni’s preferred bloc and gutted the Sons of Iraq militias, which had been suppressing AQI. From 2011 to 2013, he struck at key Sunni politicians and political interests, thereby marginalizing Sunni political representation and creating a fatal rift between Sunni tribal movements and the government. In the ensuing months, protests broke out in Sunni cities, supported by much of the Sunni population. Maliki’s measures inflamed fears of Shi’a and Iranian expansionism.

At this time, AQI—renamed the Islamic State by future caliph Abu Bakr

⁴ Todd Harrison, *Estimating Funding for Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2009). Todd Harrison, “Analysis of the FY2012 Defense Budget,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011, 6–7.

al-Baghdadi—re-emerged as a major player in Iraq. Sectarian tension fed the growth of the Islamic State. Many Sunnis turned to the Islamic State as a protector or check on the government.⁵ Amid the protests and their enmity toward the Iraqi government, Sunni leaders ended up abiding the Islamic State. In the view of many, it was better to work with the Islamic State and accept their version of change than oppose it and thereby help the government. Moreover, few wanted to object to a movement so vigorously claiming Islamic credentials. Even those uncomfortable with the Islamic State often said nothing.⁶ Undoubtedly, Sunni leaders had trouble controlling the situation. A leading Sunni tribal leader explained to me: “The question of 2013 and 2014 that every shaykh faced was: ‘Is fighting the Islamic State a possibility if doing so is in support of a Shi‘a government and against Islam?’”

In December 2013, severe clashes between Sunnis and the Iraqi army broke out in Anbar. Skirmishes went on for three days.⁷ The Islamic State seized the opportunity and, on 1 January, launched its own attack. Cells within the cities moved to seize control while convoys of pickups, loaded with hundreds of fighters, drove in from the desert and outlying villages. The Iraqi army performed poorly. Soldiers often fled and abandoned their weapons, equipment, and vehicles, sometimes shedding their uniforms and donning civilian clothes to avoid being targeted. Large numbers of humvees and tanks fell into the Islamic State’s hands. So many soldiers deserted that the two divisions in Anbar dwindled to under 30 percent strength. A few Sunni tribal leaders fought harder but too failed to hold back the tide. Most of their brethren either refused to side with the sectarian government or outright aligned with the Islamic State against the common government enemy. The Islamic State captured Fallujah and most of Ramadi.⁸

In June 2014, the Islamic State launched an even bigger offensive against Mosul and cities farther south along the Tigris. The size of the offensive grew as Sunnis and anti-government Sunni militias joined the movement. Two thousand fighters attacked ten thousand Iraqi soldiers and police in Mosul. Again, the police and soldiers showed scant will to stand and fight. Within four days of the outset of the attack, nearly the entire defending 2nd Iraqi Division deserted.⁹ Even the Kurdish Peshmerga, traditionally stauncher fighters, retreated to

⁵ Discussion with US military advisors, al-Asad airbase, al-Anbar province, January 8, 2016.

⁶ Discussion with key Abu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, 9 March 2017.

⁷ Yasir Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2013. “Al Qaeda Seizes Partial Control of 2 Cities in Western Iraq,” *The Long War Journal* (blog), www.longwarjournal.org, January 2, 2014. Michael Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” *CTC Sentinel*, 29 May 2014.

⁸ Yasir Ghazi, “Deadly Clashes Between Iraqi Forces and Tribal Fighters in Anbar,” *New York Times*, 30 December 2013. “Al Qaeda seizes partial control of 2 cities in western Iraq,” *Long War Journal*, 2 January 2014. Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 3 January 2014. Michael Knights, “The ISIL’s Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” *CTC Sentinel*, 29 May 2014. Erin Banco, “Sunni Tribesmen Helped ISIS Take Control of Ramadi, Leaders Say,” *International Business Times*, 22 May 2015. Robert Tollast, “Civil Wars of Iraq’s Sunni Tribes: Fault Lines within 8 Sunni tribes and Sub-tribes, 2003–2016, Iraqi Thoughts, website, 28 March 2016.

⁹ Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham Captures Mosul and Advances Toward Baghdad,” Institute for the Study of War, www.understandingwar.org, 11 June 2014. Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad’s story,” Reuters, 14 October 2014.

their capital of Irbil. Portions of the people welcomed the Islamic State as liberators from Shi'a oppression or as a legitimate Islamic movement. The Islamic State now controlled almost all of Sunni Arab Iraq.

