

The Tragedy in Kunduz, the Real Threat to Afghan Civilians, and the Need for Changes in U.S. Strategy

By Anthony H. Cordesman
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It is only natural that the tragedy surrounding the air attack on the hospital in Kunduz should have dominated the headlines and news coverage of events in Afghanistan, as well as General John F. Campbell's testimony this week before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. There is, however, a serious risk that the end result could be a much greater tragedy that plays out over years, if not decades.

The 2015 campaign season in Afghanistan is ending, and a deadline is emerging that could lead to further serious cuts in the already insufficient U.S. and allied military presence in Afghanistan. The United States is still on a path where its strategy seems far more tailored to trying to eliminate the U.S. military presence than deal with the conditions that have emerged since it formally eliminated its combat role in Afghanistan, except for a limited number of Special Forces in a Joint Counterterrorism Force and providing combat air strikes in an emergency.

The Real Human Cost of the War

Tragic as one event in Kunduz may be, it is important to note that the overall pattern of events is building to what could be a far greater tragedy. Afghanistan is a country of over 32 million people. As sad as any given incident where civilians are hurt or killed may be, airpower and ground troops are the only way of limiting the damage being done by the Taliban and other insurgents. War inevitably involves mistakes by the military forces that do respect civilian life, but it also involves deliberate actions by forces that do not show that respect and kill and maim far more innocent lives.

One key question that is never asked when tragedies like the hospital attack in Kunduz occur is what would happen if the United States does not provide air and training-and-assist support to the Afghan forces? How many more Afghans will suffer and die? What is the price tag of putting too many restraints on the use of military force and not providing the level of outside support the Afghan forces need?

The Taliban Role in the Growth of Civilian Casualties

The answers are grim, and they tell a lot about the Taliban and other extremist movements. The U.S. surge in Afghanistan had none of the lasting military impact of the U.S. surge in Iraq. The United Nations estimates the total number of civilian killed and seriously injured rose from 5,968 in 2009 to 7,160 in 2010, 7,842 in 2011, 7,562 in 2012, 8,637 in 2013, and 10,548 in 2014.

Things have not gotten better. UN casualty data warned that the Taliban and other groups were increasing their control and influence in the north and northeast years before the Taliban took Kunduz, as well as in the center, east, west, south, and southeast. The number of civilian casualties has gone down in some areas since U.S. and other International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) combat forces left at the end of 2014, but largely because the insurgents have won in many districts and do not have to fight, because the Afghan police have increasingly been forced to shelter in their bases, and because Afghan army patrol activity has been limited relative to the combined coverage of Afghan and ISAF forces in 2014.

If one compares the trend in the first six months of 2015—the period from January to June—against the same period in previous years, the UN estimate of total civilian killed and injured dropped from 1,943 to 1,577. It is important to note that much of the peak fighting normally occurs in the latter half of the

campaign season. It is far more important, however, to note that the vast majority of these civilian casualties are inflicted by the Taliban and other antigovernment elements.

[The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#) (UNAMA) attributes 74 percent of all civilian casualties to antigovernment elements, 9 percent to pro-government forces (8 percent to Afghan national security forces, 1 percent to international military forces), and 12 percent to ground engagements between antigovernment elements and Afghan national security forces in which a civilian casualty could not be attributed to a specific party. UNAMA attributed 4 percent of civilian casualties to explosive remnants of war and the remaining 1 percent to cross-border shelling from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

Civilian Casualties and the Use of Airpower

Many of the civilian casualties that the Afghan forces do inflict come from the fact that the Taliban and other threat forces routinely use civilian facilities and civilians as human shields, and there is no way to fight or defend without inflicting civilian casualties. Moreover, when it comes to the use of airpower, the United Nations reported in mid-2015 that the limits the United States began to put on the use of air strikes several years earlier and major cuts in air operations were having a major impact: [“Compared with the first six months of 2009, when UNAMA began to monitor civilian casualties, the number of civilians killed by Anti-Government Elements doubled in 2014 \(from 599 to 1,208\), while the number of civilians killed by Pro-Government forces has been cut by half \(from 302 to 158\), almost entirely due to reduced civilian casualties from aerial operations of international military forces.”](#)

Here, it is critical to understand that, as the Taliban gains in areas like Kunduz have shown, drastic cuts have occurred in the use of combat airpower that have done much to enable Taliban gains, limit the experience and capability of ground forces to use air strikes effectively, and increase the net level of warfare in populated areas and civilian casualties. The total number of close air support sorties dropped from 12,978 in 2014 to 2,927 in the first eight months of 2015. These sorties are now flown largely when there was a clear military need, and less than 10 percent (282) actually released a weapon.

