

Explaining the Outcomes of Military Intervention

Carter Malkasian, 30 April 2020

Much of my research has been on Afghanistan and Iraq, with a particular focus on explaining the outcome of US military intervention in each. The United States has spent nearly two decades in each country, a prolonged commitment that merits study—even if waning terrorists threats and the COVID-19 crisis soon force withdrawal. What I want to talk about here is how certain dynamics—as relate to internal order and what it means to be Afghan or Iraqi—influenced outcomes. Recognizing up front that I have not done the homework to generalize, the findings incline me toward a starker view of the limits and costs of military intervention in pursuit of stabilization.

Afghanistan and Iraq, Disunity and Resistance

I started exploring military outcomes in Afghanistan when I was working in Garmser district, Helmand province from 2009 to 2011. I was interested in why the United States had been unable to succeed and why violence had returned after the initial years of calm that had followed the 2001 US invasion. I endeavored to write a thirty-year history of this small area. My instinct, based on earlier studies of Afghanistan and the writing of Sarah Chayes in *Punishment of Virtue*, was that grievances—locals driven to fight by the mistreatment of the government or its allies—would be a primary cause of the return of violence. Indeed, I found ample evidence of grievances in the form of land issues, oppressive policemen, corruption, and government exploitation of the poppy trade. As I studied the history of the district, however, I realized that grievances could not explain everything.

For one, Garmser had largely fallen to the Taliban in 2006 but not at the hands of aggrieved locals. There had been no local uprising. Rather, the district had fallen when a few hundred Taliban fighters drove over the desert from Pakistan and attacked. Aggrieved locals helped the Taliban but were secondary to Taliban success. This finding raised the importance of Pakistan—or in theoretical terms, external safe havens—as an explanatory factor. Yet even this necessary condition could not explain everything. War is a competition between two sides that plays out in the execution of violence. The Taliban still had a battle to win, begging why the government didn't succeed in that battle.

In the case of Garmser, the answer is that when those few hundred Taliban arrived, barely any police or soldiers or tribal militias stood to fight them. Robust police and tribal militias had crumbled in the preceding years in bouts of infighting. The government side was marked by disunity among tribes and different factions. The government had not ordered itself for war. In contrast, the Taliban were fairly united. The explanation fits other literature—such as by Olivier Roy and David Edwards—about the anarchic nature of tribal systems versus the cohesion of religious leaders.¹

After leaving Garmser but continuing to research in Afghanistan, I learned that a similar process had played out in other strategic districts, such as Arghandab, Panjwai, and Zharey in Kandahar. As convincing, the disunity of warlords throughout Afghanistan is a fundamental reason for the Taliban's initial path to power from 1994 to 1996. I also was able to explore the role of disunity in Anbar province, Iraq, where I had deployed before 2007 and again became involved from 2015 to 2017 during the war against the Islamic State. Disunity had a powerful role in the Islamic State's 2014 victory in Anbar province, at least equal to grievances from the sectarianism of the Iraqi government. At the critical moment in January 2014 when the Islamic State assaulted the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, the tribal leaders and militias that had run al-Anbar since the 2006 awakening went their own separate ways. Their propensity was toward division rather than coming together for the common good. Some aligned with the government, some sided with the Islamic State in order to build their own power or turn against rivals, and some sat things out. The Islamic State was able to overwhelm those who chose to fight and capture most of the province.

Yet, in continuing to study Afghanistan, I felt something more was going on. Disunity and other explanations helped but could not explain every incident of battlefield defeat, especially after 2014. In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied police and soldiers in intact defensive positions were losing. Empirical observation made it abundantly clear that the average soldier and policeman

¹ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). David Edwards, *Heroes of the Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

simply did not want to fight as much as his Taliban counterpart. When under duress, police and soldiers too often just gave up.