Over the next three years, the United States would return to Iraq, execute a major air campaign, and send back in advisors and special operations forces. Even with advisors, the vast bulk of the Iraqi army rarely stood and fought against Islamic State units. Soldiers deploying to Ramadi reported that as many as 80 percent of their colleagues deserted before arriving in the city.¹⁰ US advisors often assessed that soldiers had very poor morale. They commented that the Iraqi army would attack only with overwhelming superiority, and the smallest setback could cause soldiers to flee. It was US air strikes, a small core of Iraqi special operations forces, and Shi'a militia forces that eventually—over three years of hard fighting and massive destruction—pushed the Islamic State back.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban were regaining ground even before the United States had drawn down to 9,800 at the end of 2014. Things got worse from there. In autumn 2015, the Taliban closed in on provincial capitals, attacking Kunduz city and then the defenses of Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand). As in Iraq, the army and police performed poorly, summoning varying levels of resistance. Too many abandoned their post at sight of the Taliban. A decade of US training and advising seemed to have come to naught.

The most famous example is Kunduz. Roughly 500 Taliban routed 3,000 police, army, and other militias. There was almost a complete breakdown in will to fight. Within two days of the beginning of the attack, the Taliban were occupying the city. A few scattered police posts and army patrols fought. Most fled before suffering any casualties. The army and police took fewer than 20 casualties. Entire police posts, often well-fortified, were abandoned. Two full army battalions, roughly 1,000 men, ran away, leaving humvees, weapons, and ammunition behind.¹¹ Afghan special operations forces drove the Taliban out after a week and the devastating accidental air strike on the Doctors Without Borders hospital. It was the first time a provincial capital had fallen to the Taliban.

The situation worsened in 2016. The Taliban surrounded and assaulted four provincial capitals instead of two. Weeks passed before the government reasserted control. Even then, the cities remained besieged because the government was too weak to push the Taliban out of the surrounding countryside. The army and police weakened from desertion and the stress of defeat after defeat. Government casualties in 2015 and 2016 exceeded 40,000 police and soldiers. Replacements could not make up the losses. Police losses doubled the number of new recruits.¹² By the end of the year, the Taliban controlled large portions of several provinces and the army and police were on the ropes.

¹⁰ Discussion with UNDP, Baghdad, July 29, 2016.

¹¹ "Unhappy anniversary: Afghanistan and a resurgent Taliban," *Economist*, 3 October 2015.

¹² Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, "Afghan Forces, Their Numbers Dwindling Sharply, Face a Resurgent Taliban," *New York Times*, 13 October 2016.

Premature withdrawal

One of the clearest similarities between the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the reduction of US advisors and air support that accompanied the respective drawdowns was a major shock.

In Iraq, no air strikes were available at all during the 2014 attacks. In Afghanistan, air support was still possible after 2014 but much decreased in availability. Air strikes went from roughly 300 or more per month in 2012 to fewer than 100 during 2015. When assistance was provided, it was too little to do more than save key cities from capture. The White House expected that the Afghan army and police had the numerical and material superiority to succeed on its own. Officials often asked why the Afghan army needed air support when the Taliban so clearly did not. Additionally, with no or drastically fewer advisors, supervision of manning and supply disappeared. Advisors had ensured units were adequately manned and well-supplied. Without them, corruption and simple mismanagement sapped combat strength.

Thus, a strong case exists that had US forces had been present or used more vigorously in Iraq and Afghanistan defeat would not have occurred or would have at least been blunted. Yet the shock of US withdrawal in and of itself cannot explain why the Iraqi and Afghan militaries could not *stand on their own* without US support. The US goal had been for them to do so. The very fact that US support was still needed at all is proof that the goal was not met. Why was that support so badly needed?