Moreover, while the number of strike sorties dropped 77 percent, the intelligence and surveillance (IS&R) sorties dropped from 32,999 to 14,620, or by 56 percent and were five times larger than the number of strike sorties. U.S. and allied airpower remained critical in the effort to minimize civilian casualties, as well as to support the operations of Afghan forces.

The Cumulative Human Cost of the Taliban and Other Extremist Attacks

There is another and even more critical price tag involved. This is a war where the Taliban is an enemy that fails to offer the Afghan people any real future if it does win. The longer the Afghan war lasts, the greater the total number of civilian casualties, the more collateral damage, and the longer economic development is postponed. In spite of massive U.S. and other outside aid, the World Bank estimates that much of this has had little impact and that poverty has actually increased in recent years. One U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official provided an off-the-record summary of the situation in Afghanistan before the United States ended its formal campaign presence by saying that he hoped that Afghanistan could reach the level of progress in Bangladesh at some point in the next decade.

These grim civil and military realities are laid out in detail in the graphs, maps, and other data in a detailed briefing that is available on the CSIS website called [Afghanistan and “Failed State Wars”: The Need for a Realistic Transition](#).

And, focusing on the cumulative civil effects of war to date and over the next few years assumes that the Taliban and other Islamist extremists do not win. The greatest potential cumulative tragedy in this is not wartime losses of civilians killed and injured. It is rather that Afghanistan—like any other state taken over

by such violent extremists—will be dragged back into a mix of limits on every aspect of progress at a social, economic, and political level: a perversion of Islam in which virtually every citizen suffers and development is impossible.

The Growing Risk of an Afghan Defeat

Some form of extremist victory is not a risk that anyone can ignore. Things have not gone well in 2015. Some aspects of General Campbell's formal testimony to both committees tried to put a brave face on the course of the fighting and understated the fact that Afghan politics, governance, budget, and economy remain in a state of near crisis. Like almost all of the official testimony in recent years, General Campbell's formal testimony failed to present a meaningful and integrated civil-military plan of action for the future. As has been the case throughout the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, General Campbell's formal testimony also failed to provide a meaningful net assessment of the trends in the growing areas of threat influence and problems in host country capabilities.

The data in *Afghanistan and "Failed State Wars": The Need for a Realistic Transition* also show just how steadily the areas of Taliban and insurgent influence have grown, the scale of Afghan problems and failures, and the degree to which the United States and its allies rushed out of Afghanistan to meet a presidential deadline regardless of the real world readiness of Afghan forces and the conditions on the ground.

General Campbell did, however, raise serious questions about every aspect of the strategy that the president had announced in the past, which also highlighted the need for a continuing train-and-assist mission and the continuing use of U.S. airpower after 2016:

“Yet in spite of our considerable progress, it is clear that our campaign will remain a challenging one. The National Unity Government (NUG) and the enemy are still locked in a fierce struggle. While I do not consider the insurgency capable of overthrowing the NUG by force, the enemy remains capable and lethal. The Afghan National Defense & Security Forces (ANDSF), in turn, have thus far proven unable to eradicate al Qaeda entirely or compel the Taliban (TB) to negotiate a political settlement.

In an ongoing, unstable security environment, other extremists groups are emerging to include Daesh, or the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP). These nefarious elements continue to sow fear among the Afghan population. The insurgents also continue to inflict a serious, disruptive effect on the NUG's ability to govern. The war continues to undermine public confidence in the NUG and stymie economic progress, thereby prompting the exodus of tens of thousands of Afghans.

...Casualties on both sides have risen, and violence has moved beyond the traditional insurgent strongholds. Other factors are also contributing to the uptick in casualties and spread of violence. Pakistan Military (PAKMIL) operations have displaced foreign fighters into eastern and northern Afghanistan. The emergence of Daesh, or the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), has further complicated the theater landscape, and potentially, expanded the conflict. Most recently, the Taliban have increased the tempo of their operations in order to reassert their prominence within the insurgent syndicate after the announced death of their spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar (MMO).

We are also now seeing how our redeployment and transition from combat operations to TAA have changed battlefield dynamics. Only a few years ago, our Coalition numbered over 140,000 military personnel. Now our force is comprised of fewer than 14,000 of which approximately

10,000 are U.S. servicemen and women. In years past, our aircraft provided responsive and often decisive close air support (CAS) to Coalition and Afghan troops in contact. This is no longer the norm—but the exception. Our force reduction, drop in enablers, and resultant CAS gap have created challenges for the ANDSF; they have understandably struggled at times to adjust.

Within this context, the fluidity of the current security situation is not surprising. This Fighting Season, the Taliban surged forces into northern Helmand. Most recently, they overran Kunduz. Nevertheless, the ANDSF rallied and regained control of most of the areas lost in Helmand, just as they have successfully retaken other ground temporarily lost throughout this Fighting Season. I am confident that they will regain control of Kunduz as well. Still, the Taliban achieved their aim in Kunduz.

