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After the Withdrawal

A Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Joint Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific on March 19, 2013

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***After the Withdrawal:
A Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan²***

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
United States House of Representatives**

March 19, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. This is an opportune time to discuss a way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I have spent time in the region over the past decade in two separate capacities: as a researcher for RAND and a senior civilian within U.S. Special Operations Command in Afghanistan. My comments today draw from both experiences, combining research and analysis with operational experience on the ground.

My primary argument is that it would be detrimental to U.S. national security to withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, as the United States has done in Iraq. The United States should continue to conduct counterterrorism operations and assist the Afghans in conducting counterinsurgency after 2014. The reason is straightforward: there are several militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan that threaten U.S. security and its interests overseas, including al Qa'ida (which still retains its core leadership along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (which has conducted terrorist attacks in the region and had operatives arrested in the United States), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (which was involved in the 2010 Times Square plot in New York City), and Haqqani Network (which has conducted numerous attacks against U.S. forces and the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan) among others.

While Iraq is obviously different from Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is worth highlighting the potential dangers of a complete U.S. military withdrawal. Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) has increased its campaign of violence in Iraq and established a foothold in neighboring Syria since the U.S. departure. By early 2013, AQI was involved in an average of 30 suicide and car bomb attacks per

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month, an increase of 50 percent from 2011 levels – the last year U.S. forces were in Iraq. In addition, AQI has been active in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra, AQI's affiliate there, has a growing number of foreign fighters, heavy weapons, and money, and is now potentially al Qa'ida's best-armed affiliate in the world. The experience in Iraq should serve as a lesson about the risks of withdrawing too early in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In response to the instructions from both Subcommittees, I have divided my written remarks into four sections: security implications of the drawdown, the capacity of the Afghan government, Pakistan dimension, and a brief conclusion on the U.S. commitment.

I. Security Implications of the U.S. Drawdown

The United States continues to face a threat from terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including along a border that terrorists cross regularly with ease. Al Qa'ida presents the most serious threat. While it has been weakened because of persistent drone strikes, al Qa'ida continues to survive. It is currently led by Ayman al-Zawahiri and a range of senior leaders, including Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqi, Abu Zayd al-Kuwaiti, Hamza al-Ghamdi, and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi.

In addition, al Qa'ida has developed a "symbiotic" strategy in the region. Since al Qa'ida lacks the legitimacy and power to establish a sanctuary in Afghanistan and Pakistan on its own, it has attempted to leverage local militant networks in the region. Al Qa'ida has not limited itself to one geographic area or one group. As Table 1 highlights, al Qa'ida has established close relations with the Haqqani Network and some other groups, though the degree of cooperation varies between al Qa'ida and its allies. This symbiotic arrangement provides al Qa'ida some redundancy. In addition, some al Qa'ida allies that have traditionally focused on Pakistan, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, have become more involved in Afghanistan operations. In Pakistan, al Qa'ida has established close ties with some groups, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Harakat ul-Jihadi-i-Islami, and Harakat ul-Mujahideen, and limited relations with others, such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Al Qa'ida has also recruited a growing number of Pakistanis into its senior ranks, such as Abdallah al-Sindhi, Ahmed Farouq, Osama Nazir, and Hassan Gul (the latter was killed in October 2012).

Table 1: Al Qa'ida's Relationship with Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Group	Comment on Relationship
Afghan Taliban	Cooperation limited to specific areas and commanders
Al-Badr Mujahidin	Limited support and shelter to al Qa'ida in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
Commander Nazir Group	Limited cooperation, including safe haven, materiel, training
Gul Bahadur's Group	Limited cooperation, including safe haven, materiel, training
Haqqani Network	Close strategic and operational relations
Harakat ul-Jihad-Islami	Close relations, including through HUJI-313
Harakat ul-Mujahideen	Close relations, especially through Fazlur Rahman Khalil
Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin	Limited cooperation
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	Close relations, including in northern Afghanistan, FATA
Jaish-e-Mohammad	Limited cooperation
Lashkar-i-Islam	Close relations, including with Mangal Bagh
Lashkar-i-Jhangvi	Some cooperation, such as financing, planning for attacks
Lashkar-i-Tayyiba	Limited cooperation, especially at senior levels
Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan	Limited cooperation
Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan	Close strategic and operational relations

Several of these groups – such as al Qa'ida, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, and the Haqqani Network – present a threat to the United States and its interests in the region. In September 2009, for example, Najibullah Zazi was arrested for planning attacks with al Qa'ida on the New York City subway.³ Several al Qa'ida operatives, including Saleh al-Somali (now deceased) and Adnan Gulshair el Shukrijumah, were involved in the plot. According to U.S. government documents, Zazi's travels to Pakistan and his contacts with individuals there were pivotal in helping him build an improvised explosive device using triacetone triperoxide, the same explosive used effectively in the 2005 London subway bombings. In October 2009, Chicago-based David Coleman Headley (aka Daood Sayed Gilani) was arrested for his involvement with Lashkar-e Tayyiba and senior al Qa'ida leaders to conduct a series of attacks, including the November 2008 Mumbai attack and a plot to attack a newspaper in Copenhagen. Headley's base in Chicago made him ideally suited for a future attack in the U.S. homeland.