Sectarian and ethnic divides

Explanations differ for each case and neither can be explained by a single cause. For Iraq, one factor that matters is sectarian divisions. Maliki's oppressive policies encouraged Sunnis to support and join the Islamic State. They particularly inhibited tribal leaders and politicians from opposing the Islamic State and siding in any way with the government. The policies divided tribal movements formerly united against AQI. Furthermore, the sectarian policies trickled into the Iraqi army. Maliki purged the army of the experienced commanders who had been trained by the US military, especially the Sunnis, and put in less-skilled loyalists.¹³ The edge the Americans had trained into the army dulled. The net effect of Maliki's policies was to strengthen support for the Islamic State while weakening the government's defenses against them.

The Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide and real fear underpinned Maliki's oppressive policies. The defensiveness of Shi'a politicians and parties in the wake of decades of Sunni oppression—a belief that the Sunnis were plotting to do it again—propelled Maliki to ill-advised lengths. As Adeed Dawisha has argued in his book, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, the Shi'a political leadership feared a Sunni resurgence because of Saddam's and AQI's histories of violence.¹⁴ This fear was a powerful force against Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation.

¹³ Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story," Reuters, 14 October 2014. Visit to CTS training facility, Baghdad, January 7, 2016. Discussion with United Nations Development Program officer, July 30, 2016.

¹⁴ Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 270.

Maliki depended on the support of a coalition of Shi'a groups, armed with militias, to maintain his premiership. He had to heed their sectarian defensiveness. It compounded his own biases toward oppressing the Sunnis.

Corruption

In Afghanistan, corruption mattered more than sectarian (or ethnic) rifts. Corruption within the Afghan government whittled away at the numerical and material superiority of the army and police.¹⁵ Politicians and commanders skimmed pay, weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and fuel, either to sell it or hoard it to build their own power. On the battlefield, soldiers and police were left undersupplied and undermanned. Stockpiles were shallower than they should have been. Commanders put “ghost soldiers” on the rolls to pocket pay of non-existent personnel. In Helmand, the total number of army, police, and local police was supposed to be 28,400. The actual number in 2015 was closer to 19,000. Individual soldiers and police lacked the standard number of magazines and RPG rounds. When fighting went for months, units that had been well-supplied and cared for, thanks to good leaders, could not get resupplied from their higher headquarters. In November 2016, Lieutenant General John Nicholson, commander of US and coalition forces in Afghanistan, told Congress that corruption and poor leadership were at the root of recent defeats.¹⁶

Corruption was a function of deeply-ingrained cultural, social, and political factors. In Afghanistan, communities run on patronage. Because of the power of tribal ties, a leader must provide resources to superiors to earn promotion and resources to his community for their survival. The community takes precedence over the good of the nation. Corruption provides the resources for patronage to work. Tribes, warlords, and politicians all used it for this purpose.¹⁷

Efforts to defeat corruption were disappointing. Institutionalization of meritocratic appointments, improved training, inspections, electronic pay systems and various other ideas came to little. Patronage systems subverted, circumvented, or subsumed them. Historically, this is unsurprising. Political scientist Samuel Huntington, Nobel Laureate Roger Myerson, Francis Fukuyama, and many others consider patronage systems inherent to the functioning

¹⁵ In Iraq, corruption was also a problem, just to a lesser same extent than in Afghanistan. Maliki's politicization of the army allowed corruption to rise. Officers became involved in corruption. Senior officers were involved in oil smuggling, blackmailing contractors, sale of military equipment on the blackmarket, and ghost soldier schemes. It undermined army effectiveness. Manning in Mosul in 2014 was at less than half of the assigned 25,000 soldiers and police. At the time of the battle, heavy weapons and ammunition for all types of arms was lacking, leaving soldiers yet worse off to face the Islamic State fighters. “Former Mosul mayor says corruption led to ISIS takeover,” Al-Monitor, www.al-monitor.com, 2 July 2014. Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story,” Reuters, 14 October 2014.

¹⁶ See also Vanda Felbab-Brown, “How predatory crime and corruption in Afghanistan underpin the Taliban insurgency,” Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/18/how-predatory-crime-and-corruption-in-afghanistan-underpin-the-taliban-insurgency/>, 18 April 2017.

¹⁷ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 304.

of developing states.¹⁸ Corruption is known to take decades to reform, often as an outgrowth of prolonged political struggle and the development of state capacity and human capital.¹⁹ Sometimes and in some places in Afghanistan, the negative effects of corruption could be managed. The Taliban did so best because their system and ideology was less based on patronage and less prone to the intense competition of the tribal system. For the government, corruption was extremely difficult to suppress and a drag on military effectiveness.

