

## In Afghanistan, Let's Keep It Simple

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By Ahmed Rashid

For much of the 20th century before the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan was a peaceful country living in harmony with its neighbors.

There was a king and a real government, which I witnessed in the 1970s when I frequently traveled there. Afghanistan had what I'll call a minimalist state, compared with the vast governmental apparatuses that colonialists left behind in British India and Soviet Central Asia.

This bare-bones structure worked well for a poor country with a small population, few natural resources and a mix of ethnic groups and tribes that were poorly connected with one another because of the rugged terrain. The center was strong enough to maintain law and order, but it was never strong enough to undermine the autonomy of the tribes.

Afghanistan was not aiming to be a modern country or a regional superpower. The economy was subsistence-level, but nobody starved. Everyone had a job, though farm labor was intermittent. There was a tiny urban middle class, but the gap between rich and poor was not that big. There was no such thing as Islamic extremism or a narco-state.

In 2002, I spent a great deal of time in Washington trying to urge the Bush administration to focus on rebuilding Afghanistan's minimalist state, which had been utterly destroyed by 30 years of war.

At that time a bunch of experts in Washington, some now closely associated with Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, estimated that it would cost the international community about \$5 billion a year for 10 years to re-create a basic Afghan state that could counter any threat that al-Qaeda or the Taliban might pose.

The keys were investment in agriculture, because that is where jobs lie; rebuilding the roads that used to link the major cities and border towns, so the economy could take off; and investing in an Afghan army and police force. In addition, the country needed a workable government model, modern and inclusive education and health programs, and a functioning justice system.

We all know what happened. The Bush administration left Afghanistan underresourced, underfunded and in the hands of the CIA and the warlords, and went off to fight in Iraq.

When al-Qaeda and the Taliban saw that George W. Bush was not serious about Afghanistan, they found it easy to return. The insurgency began in the summer of 2003, as the Taliban reoccupied large chunks of the country, used drug money to arm its men, and improved their firepower and tactics so much that the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), recently said the situation is "serious" and "deteriorating."

Now any operation to patch together a minimalist Afghan state would cost between \$10 billion and \$15 billion a year and require tens of thousands more Western troops, which nobody is willing to provide. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, is widely expected to request additional forces, but he's not going to get that many.

Today Washington is bickering over what constitutes success in Afghanistan, whether the Obama plan will work, how long American public opinion will hold up, how many more troops and dollars are needed and how to stop its alleged NATO allies from slipping out through the back door. Asked what success would look like,

Holbrooke even quipped: "We'll know it when we see it."

Many dissenters in Washington, such as columnist [George Will](#), insist that the Afghans are incapable of learning and unwilling to build a modern state. Others, including former British diplomat [Rory Stewart](#), argue that Afghan society should be left alone. But the dissenters do not sufficiently acknowledge the past failures of the Bush administration that led us to this impasse. What's worse, they offer no solutions.

So what needs to be done? First, the American and European people need to be told the truth: Their governments have failed them in Afghanistan over the past eight years, and not a single aspect of rebuilding the minimalist state was undertaken until it was too late. The capital, Kabul, for example, got regular electricity only this year, despite billions of dollars in international aid. Millions of dollars for agriculture has been wasted in [cockamamie schemes](#) to grow strawberries and raise cashmere goats.

Governments also need to explain that the terrorist threat has grown and that al-Qaeda has spread its tentacles throughout Africa and Europe. And the West must admit that the Taliban has become a brand name that resonates deep into Pakistan and Central Asia and could extend into India and China.

Second, the minimalist state must be rebuilt at breakneck speed. President Obama understands this. His plan for the first time emphasizes agriculture, job creation and justice; on paper, at least, it's an incisive and productive blueprint. But will he be given the time to carry it out?

The Democrats want to give him just until next year's congressional elections and then start bringing the troops home. For the first time, more than 51 percent of Americans want their men and women back from Afghanistan. The Republicans are looking for slipups, such as the apparent fraud in the presidential election last month, so they can pounce.

However, the Obama administration needs two or three years before it has any chance of success. So the president's first task is to create public and congressional support to give the plan sufficient time.

Third, the insurgency can never be defeated as long as the rebels enjoy a haven. The retreating Afghan Taliban was welcomed in Pakistan in 2001 and is still tolerated there because of a certain logic put forward by the Pakistan army that mainly involves containing India's growing power in the region and in Afghanistan in particular.

Bush never really pushed this issue, choosing to treat then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf with kid gloves. Today the Islamabad government is divided between civilians and the military, and as the civilians show themselves more inept, the army's power is once again ascendant.

In recent months the army has seemed more determined to take on the Pakistani Taliban -- since April it has lost 312 soldiers and killed some 2,000 Taliban members. Yet there is no strategic shift to take on the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan.

Despite Holbrooke's attempts to pursue a regional strategy, there is still no breakthrough with Pakistan. And India continues to act tough with Islamabad, offering the Americans little room to maneuver. There is no easy way out of this quandary except time and more international aid to Pakistan.

Last, there have to be Afghan partners on the ground to help build a minimalist state. Unfortunately, Bush ignored that too. The corruption, the growth of the drug trade and the failure to build representative institutions after partially successful elections in 2004 and 2005 were all glossed over, as Bush feted President Hamid Karzai and did not ask hard questions.

The apparent rigging of the Aug. 20 elections has plunged Afghanistan into a political and constitutional crisis for which neither America nor the United Nations has any answer. (In another sign of turmoil, the deputy intelligence chief was blown up by a suicide bomber last week, and the Taliban claimed responsibility.) But the electoral fraud was assured months ago when Karzai began to ally himself with regional warlords, drug traffickers and top officials in the provinces who were terrified of losing their jobs and their lucrative sinecures

if Karzai lost. It seemed obvious to everyone except those who mattered in the West.

To emerge from this mess with even moderately credible Afghan partners will be difficult, but it has to be done. (The Americans could start by forcing Karzai to create a government that includes all leading opposition figures.) Without a partner, the United States becomes nothing but an occupying force that Afghans will resist and NATO will not want to support. Holbrooke's skills as a power broker will be sorely tested, with his past successes in the Balkans a cakewalk compared with this perilous path.

The Obama administration can come out of this quagmire if it aims low, targets the bad guys, builds a regional consensus, keeps the American public on its side and gives the Afghans what they really want -- just the chance to have a better life.

There is no alternative but for the United States to remain committed to rebuilding a minimalist state in Afghanistan. Nothing less will stop the Taliban and al-Qaeda from again using Afghanistan and now Pakistan to wreak havoc in the region and around the world.

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