In December 2009, five Americans from Alexandria, Virginia – Ahmed Abdullah Minni, Umar Farooq, Aman Hassan Yemer, Waqar Hussain Khan, and Ramy Zamzam – were arrested in Pakistan and later convicted on terrorism charges. They radicalized in the United States and went to Pakistan for training and operational guidance. In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate an improvised explosive device in Times Square in New York City after being trained by bomb-makers from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

³ U.S. District Court, Eastern District of New York, United States of America Against Najibullah Zazi, 09 CR 663(S-1), February 22, 2010.

In sum, there are – and will likely continue to be – a range of Islamic extremist groups in the region, most of which are Sunni, that threaten the United States. A withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the region would significantly degrade the U.S. ability to conduct counterterrorism operations throughout the region and potentially allow a resurgence of these groups.

II. Capacity of the Afghan Government

There have been notable improvements in Afghan society in several areas thanks, in part, to a better functioning Afghan government. After all, the Taliban government that ruled until 2001 barely functioned. Economic conditions have improved because of the war economy, an increase in foreign investment, Afghan entrepreneurship and some progress from the Afghan government. Examples include:

- Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rose from \$92 in 2001 to \$543 in 2011
- Foreign direct investment increased from \$170,000 in 2000 to \$83 million in 2011
- Agrarian output has improved; cereal production, for example, tripled from 1.9 million metric tons in 2000 to nearly 6 million in 2010⁴

Health metrics have also improved from appalling conditions during the Taliban years. Examples include:

- The infant mortality rate declined from 95 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 73 per 1,000 live births in 2011
- Life expectancy for both men and women increased from 45 years in 2000 to 48 by 2010
- Clean water is more readily available; in 2001, only 22 percent of Afghans had access to improved water sources, but by 2010 half of Afghans had access⁵

Education has also improved. While data on literacy rates is unreliable, a growing number of male and female Afghans are going to school. Examples include:

- Primary school enrollment increased from 749,360 pupils in 2000 to over 5 million in 2010
- Secondary school enrollment rose from 362,415 in 2001 to 2,044,157 in 2010⁶

Afghan society is better off today than a decade ago. And Afghans in rural and urban areas are now better connected to each other – and the world – than ever before. Mobile cellular

⁴ The World Bank, World Development Indicators Dataset, accessed on March 13, 2013.

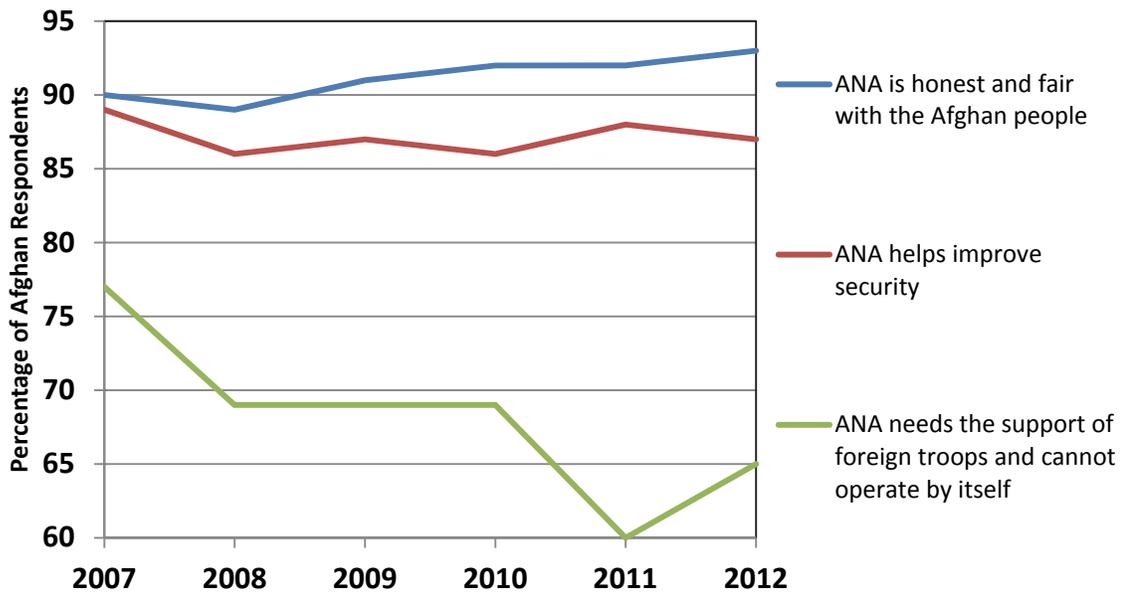
⁵ The World Bank, World Development Indicators Dataset, accessed on March 13, 2013.