Morale

A final reason for the defeats of Iraq and Afghanistan is poor morale. Unlike the other reasons, poor morale pertains to both cases. For all the importance of sectarian rifts and corruption, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the average soldier and policeman simply did not want to fight as much as his Islamic State or Taliban counterpart. In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied police and soldiers in intact defensive positions made a collective decision to throw in the towel rather than go another round. When under duress, police and soldiers too often just gave up. In the words of an Afghan villager, “I saw with my own eyes government forces leave checkpoints...I don’t think the government can push the Taliban back. They don’t fight...We see the Americans supporting the government forces when they are trying to retake checkpoints, but then it’s too late.”²⁰

During the key battles—Kunduz, Marjah, Ramadi, Mosul—soldiers and police had numerical superiority and at least equal amounts of ammunition and supply—even after the effects of corruption—yet retreated without putting up much resistance. In Kunduz, the critical case of Afghan army defeat, a post-battle evaluation found that nowhere had soldiers or police left their posts because of a shortage of ammunition.²¹ Whatever its prevalence, corruption had not denied these men the means to fight.

Poor morale may have been partly a secondary effect of sectarian rifts and high corruption. It couldn’t have been inspiring to serve a government mired in sectarian infighting or to serve leaders more concerned with pocketing money than the welfare of their men. Still, these explanations are incomplete. The Iraqi army was predominantly Shi‘a, after all. Presumably, government sectarianism was to their benefit. And it is not like the Islamic State were paragons of equality and diversity. The relationship of poor morale to corruption is similarly ambiguous. Forces under notoriously corrupt commanders could still exhibit high levels of morale. Conversely, efficient administrations or military units often still had trouble keeping their men in the field. The best units with the lowest corruption still needed US advisors and air strikes to make up for hesitancy under fire.

¹⁸ Roger Myerson, “Foundations of the State in Theory and Practice,” home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/fieldman.pdf, October 2007. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “What is Corruption?” in *Against Corruption: a collection of essays* (London: UK Government Stationery Office, 2016). Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 334.

²⁰ Sune Engel Rasmussen, “First Helmand, Then Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2016.

²¹ “Saleh: Weakness in leadership was the cause of the collapse of Kunduz,” VOA Pashto, 21 November 2015.

The reason for poor morale should therefore be tied to independent factors. A strong contender is identity. US-built national-level forces lacked the tie to what it meant to be Iraqi or Afghan necessary to generate high levels of morale. In contrast, AQI (later the Islamic State) and the Taliban each stood for Islam and resistance to foreign occupation, virtues deeply rooted in what it means to be Iraqi or Afghan. They had an ability to inspire, as well as unite, that the Western-installed government could never match. Iraq and Afghanistan had proud histories of resisting colonization. Iraqi kings and prime ministers had been delegitimized by their support for Great Britain. Among tribal leaders, participation in the 1920 revolt against the British was a badge of honor. The Afghans, of course, prided themselves on the defeat of a series of occupiers, especially the British in the nineteenth century and Soviets in the 1980s.²²

AQI, as the predecessor of the Islamic State, had demonstrated this ability to inspire from 2005 to 2007. During those years, AQI rose up its own and overwhelmed the tribes and other resistance groups, gaining widespread support from locals. AQI and then the Islamic State gathered this momentum naturally, with limited outside help, thanks in part to ideology. Sunnis may have questioned the AQI version of Islam but jihad against the infidel appears to have been inspiring.²³

The Iraqi national army never acquired a sense of nationalism. Its soldiers were caught between the extremism of the Islamic State and the sectarianism of Shi'a militias. The army stood for a vague attempt at nationalism while the Islamic State stood for both Sunnism and Islam and the Shi'a militias stood for Shi'a identity and devotion. US commanders assessed army soldiers to be far less ideologically inclined than their more aggressive Shi'a militia counterparts. Iraqi generals were known to despair that their army was nothing, a shadow of Saddam's army of the 1980s.²⁴ "There is no sense of nation," said one American general, an astute observer of the Iraqi army, "The republic goes no farther than Baghdad."²⁵

In Afghanistan, the effect of identity was even more pronounced. The fact the government had been created by the United States and still hosted thousands of US troops constrained its ability to generate high levels of morale. Former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations and member of the Afghan High Peace Council, Abdul Hakim Mujahed—a religious scholar with access to the Taliban but an independent perspective—explained this clearly to me in 2014: "The insurgency is strong now. There are two things that make them strong. First, the government fails to defend Islam. Second, the government fails to defend Afghan sovereignty. The United States keeps doing night raids and killing civilians, even though, time after time,

²² Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 341–342.

