

Don't head for Afghanistan's exits yet

Things look after the Panjwai massacre, but we've made too much progress to turn our backs now

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The shooting of 16 Afghan civilians, reportedly by a U.S. Army staff sergeant in Kandahar province's Panjwai district, comes on the heels of other incidents that have already fed U.S.-Afghan distrust, including the inadvertent desecration of holy Korans by U.S. forces and the killings, by rogue Afghan military members, of coalition military personnel.

Now, [Afghan President Hamid Karzai](#) is pressuring the United States to confine its troops to major bases — and the Taliban has announced it is suspending peace talks with Americans. Here in the U.S., it seems that public opinion against the war has turned decisively sour — and will likely never improve.

Is this mission hopeless? Is all lost in Panjwai? Was the massacre the straw that broke an already rickety camel's back?

I believe not. Even in volatile Kandahar Province, the killings resulted in well-attended memorial services — some attacked by insurgents — rather than the rage and violence incited by the Koran-burning. Mass demonstrations protesting the Panjwai killings took place in secure Jalalabad, not embattled Kandahar.

The difference is understandable. The Koran burnings appeared a calculated cultural insult, while friendly-fire deaths in Kandahar have been all too common.

Panjwai is a hard district, with swaths of irrigated green set among a hot, dusty desert, famous for its grapes before the Soviet Army devastated it in the 1980s. Taliban insurgents stood and fought when Canadian troops came there in 2006, their most intense combat since Korea in 1952.

But his fact is crucial: Insurgents are now outsiders in Panjwai, in part because of the US military presence, ironically including the alleged gunman, enabling Afghan villagers to defend themselves as part of the Village Stability Operations Program (VSOP).

It is understandable that the Panjwai killings would compound current uncertainties over the future of Afghanistan. In the U.S. and its coalition partners, political leaders want to have Afghanistan “in the rear view mirror,” despite existing promises to turn over security to the Afghans by 2014. On the Afghan side, Karzai wants to consolidate his power by presenting himself as the alternative to the foreign military presence.

The truth is these recent tragedies need not poison this mission. Indeed, the stakes remain so high, they must not be allowed to do so.

Lone gunmen, book-burners and divergent U.S. and Afghan political agendas cannot negate that, in 2001, coalition military forces brought hope back to Afghanistan and created the chance for a better life for Afghans.

In some areas, this hope has been realized. Education, in 2001 limited for boys and banned for girls, is today widespread. Cell phones and a vigorous independent media mean Afghanistan is no longer remote. Afghans remain proud of their constitution and national institutions, however threatened by insurgents and corruption alike.

Most important for the U.S., Afghanistan provides neither a base for transnational terror nor a model of how armed Islamic radicals can overthrow a Muslim democracy and humiliate the West. Long wars are frustrating and costly, but failure is more so.

Today, Afghans' frustration is rooted in seeing the rest of their hopes unrealized and in their fears that the 2014 U.S. disengagement will encourage hostile neighbors and Afghan insurgents. Koran-burning and the Panjwai killings painfully aggravated these underlying insecurities.

Even in Kandahar Province, where both the U.S. and coalition military presence and the Afghan government are less popular than anywhere else in Afghanistan, Afghans remain aware that insurgents no longer control Panjwai because of coalition soldiers. Foreign involvement is accepted where there is evidence it enables a better life while respecting Afghan lives and culture.

The majority of Afghanistan that remains comparatively peaceful presents a model for an achievable future. Most Afghans still recognize that the U.S. presence prevents a renewed devastating proxy war by their neighbors.

All that has been built since 2001 is put at risk by a focus by leaders on their electorates' frustrations: America's long war or Afghanistan's culturally invasive foreign presence.

Mutual frustrations will remain, other coalition members will depart, but the reasons that have led to the United States and international presence since 2001 will continue.

Afghanistan's importance to U.S. and global security did not die with [Osama Bin Laden](#). We must look beyond the recent tragedies, rather than telling the Afghans they are unworthy and once again disengaging as was done in the 1990s.

A post-2014 commitment to Afghanistan can be built, based on training, support and aid — as well as on the successes demonstrated since 2001, even in battlegrounds like Panjwai. These remain more important than the shock of killings or burnings or achieving short-term political gains in both Washington and Kabul.

Isby is author of "Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires."

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