The fighting in Kunduz underscores several shortcomings in the ANDSF to include poor intelligence fusion, lack of cross-pillar coordination, and sub-optimal utilization of their forces. They do not possess the necessary combat power and numbers to protect every part of the country. This makes it very difficult for the ANDSF to counter the Taliban's ability to temporarily mass, seize an objective, and then blend back into the population when confronted with an ANDSF counterattack. Hence, a reprioritization of the ANDSF's security efforts within the framework of their larger, multi-year campaign will be required at the conclusion of this Fighting Season. They also need to improve the responsiveness, flexibility, and preparedness of their forces at the tactical and operational levels. Ultimately, ANDSF leaders also need to discern better when to take the offensive, when to defend, and where to assume risk.

...In general, I would characterize the ANDSF's performance this fighting season as uneven and *inconsistent*. They have learned some hard lessons from their mistakes. On the positive side, when the ANDSF seize the initiative, deliberately plan their operations, and coordinate their actions across the security pillars, they achieve notable results. When they execute deliberate, cross-pillar operations that are thoroughly planned and resourced, they are highly successful. On the negative side, when they act hastily and employ their forces in a haphazard, uncoordinated manner such as in Helmand, they are far less effective. They have also struggled to optimize their force laydown and employment. They remain tethered to isolated checkpoints and static defenses, which increases their vulnerability and reduces their ability to maneuver effectively.

The ANDSF's mixed performance underlines both their weaknesses and strengths. A closer examination of ANDSF actions and inactions in Helmand in August and September underscores this point. Elements of the 215th Corps and local police units responded poorly to the initial insurgent attacks on Now Zad and Musa Qala.

...The outcome in Helmand could have undoubtedly been much different. President Ghani responded decisively to the crisis, and after a frustrating start, senior ANDSF leaders took control of the situation. Our advisors and enablers provided invaluable support, without which, the ANDSF would most likely have suffered significantly more casualties and a strategic setback.

These events underscore that *the ANDSF still require broad support*. They have repeatedly shown that without key enablers and competent, operational-level leaders, they cannot handle the fight alone in this stage of their development. Ultimately, I am convinced that improved leadership and accountability will address most of their deficiencies. ANDSF soldiers and police perform well when they are well led and appropriately resourced. That is why our insistence on sound leadership and strict accountability remains our top priority for our TAA programs and activities. However, it will take time for the Afghans to build their human capital.

...The ANDSF's uneven performance this Fighting Season underscores shortfalls that will persist well beyond this year. Capability gaps still exist in fixed and rotary-wing aviation, combined arms, intelligence, logistics, maintenance, and sustainment. Other needed areas of improvement include resource management, cross-pillar synchronization, and intelligence-based operations. One of the greatest tactical challenges for the ANDSF this Fighting Season has been overcoming the Afghan Air Force's (AAF) still extremely limited organic CAS capability.

These shortfalls can be rectified over time if the appropriate time, money, and resources are allocated, and most importantly, ANDSF leaders continue to mature and develop sufficiently to implement these changes and needed reforms.

I remain concerned about the long-term viability of the ANDSF. Succinctly, *Afghanistan cannot* afford its security forces—particularly at their present size. Yet their current numbers are needed to contend with the scale of the threat. If we sharply reduce their forces now, it will have a detrimental effect. The international community currently funds over 90% of the ANDSF's operating costs.

The U.S. covers the majority of this amount. We must assume that that the ANDSF will not be self-sustainable for several years to come. At this stage, without adequate international and U.S. funding support and an appropriate Coalition troop presence to oversee the proper expenditure of such funds, the ANDSF could potentially collapse.

At the security ministries, our advisors continue to focus on building ASI systems, processes, and national ANDSF sustainment capabilities. They are also working to improve integration among the different security pillars: military, police, and intelligence services. At the corps level, our advisors continue to concentrate on developing the ANDSF planning capacity, command and control, operational capabilities, unit logistics, and operational sustainment.

Our advisors at the ministries and our regional Train, Advise, & Assist Commands (TAACs) continue to serve as important sensors and touch points that allow us to verify and validate Afghan reporting while reinforcing the use of organizational systems and processes. They enable the Afghans to see themselves and to understand that they possess adequate supplies and equipment. Our advisors routinely find that reported shortages in operational units are most often the result of failures in accounting and distribution rather than actual deficiencies. We are assisting the Afghans to break the culture of hoarding and eliminate false claims of shortages in order to garner more resources and assistance. At all levels, our advisors also continue to emphasize and enforce Afghan financial transparency and accountability of donor resources..."