²³ Anthony Shadid, "In Anbar, U.S.-Allied Tribal Chiefs Feel Deep Sense of Abandonment," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2009. Sam Dagher, "In Anbar Province, New Leadership, but Old Problems Persist," *New York Times*, September 12, 2009.

²⁴ Discussion with US military advisors, al-Asad airbase, Anbar province, January 8, 2016. Discussion with Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015. Discussion with key Albu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, 9 March 2017.

²⁵ Discussion with US generals, Irbil, Iraq, October 20, 2015.

President Karzai orders them to stop.”²⁶ Afghan generals found the same thing. One general admitted: “The enemies are ideological people; their slogan is Jihad and Heaven but our army doesn’t have that motive and slogan.”²⁷

Too often, the police and soldiers did not believe in the government.²⁸ In 2015, the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies surveyed 1,657 national police (not local police) in 11 provinces throughout Afghanistan and asked them about their beliefs. Respondents were deeply conflicted about why they were fighting. *Only 11 percent had joined the police to fight the Taliban.* Certainly, a far larger percentage of Taliban had joined to fight the government. The image of puppet government was a key factor. Many interviewees claimed that police “rank and file are not convinced that they are fighting for a just cause.”²⁹ Seventy percent of respondents said the government was overly influenced by the West. Nearly a third of respondents believed that Taliban authority was legitimate. On top of this, 83 percent believed that violence was justified against a government that criticized Islam, which Western influence presumably encourages. These figures show that the legitimacy of violence on behalf of a government did not always live up to notions of Afghan identity.

The forces most able to fight effectively were the Iraqi and Afghan special operations forces (the counter-terrorism service in Iraq and the special operations commandos in Afghanistan). They spearheaded almost every offensive. They had received years of dedicated training and advising from US special operations forces. There were roughly 10,000 in Iraq and 17,000 in Afghanistan.³⁰ For that size force, the US instructors and advisors could instill a standard of tactical proficiency unattainable when training larger numbers of regular soldiers. US special operations forces designed the program to attract the fittest and most dedicated recruit. Entry standards were rigorous. Under US influence, officer selection was more meritocratic than in the rest of either army. Consequently, officers were of a higher standard and enlisted had a sense of professionalism and pride in being elite that eluded the rest of the army. Nevertheless, the special operations forces were too few to be decisive. Their source of identity could never spread across the police and army. By definition, elite professionalism inspires exclusive groups, not a nation. And even their morale could buckle without US advisors and air strikes.

The accomplished anthropologist David Edwards touches on the link between morale and identity in *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan*. The book examines the causes of martyrdom and suicide bombing in Afghanistan. He finds that just as an Afghan tribesman is obligated to defend his family and land, so too is he obligated to do everything in his power to defend the Afghan homeland and take revenge when that is not possible. A man who does otherwise is nothing. Prolonged US occupation prods at this

²⁶ Discussion with Abdul Hakim Mujahed, former Taliban ambassador to the United Nations, Kabul, 18 January 2014.

²⁷ Antonio Giustozzi, “The Struggle to Create an Afghan National Army,” manuscript, February 2014, 203.

²⁸ Discussion with Kabul University professor from Andar tribe, Kabul, 2 March 2016.

²⁹ Robert Zaman and Abdul Hadi Khalid, “Trends of Radicalization among the Ranks of the Afghan National Police,” Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2015, 15–17, 19–20.