What was happening? The explanation that I have been exploring is that the Taliban exemplified an idea, an idea that inspired, an idea that made them powerful in battle. In simple terms, that idea is Islam and resistance to occupation. Both were deeply tied to what it meant to be Afghan. Aligned with foreign occupiers, the government mustered no similar inspiration. It could not get its supporters, even if they outnumbered the Taliban, to go to the same lengths. Its claim to Islam was fraught. The very presence of Americans in Afghanistan trod on what it meant to be Afghan. It prodded at men and women to defend their honor, their religion, and their home. It dared young men to fight. It animated Taliban. It sapped the will of Afghan soldiers and police. When they clashed, Taliban were more willing to kill and be killed than soldiers and police, or at least a good number of them.²

I found various evidence for this hypothesis. Official and unofficial Taliban statements are abundant. For example, a Taliban religious scholar from Kandahar told me: “The Taliban fight for belief, for *janat* (heaven) and *ghazi* (killing infidels)...The army and police fight for money...The Taliban are willing to lose their head to fight...How can the army and police compete with the Taliban?” More convincingly, multiple surveys of Taliban since 2007 (by Graeme Smith, Ashley Jackson, Theo Farrell, and Antonio Giustozzi, among others) have confirmed that one reason the Taliban fight is because they believe it their Islamic duty to resist occupation and are convinced their cause will enable them to win.³ I myself organized a survey of 45 Taliban in 2014; just over half cited Islam or Afghan identity as integral to their morale. The role of Islam and resistance can be seen on the battlefield as well. During the key battles after 2014—Sangin, Marjah, Nad Ali, Lashkar Gah, Andar, and Kunduz—I have found

² David Edwards makes a similar argument regarding what drives Afghans to conduct suicide bombing, perhaps the ultimate act of high morale, in David Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

³ Graeme Smith, *The Dogs are Eating Them Now: Our War in Afghanistan* (New York: Counterpoint, 2014), 199–211. Ashley Jackson, “Perspectives on Peace from Taliban Areas of Afghanistan,” Special Report, no. 229, United States Institute of Peace, May 2019, 4, 12–13. Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban at war: inside the Helmand insurgency, 2004–2012,” *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4, (2013): 853.

testimonials from Taliban that Islam and resistance to occupation was motivating them whereas soldiers and police expressed listlessness and lacked inspiration.

Evidence can also be found in Iraq, although it is less weighty than in Afghanistan, less prevalent than evidence on sectarianism and Iran as motivational factors. Still, the success and endurance of the Islamic State on the battlefield probably had something to do with their claimed Islamic credentials. After the 2014 collapse, Islamic State fighters regularly defeated superior numbers of tribal and government forces in Anbar until US air power became so crushing that defense was impossible.⁴ US advisors often assessed that Iraqi soldiers—who were the bulk of the force in Anbar—had very poor morale, commenting that the Iraqi army could only attack with overwhelming superiority and the smallest setback could cause soldiers to flee, leaving their weapons and uniforms behind. It is easy to see that the Iraqi national army never acquired a sense of nationalism. The army stood for a vague attempt at nationalism while the Islamic State stood for both Sunni identity and Islam. US commanders judged army soldiers to be far less ideologically inclined than their more Shi‘a militia counterparts, who were fighting for Shi‘a identity and Islam. Iraqi generals were known to despair that their army was nothing, a shadow of Saddam’s army of the 1980s.⁵ “There is no sense of nation,” said one American general, an astute observer of the Iraqi army, “The republic goes no farther than Baghdad.”⁶

I do not mean to suggest that Taliban or Islamic State claim to Islam and resistance to occupation is the sufficient condition for the lack of success in Afghanistan and Iraq. As I noted, disunity, grievances, external safe havens, and sectarianism are other necessary conditions. Poor leadership and corruption probably added to the overall problem of poor morale and the resulting poor military effectiveness. State structure mattered too. As Thomas Barfield has argued in his magisterial *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, the overly centralized Afghan government system appointed provincial and district

⁴ 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.