⁶ The World Bank, World Development Indicators Dataset, accessed on March 13, 2013.

subscriptions jumped from 0 in 2000 to 18 million in 2011.⁷ The majority of Afghan households now have phones.

Yet there are still challenges that necessitate a sustained U.S. and international commitment. One is the quality of Afghan National Security Forces and the Afghan Local Police, which continue to require additional help in training, logistics, planning, and intelligence collection. As Figure 1 highlights, Afghan perceptions of the Afghan National Army are generally getting better. Nearly 95 percent of Afghans view the army as honest and fair, between 85 and 90 percent believe it is helping improve security, and a declining percentage of Afghans believe it needs support from foreign troops. It is worth remembering that the Afghan government faces an enemy that receives considerable aid from states (such as Pakistan and Iran) and non-state actors (such as global terrorist groups and their supporters in the Gulf and other locations). Consequently, a U.S. presence would be helpful in continuing to ensure the ANA and other Afghan security forces stay on this trajectory.

Figure 1: Afghan Perceptions of the Afghan National Army⁸



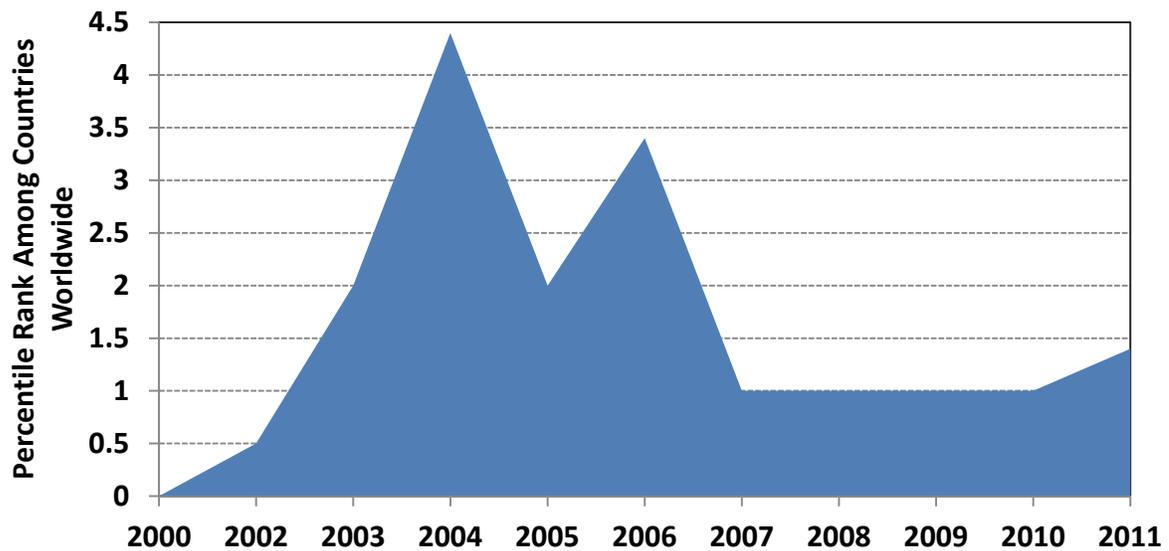
Another challenge is corruption. To maintain and build legitimacy, the central government and local institutions need to more adequately provide justice and service delivery to the population, including countering high levels of corruption. As Figure 2 highlights, however, Afghanistan

⁷ The World Bank, World Development Indicators Dataset, accessed on March 13, 2013.

⁸ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2012: Survey of the Afghan People* (Kabul: Asia Foundation, 2012), p. 52.

remains in the bottom 1.5 percent of most corrupt countries in the world, according to World Bank estimates. But there have been some improvements thanks, in part, to U.S. encouragement and assistance. Two key players in the \$900 million Kabul Bank scandal were sentenced earlier this month to five years in prison each, though Afghan authorities are seeking to increase the sentence. While shorter than most expected, the sentences nonetheless mark limited progress. A withdrawal of U.S. forces would likely decrease U.S. leverage in encouraging more systematic anti-corruption efforts.