³⁰ Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, “Afghan Forces, Their Numbers Dwindling Sharply, Face a Resurgent Taliban,” *New York Times*, 13 October 2016.

obligation. Not all Afghans are driven to become suicide bombers. But enough are: “some find that the way they can recover their honor and identity is by killing themselves in the process of killing those who have defiled their honor...The bomber reclaims lost honor and standing in the community, he does his duty (*farz ‘ain*) according to Islam (as interpreted by Taliban clerics), and he performs the political act of striking an unjust oppressor.”³¹

In my own study of Afghanistan and Iraq, I have come to feel that our very presence trods on what it means to be Afghan or Iraqi. It dares young men to fight. It animates Taliban and Islamic State fighters. It saps at the will of policeman and soldier, giving cause to flee rather than fight. The explanation is powerful because it answers questions that arguments about sectarianism or corruption cannot. The explanation is dangerous because it can be misinterpreted to mean that all Muslims are bent on war or, worse, are fanatics. On the contrary, the argument is that it is tougher to risk life for country when fighting alongside what some would call an occupier. As Samuel Huntington warned, “The principal impetus to... [revolutionary] movement is foreign war and foreign intervention. Nationalism is the cement of the revolutionary alliance and the engine of the revolutionary movement.”³²

The intractability of Iraq and Afghanistan

What could have been done to address these problems? The list is long. Professor Stephen Biddle, Lieutenant General H R McMaster, and others have pointed out that the United States could have applied greater pressure, especially in the form of conditionality, upon the Iraq and Afghan governments to adhere to the precepts of democracy or to counter corruption.³³ There are numerous occasions when the United States was hands off sectarian politics in Iraq and governance reforms in Afghanistan. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) has argued that much greater attention could also have been paid to accountability of US funds and indictment of criminals.³⁴ On poor morale, I myself have argued that the United States could have pressured for better leadership.

Though I am in favor of all these measures, how much difference they would have made is questionable. Unless large numbers of Americans stayed in country, I doubt they could have changed the underlying conditions that pushed Iraq and Afghanistan back toward violence.

The thing about sectarian rifts, corruption, and identity is that none are terribly malleable to actions on the part of the United States. There are few known quick solutions.³⁵ In the most

³¹ David Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2017), 148.

³² Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

³³ Stephen Biddle, “Policy Implications,” forthcoming, 31 October 2016. Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces and Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–138. Michelle Hughes and Michael Miklaucic, Eds., *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Complex Operations, 2016). Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: How Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

³⁴ “Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, September 2017.

³⁵ James Fearon wrote in his seminal piece on Iraq’s civil war, sectarian rifts during civil war are notoriously difficult to mend: “The historical evidence suggests that this is a Sisyphian task.” James Fearon, “Iraq’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2007): 7.

well-known cases of success, decades of occupation, violence, and sometimes oppression facilitated change, not a few years of military operations. American boots and guns could countervail the effects of such ingrained dynamics only as long as they were present. Once the United States drew down, these dynamics reasserted themselves and each country relapsed into civil war.

Obama's strategy to deal with the setbacks in the two countries after 2014 reflected a recognition of the improbability of lasting change. The strategy was designed to avoid over-commitment. Fewer than 5,000 troops were sent to Iraq. Most were dedicated to training and advising and forbidden to enter combat. Heavy air strikes were used to give the Iraqi forces an advantage. In reaction to setbacks in Afghanistan, Obama eased restrictions on air strikes (though less than in Iraq) and scuttled his plans to withdraw. First, in 2015, he decided to keep 9,800 troops into 2016. Then, in May 2016, he decided to keep 8,400, with no drawdown timeline. Yet he remained to determine to hold numbers below 10,000 and not fall back into a heavy commitment. In both countries, the onus was placed on the host government to bear the brunt of combat.

Rethinking intervention

The lesson is that internal cultural, historical, and social dynamics—ethnic divides, age-old tribalism, and the influence of groups claiming Islamic legitimacy—could not be re-directed in the span of a few years. The strategy of intervening and then leaving with a new government that could stand on its own was off. The entire notion of an “exit strategy” was inconsistent with the goal of keeping the local government afloat. In this regard, the cost of the surges dramatically outweighed the gains. The surges had bought only a few years of peace. The same long-term result may have been attained with far fewer forces.

Today, we are confronted with the need to rethink and reconsider counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and intervention in light of these defeats and the past 15 years of war. The idea that intervention can be short and create lasting change is fundamental to the American way of intervention. It has justified continuing intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam before them. It is influential and appealing to politicians who want to do something but know the United States cannot stay forever. The idea should be viewed cautiously. Afghanistan and Iraq question it. They exemplify how intervention may be a costly, long-term project and how success may only be sustained through a near-indefinite commitment of troops. Short-term gains may last only as long as intervening forces are present.