⁵ Discussion with US military advisors, al-Asad airbase, Anbar province, January 8, 2016. Discussion with Marine command, Kuwait, August 24, 2015. Discussion with key Abu Nimr tribal leader, Amman, Jordan, 9 March 2017.

⁶ Discussion with US generals, Irbil, Iraq, October 20, 2015.

leaders with little input from locals and refused to empower them, resulting in leadership that was unresponsive to local needs and not resourced to take action—hardly a system to breed leaders willing to fight and die. Furthermore, causes of defeat may shift over time and space.⁷ The reasons Afghan or Iraqi government forces were defeated in 2006 need not be the same as the reasons in 2014. Deep antipathy to foreign presence may have hardened over the course of both wars as violence begat violence. Repeated defeats had their own suppressive effect on morale. If not the cause of the original defeats, they magnified the problem and impeded turning the corner. Taking all this into account, what I would argue is that disunity, Islam and resistance, grievances, and external safe havens are likely tied to the outcome of our Afghanistan and Iraq wars. At the very least, they had a critical impact at critical moments.

Policy

I have not explored the external validity of these findings, either in the wider world or solely in the Middle East and South Asia. The explanations may be incidental to Iraq and Afghanistan, which bear similarities to Syria and Vietnam but differ drastically from other stabilization cases. Nevertheless, the intractability of these explanations raise questions for policy. None proved sufficiently sensitive to treatment to alter the outcome of military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq—at least in my experience. The best efforts were unable to graft disunity or dispel resistance to occupation while grievances and external safe havens remain notoriously difficult to handle. Problems in cohesion, morale, grievances, and external safe havens resulted in government failure absent our military forces and especially air strikes. They were issues to be managed rather than overcome.

The first question that comes to mind is: If problems are so difficult to overcome, can we create stability or enable partner governments to stand on their own? I do not want to jump to conclusions. Perhaps sounder decisions early on such as drawing the Taliban into the Bonn process or not dissolving the Iraqi army could have set intervention on the right course. Perhaps all interventions have early moments when sound decisions can make a difference, a tempting “golden hour.” Even so, the range of

⁷ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

opportunity to either create stability or enable partner governments to stand on their own would still be narrow. That is sobering, even if the finding only pertains to Afghanistan and Iraq (which seems unlikely).

If opportunity is narrow, then what should policy be? When key interests are at stake, I think we may need to contemplate being present for the long haul—but not in the way we have been in the past. A thrifty, humble strategy that is sustainable over the long term would be advisable over heavy investment to bring about quick change. Afghanistan and Iraq suggest short-term progress can reverse itself once our commitment decreases. Such a thrifty, humble strategy muddles through, preferring to deploy as few forces as possible, aware that trying to force decisive change is a waste of resources.

If going low to stay long—to quote Kael Weston who is in the audience today—is a wise policy, then what kind of recommendations are needed? The most helpful are not those that shoot for success or enabling a partner to stand on their own but those that make intervention more sustainable. Decisions not to surge or not to withdraw prematurely, for example, lessen the cost of intervention in lives and money. In that vein, well-designed state structures and accountable leaders, as Professor Myerson has shown, can bolster sustainability by dampening popular opposition and improve the state's performance in security so as to keep collapse and demand for our outside resources at bay. And stronger use of conditionality could encourage governments to enact reforms and reduce grievances. Better decisions of this sort would have put the Afghan and Iraq wars on a better course, even if they did not yield victory.

The costs and difficulties of intervention naturally lead to a larger, final question. Should we intervene at all? The obstacles have led me to doubt the wisdom of military intervention in pursuit of stabilization, or at least its widespread use. How dire is the threat? Since costs can be high and the commitment likely long, in many cases I think we should not intervene in the first place. And when interventions go poorly and the threat to US interests is low, we should withdraw. Living with instability somewhere in the world may be better than the financial and human expenses of addressing it.