Figure 2: Corruption in Afghanistan (Percentile Rank among Countries Worldwide)⁹



A final challenge is economic sustainability. Some economists are concerned about the potential for a recession in Afghanistan when international funding from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) decreases. This might not be as much a result of declining development aid, but rather a decrease of services from ISAF activity. How can the United States help the Afghan government grow its revenue and productive sectors to help pay for services, investment, and security? There are several options that should be more effectively implemented. Examples include long-term development of a mining sector that offers substantial benefits from Afghanistan's virtually untapped deposits of iron, copper, cobalt, gold, and critical industrial metals like lithium. In the shorter term, there should be an emphasis on artisanal projects and a shift from illegal artisanal mining to legal small-scale mining operations. Afghanistan granted negotiating rights on copper and gold tenders last year, blocks in the Afghan-Tajik Oil Basin, and gas well refurbishments in Shirbirghan. But Kabul has yet to pass a revised mining law, which has stalled further projects. Despite the limited progress in Afghanistan's extractives sector, a

⁹ World Bank, World Bank Governance Indicators Dataset, accessed on March 13, 2013.

complete withdrawal of U.S. forces would likely increase the possibility of a collapsed state and dampen the prospects of economic sustainability. During the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, there was virtually no international investment.

III. The Pakistan Dimension

Pakistan has long had a relationship with militant groups in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, provided aid to the Afghan mujahideen with help from other organizations – including the Central Intelligence Agency. In the 1990s, the ISI helped support the Taliban. According to declassified U.S. documents, U.S. State Department officials understood that “ISI is deeply involved in the Taleban take over in Kandahar and Qalat.”¹⁰ ISI officers were deployed to such Afghan cities as Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad – and stationed in Pakistani consulates – to provide assistance and advice.¹¹ Another U.S. intelligence assessment contended that the ISI was “supplying the Taliban forces with munitions, fuel, and food,” and “using a private sector transportation company to funnel supplies into Afghanistan and to the Taliban forces.”¹²

Today, individuals from the ISI and Pakistan military continue to provide some support to Afghan insurgents. Indeed, Pakistan is running one of the most successful covert action programs today against a major power – and against the United States no less. The U.S. failure to curb Pakistan's sanctuary and support is particularly egregious since the United States was involved in an almost identical program 30 years ago – with the ISI – against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Islamabad's rationale for supporting Afghan insurgents is straightforward and, in many ways, understandable. Hemmed in by its arch-enemy India to the east, Pakistan wants an ally to the west. It doesn't have one at the moment. Instead, New Delhi has a close relationship with the Afghan government. Feeling strategically encircled by India, Islamabad has resorted to proxy warfare to replace the current Afghan government with a friendlier regime. With U.S. forces withdrawing from Afghanistan, Pakistan could get its wish.

Yet this outcome was not inevitable. The U.S. made three key mistakes along the way. First, U.S. policymakers failed to develop an effective regional strategy that involved Afghanistan's neighbors. At the Bonn Conference in December 2001, U.S. and other Western diplomats pulled together the regional powers, such as Iran, Pakistan, India, and Russia, to agree on a way

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, From Ron McMullen (Afghanistan Desk), “Developments in Afghanistan,” December 5, 1994. Released by the National Security Archive.

¹¹ U.S. Embassy (Islamabad), Cable, “Afghanistan: [Excised] Criticizes GOP's Afghan Policy; Says It Is Letting Policy Drift,” June 16, 1998. Released by the National Security Archive.

¹² From [Excised] to DIA Washington D.C., Cable, “Pakistan Interservice Intelligence/ Pakistan (PK) Directorate Supplying the Taliban Forces,” October 22, 1996.

forward in Afghanistan. After Bonn, however, there was no follow-on institution to ensure regional collaboration, and cooperation quickly devolved into security competition.

Second, the United States and Pakistan failed to target the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan. The United States has conducted drone strikes in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. But senior leaders of the Taliban are located hundreds of miles south in Baluchistan Province and Karachi. Neither the U.S. nor Pakistan have targeted the Taliban command-and-control network there. Instead, the Taliban's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, resides well outside the area where drone strikes are occurring. So does the Taliban's inner shura, its most important decision-making body. The inner shura provides strategic guidance for the insurgency, exercises some command-and-control, and is the largest fundraiser. Indeed, Baluchistan has been so safe for Taliban leaders that most have moved their families there and sent their children to Pakistani schools.