General Campbell's oral testimony also stated the need to preserve higher U.S. military manning levels than the president has previously authorized and do so beyond the current deadline of the end of 2016. He also talked about the need to continue to provide combat air power. However, he did not provide specifics, and—as usual—both committees failed to insist on concrete recommendations. (One of the few surviving aspects of bipartisanship in both Houses of Congress.)

Lessons for the Future

Given this background, the worst outcome of the tragedy in Kunduz would be to make those responsible for the tragedy scapegoats for the fog of war and set even more stringent limits on the use of airpower—rather than fix the particular problems that led to the attack on the hospital. It would be even worse if somehow led to cuts in U.S. air strength and the number of men in the train-and-assist mission.

The goals should be very different. First, there is almost certainly a need for more air power and better training of Afghan forces to use it. The problem is not too much air power; it is too little used too sporadically and then often under conditions where a U.S. or Afghan force is already under severe threat and the tactical situation is difficult to characterize and assess.

The tragedy in Kunduz is a warning that doing too little too late with inexperienced forces in the middle of a major firefight is not the answer. If the United States is to buy the Afghan forces the time they need to stand on their own, it will take a mixture of U.S. unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), fixed-wing combat aircraft, and rotary-wing aircraft to provide both rapidly deployable combat air power and help move Afghan forces in a real emergency. And, it will be better to focus on initial over-deployment rather than continue to ration out too little—both to ensure that the Afghan forces do not lose by sheer attrition or in some catalytic collapse and to minimize civilian casualties.

There is also a need for a frank and open zero-based assessment of the number of U.S. forces needed in the train-and-assist mission and a shift from a “deadline” to a “conditions-based” strategy for deciding when they should leave. The present effort is limited largely to the corps level and only about 6,980 of the some 9,800 U.S. forces still in-country seem to be involved.

This number is probably much too low, and the total of 5,000 that some are discussing as the level to be retained through 2016 is likely to prove even more inadequate. It is necessary to provide enough manpower to train and assist at the Kandak level and at all of the other critical levels necessary to help the Afghan forces become combat effective, as well as provide more air power and force protection.

The criticisms General Campbell made of Afghan forces in his testimony are to some extent criticism of the way in which the United States shaped the growth of the Afghan forces. The United States and its allies rushed far too many of these forces into being, focused on generating more forces rather than on combat effectiveness, and provided erratic funding and supplies of qualified trainers. We then rushed out before Afghan ground troops were close to being ready—and left years before the Afghan air force could become effective.

There is no magic number here, but an objective analysis of what is really needed might well conclude that the total U.S. manning level in Afghanistan should be above 13,000 than rather than the present 9,800. The United States will almost certainly have to stay for several years after 2016 and will have to forward deploy real experts in combat—special forces, rangers, Afghan hands at the Kandak level.

The train-and-assist mission needs to focus on providing advisers where they can properly develop and support combat leaders and real-world warfighting capability, deploying advisers where they can help develop Afghan ability to use combat air support, ensure the flow of ammunition and supplies, and ensure reinforcements go to the right place and actually come when needed. This will mean putting some U.S. advisers into places where they will be at far more risk and taking casualties, and this should be part of an overall risk assessment.

Finally, continued U.S. military and civil aid will be needed each year in the future, through at least 2020, and the amount should be based on some kind of annual plan worked out with the Afghans and not simply assigned on the basis of past plans and commitments or arbitrary budget caps.

Plans, Transparency, and Integrated Civil-Military Efforts

There is a clear need for the Executive Branch to do a far better job of giving the Congress integrated civil military plans, clear rationales for its aid requests, and showing it has adequate ways of controlling the flow of money and measures of effectiveness. Fifteen years of war have led to far too little progress in all

these areas, and it is time that the United States stopped focusing on Afghan corruption alone and actually held itself accountable.

This does not mean that the United States should give the Afghan government a blank check or fail to set conditions for these efforts. It should be clear to everyone in Afghanistan—especially its leaders—that the reforms they once pledged at Tokyo, suitable countercorruption measures, and basic reforms in the way the Ministries of Defense and Interior operate will actually take place. The United States should never tolerate another Hamid Karzai or failure to reach an agreement on political leadership.

There also is a clear need for far more honesty and transparency in U.S. reporting on the war. The Congress, the media, and the American people deserve honest reporting on the fighting, the growth of insurgent activity and regional influence, and problems in the Afghan forces and government. So, for that matter, do our allies and the Afghan people. The war cannot be won by “spin” and public relations exercises and by avoiding the truth about the problems in the Afghan government effort or dealing with Pakistan. So far, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) seems the only element of the U.S. government focused on the real challenges in the war.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

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