

## **Afghanistan and the Defeat in Kunduz: The Crisis in Transition**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

The Taliban's capture of Kunduz does mark its first major capture of a major urban area, but it is only a symptom of a much broader crisis in the Transition process in what has begun to approach a forgotten war.

### **The Broader Crisis in Afghanistan and a Failed Transition Plan**

Afghanistan is now caught up in a much broader series of crises: political, governance, economics, security, and Afghan force development. In each case, the "Transition" since U.S. combat forces left at the end of 2014 is failing.

This failure is only partly the fault of the Obama administration. The Afghan government has failed to provide effective leadership in each critical dimension. Many of the problems involved also have their origins in the UN's failure to play a meaningful role in coordinating any aspect of the civil aid effort, and the erratic politics and programs the Bush Administration pursued – partly because of its focus on the Iraq conflict. .

The fact remains, however, that it is the Obama administration that is now in charge and that created a fundamentally unworkable set of transition policies and deadlines. It is the Obama administration that set transition deadlines for the political purpose of ending the war before the president left office, rather than created plans based on the conditions in Afghanistan and real world level of civil and military development in the country.

It is the Obama administration that steadily cut back on the level of reporting and transparency in the transition process, made exaggerated claims of success, and avoided dealing with problems by failing to address them and the data on their scale and seriousness. It is also only the Obama administration that has the option of reversing its mistakes in time to have any real hope of salvaging the transition process.

These are key issues the Congress must address as it starts to hold hearings on the progress in Afghanistan, and it must look far beyond the military and security dimension. This is made clear in detail in a new report by the Burke Chair at CSIS that uses a wide variety of official, NGO, and think tank data and metrics to address each critical problem in Transition.

This report is entitled **Afghanistan and "Failed State Wars": The Need for a Realistic Transition**, and is available on the CSIS web site at [http://csis.org/files/publication/150929\\_Cordesman\\_Afghanistan\\_Failed\\_State\\_Wars\\_1.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/150929_Cordesman_Afghanistan_Failed_State_Wars_1.pdf).

The report is in PowerPoint form so it can show the trends involved in graphic and map form, and provide comparative data from a wide range of sources.

### **The Crises in Politics, Governance, and Economics**

The first part of the report focuses on the political, governance, and economic crises in Afghanistan because these aspects of transition have received far too little attention from the administration, the Congress and outside analysts.

It addresses:

- The reality that the problems in host country leadership and governance have often been as much, or more, of a threat to success as the actions of the Taliban and other insurgents. (pp. 2-6)
- The fact that Afghanistan faces major crises from population growth and demands for economic success and jobs by its youth – an age group that often turns to violence when the Afghan economy fails to provide real options – and from deep ethnic and sectarian divisions. (pp. 7-17)
- The scale of the real world challenges in civil society and human development, many of which have been concealed or omitted in State Department and USAID reporting. (pp. 18-29)
- Key failures in Afghan politics and governance at every level that have undermined popular support for the government and empower the Taliban and other insurgents. (pp. 30-35)
- The problems caused by massive levels of corruption at every level of civil governance and in the Afghan security forces. (pp. 36-43)
- Critical problems in raising Afghan government revenues, over-dependence on aid, and the ability to formulate and execute the government budget with adequate fiscal controls and measures of effectiveness. (pp. 44-56)
- Broader economic problems which have been disguised in the past by
  - Deep structural problems, gross over-dependence on poorly controlled aid and military spending, and unkept promises of reform, (pp. 57-82)
  - Weak job creation and a return to growing poverty (pp. 83-89), erratic economic aid projects poorly executed and with minimal benefits, and serious structural problems in the balance of trade and financial sectors. and
  - false promises of a “new silk road” and income from mines and minerals (pp. 90-102),
- The failure of counter-narcotics programs from 2002-2015, and a sharply growing dependence on a narco-economy – disguised in part by exaggerated claims of success in eradication and seizures and a failure to honestly assess the real world role of narcotics in the Afghan GDP and economy. (pp. 103-123).

### **The Crises in Security and Developing Effective Afghan Forces**

The second part of the report focuses on security issues and the effort to create effective Afghan National Security Forces – an efforts whose critical failings have helped create the crisis in Kunduz and a much broader crisis in security that the Obama administration can only address by reversing its current transition plans and policies.

It addresses:

- The fact that violence and casualties are steadily rising, and that the surge in Afghanistan – unlike the combination of the surge and rise of local Sunni forces in Iraq, came too late, was poorly executed, and DoD and UN metrics show it had no meaningful benefits for Afghan security. (pp. 124-135)

- The failure to address the most critical metrics of an insurgency: The relative level of insurgent influence and control versus that of the Afghan government, and the fact that unclassified reporting on this subject began to lie by omission after the trends continued to be negative in 2010. (pp. 136-142)
- The fact that the trend in civilian casualties warns that USG and DoD reporting has systematically understated the growth in the scale and breadth of Taliban and insurgent operations in the past. (pp. 143-159)
- The uncertain status of the development of Afghan Army, Police, and Local Police forces, which has been disguised in part by suddenly classifying the capability of given combat units and police elements, but clearly reflects the lack of progress in creating an effective Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior caused by the long post-election crisis in forming an effective Afghan government. (pp. 160-171)
- The failed and premature Transition Plan that did not provide adequate support for any element of the ANSF, reflect the combat conditions on the ground, cut the advisory efforts at the most critical level of combat operations, and now fails to provide adequate advisory support for the Afghan National Army and police forces thrust into paramilitary roles for which they are not properly trained and equipped. (pp. 173-179)
- The fact that the actual manning levels to support Afghan forces are very low, and the U.S. portion is only about two thirds of the U.S forces deployed in the spring of 2015. No reporting or plan has been released showing current and currently planned levels for end-2015, 2016, or 2017. (pp. 180-186)
- The failure to take the lack of progress in developing the Afghan Air Force into account, although air power offers the only clear solution to partial compensation for the limited size and capability of Afghan ground forces, and the severe limits to the air support provided by U.S. and allied air units since 2014. This has occurred in spite of the fact that air power was critical to avoid Taliban victories when U.S. and allied combat ground troops were still in Afghanistan. (pp. 187-191)
- The erratic nature of U.S. military and civil aid plans and funding from 2002 to the present, coupled to major failures to establish adequate civil plans, the coordination of different national aid efforts, sustain funding levels over time, and develop meaningful measures of effectiveness. (pp. 192-200)
- The fact that Pakistan in many ways remains as much of a threat as an ally. (pp. 201-214)
- The security challenges that might be met if the U.S. expanded its train and assist mission and shifted its focus to combat effectiveness rather than force generation and sustainment, provided adequate combat and other air support, and developed a clear longer-term civil and military plan tied to conditions that the Afghan government and forces could actually meet. (pp. 215-219)

### **Radically Change the Transition Plan or Accept Near-Certain Failure**

This latter point is critical. The present U.S. Transition effort cannot succeed and the U.S. cannot eliminate its military aid mission by end-2016. There also are no guarantees that the U.S. can now help the Afghan government overcome all of its weaknesses and to succeed.

However, the Taliban and other insurgent elements are not united or so strong that the Afghan government and forces cannot counter and defeat them over time *if* the U.S. develops a realistic transition plan, provides a condition-based level of train and assist effort and develops realistic civil and military aid plans.

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