Third, U.S. and Afghan leaders failed to co-opt as many former Taliban leaders as they could after Bonn, sending them instead to prisons at Bagram air base or Guantanamo. This was a mistake. The Taliban represented a faction of Afghan society that could not be indefinitely excluded from the country's political and economic life. Consequently, Taliban leaders, including several that considering reconciling with the Afghan government, slipped across the border into Pakistan.

According to a RAND study I led in 2008, the success rate of insurgent groups significantly rises when they have support from an outside power. Those insurgencies that received support from external states won more than 50 percent of the time, while those with no support won only 17 percent of the time. But that's not all. Insurgents have been successful approximately 43 percent of the time when they enjoyed a sanctuary.¹³ Afghan insurgents enjoy both outside support *and* sanctuary, a doubly difficult hurdle for the United States and its allies to overcome. Ten years after the U.S. helped overthrow the Taliban regime, it is notable that successive U.S. administrations have decided not to target the Taliban safe haven in Baluchistan. The Soviet Union faced a similar dilemma in the 1980s, when it did not act against the seven major mujahideen groups headquartered in Pakistan.

In his book *The Bear Trap*, Mohammad Yousaf, who headed the ISI's covert war in Afghanistan against the Soviets, wrote that the insurgent sanctuary in Pakistan was essential to defeat the

¹³ Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

Soviets and win the insurgency.¹⁴ Sadly, Yousaf's observation remains relevant today. A withdrawal of U.S. forces would likely leave behind an even more chaotic war involving multiple sides: insurgent groups backed by Pakistan and Iran; an Afghan government backed by several states, including India; and a range of Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara, and other powerbrokers backed by virtually all of Afghanistan's neighbors.

IV. Conclusion: A Sustained U.S. Presence

On September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was not just a sanctuary for al Qa'ida. The Taliban was also an ally. There were disagreements between Taliban and al Qa'ida leaders, as there are between most organizations. But Osama bin Laden's decision in the late 1990s to move from Tora Bora to Kandahar, only a few miles from Mullah Omar's residence, and the Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden after September 11 indicated a viable relationship. Today, the United States cannot accept a situation in which al Qa'ida and its local allies have an unchallenged sanctuary to plan and train for terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Nor can the United States accept an Afghan government that is an ally of terrorists. Al Qa'ida's continuing relationship with senior Taliban, Haqqani, and other militant leaders – including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan – suggests that a Taliban-led government would be a risky gamble for U.S. national security.

A viable long-term option may be relying on a limited U.S. Special Operations Force footprint, aided by the CIA and a small number of conventional forces. On the military side, it would focus on two goals: (1) assist Afghan national and local forces to prevent the military overthrow of the Afghan government by the Taliban, and (2) target al Qa'ida leaders and others plotting against the United States and its allies overseas. An Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy would involve using U.S. forces to conduct several tasks:

- Train, equip, and advise Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and Afghan Local Police forces
- Conduct direct action operations against high value terrorism targets
- Provide limited “enablers,” such as intelligence, civil affairs, and military information support operations

This strategy might require decreasing the number of U.S. and NATO forces to perhaps 8,000-12,000 by 2015, depending on ground conditions and other factors. This strategy entails some risks. It assumes that Afghan National Security Forces and local allies, with assistance from U.S. Special Operations Forces and others, would be adequate to degrade the Taliban-led insurgency.

¹⁴ Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan – The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 1992).

It also assumes that Afghan central government institutions would be adequate to establish some order and deliver services, at least in key urban areas. Current levels of corruption and incompetence raise long-term governance concerns. But this Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy has several benefits. It relies on Afghans to do the bulk of counterinsurgency, though with limited U.S. assistance and oversight. It also ensures a steady drop in financial costs of the war. While it would be foolhardy to draw too many lessons from other counterinsurgencies since they represent different contexts, it is worth noting that small numbers of U.S. Special Operations Forces and intelligence units have been successful in helping defeat insurgents (or setting the conditions for a peace settlement) in Colombia, Philippines, and a number of other insurgencies.

But a precipitous U.S. withdrawal and continuing Pakistan support to Afghan insurgent groups could lead to Taliban control of part or most of Afghanistan over the next decade. The complete U.S. departure from Iraq has allowed AQI to recover and threaten broader U.S. interests in the region. Yet the stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan are much higher than in Iraq, in part since it is the region where al Qa'ida was born and its leadership, which is still committed to attacking the United States, continues to exist.