The two cases, even with their similarity to Vietnam, do not make a general theory. My point is that they are weighty enough to merit foremost consideration in any policy discussion on intervention. The cases where an intervening power had success without a long-term presence, such as Oman, El Salvador, and Colombia, seem to be too few and too unique to be a basis for policy.³⁶ They do not lessen the need for caution. The more famous successes—Malaya,

³⁶ Oman was a communist insurgency in an Islamic State, a counterinsurgent's dream. El Salvador is the size of a postage stamp and the Soviet Union collapsed. Colombia had a good government and actually enjoyed long-term U.S. support so it may not even be an exception to the rule.

Philippines, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia—were very long (and larger) commitments and thus underline the main point. Although certain circumstances may still facilitate success, it would appear to be rather unlikely barring decades-long presence.

A long-term commitment, possibly indefinite, raises the expected cost of any intervention. The United States may have to pay for troop deployments for decades and accept the accompanying casualties. This should give any general, secretary of defense, senator, or commander-in-chief pause. The prospect of protracted costs should devalue intervention, often deterring the endeavor entirely. Living with instability somewhere in the world may be better than the financial and human expenses of addressing it.

If the dangers of staying out are too high, then understanding that military commitment is likely to be severely prolonged and permanent gains are unlikely should encourage thrifty strategies that are sustainable over the long term. There are times when a full-blown intervention of hundreds of thousands of troops over decades has been warranted. Keeping large numbers of forces in place, however, has only been acceptable when the stakes are very high, such as the Philippines, Germany, Japan, or South Korea. The stakes of the Middle East and South Asia have always been more ambiguous. In places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, the acme of good strategy is to deploy the lightest force possible to maintain pressure on terrorists and prevent the host government (or partner) from falling.

The prolonged nature of this line of strategic thinking was frustrating for the Obama administration and may be frustrating for the Trump administration. It has so far been unavoidable. The tendency for outside presence to trigger resistance and delegitimize governments and militaries presents a conundrum. Usually, outside powers intervene when a local government cannot stand without outside support. Outside support then feeds insurgents and undermines the government, perhaps above all in Islamic countries. In turn, the commitment to keep down the insurgent or terrorist threat becomes indefinite. A solution to this conundrum is unexplored territory within strategic thought.

I wonder if a possible solution could be found by thinking beyond outright intervention and focusing on the best outcome over several decades. If sending troops delegitimizes partners, then the trick is to how to enable without delegitimizing them. A possibility might be to deploy no troops and to fund one side and then let the civil war run its course. Over time, insurgencies may weaken and new opportunities may emerge. The policy would be a gamble. The adversary may win. But so may an ally. Ditching “occupying” troops is a way an ally could retain legitimacy and the adversary *might* be defeated, setting the stage for stability and peace.³⁷ The situation on the ground could be better than what could ever be attained by US troops. If troops are on the ground, the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan is that the host military can have trouble ever building such legitimacy, foreign forces may have to stay, and the vicious cycle can go on and on.

The last observation I would like to bring up is the morality of intervention. A moral dilemma arises from the pursuit of light, low-cost, sustainable intervention strategies. If the intervening power is not staying permanently and in sufficient force to suppress insurgents or

³⁷ For support for this approach see: Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 335.

terrorists, then it is prolonging civil war. It is saving an endangered government but not halting violence. It is sustaining instability even though the people may be better off under order instilled by an adversary. The intervening power is exposing innocent people to harm in order to defend its own people from terrorist attack or some other threat. The local people would prefer the massive overly-expensive intervention that brings at least temporary stability. The sustainable, affordable strategy leaves them in a state of unending civil war. At the end of the day, intervention can boil to down to a terrible tradeoff between the well-being of American (or European or Chinese or Russian) citizens and the well-being of the people of the host nation. Odd Arne Westad's finding in his magisterial *The Global Cold War* that the superpowers caused untold harm to the peoples of the developing world in pursuit of marginal interests echoes around us today.³⁸ In the broad sweep of history, it is responsible to ask ourselves how often intervention is truly worth it.

³⁸ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 396–407.