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Foreign Policy

So Much for the Good War

By Arif Rafiq

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It's time to admit that Obama's Afghanistan strategy is a total failure.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the plight of the Afghan woman was a minor, but important part of the narrative that shaped the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. Girls, for the first time in years, headed to schools, and women -- at least in Kabul -- were able to move without the blue shuttlecock burqas that symbolized their bondage under the Taliban.

So it is with great irony that this week, one of the worst ever for coalition forces in Afghanistan, foreigners were killed in Kabul by a suicide bomber who was neither male nor linked to the Taliban. The perpetrator was a young woman affiliated with the Hezb-i-Islami (HIG) militant group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a bitter foe of the Taliban and former U.S. proxy who on 9/11 was self-exiled in Iran.

The ever pragmatic Hekmatyar is a weather vane, indicating the trajectory of the conflict in Afghanistan and the ever shifting domestic and regional power game. His role in the Sept. 18 bombing shows that the insurgents have the upper hand, their fight against the United States and Kabul government will continue, and Afghanistan is headed toward a messy, full-scale civil war.

Hekmatyar is the ultimate hedger. During the 1990s, he was at one point taking cash from both Iran and Pakistan. Today, his group is allied with his former Taliban enemies and is back in cahoots with the Pakistanis -- it continues to dominate Pakistan's Shamshatoo refugee camp and operates freely in Peshawar -- after having been dumped by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence

for the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Yet, out of all the insurgent groups, HIG has been most inclined to negotiate with Kabul. It in fact has a prominent network of fellow travelers in Afghan President Hamid Karzai's cabinet, a network consisting of people who have left Hekmatyar's branch of Hezb-i-Islami but still speak of him with reverence. A leading HIG negotiator now says that the peace talks are dead. And in a small-scale but ominous reminder of the chaotic intra-mujahideen war of the 1990s, recently HIG fighters have led so-called local uprisings against the Taliban. Warlordism still rules.

What's in store for Afghanistan is more war. The most perilous scenario is a renewed, full-fledged civil war -- total conflict with every faction for itself. Many, including people in Kabul, Washington, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, will be responsible for the carnage that could follow. But it is indisputable now that the Obama administration's once-vaunted "AfPak" strategy is a massive failure.

Osama bin Laden is, of course, dead. His killing and the rescue of General Motors were crudely displayed together at the Democratic National Convention as President Barack Obama's greatest achievements. A vigilant drone campaign has depleted al Qaeda's core. Many commanders have fled for greener pastures in the Arab heartland, where the next great jihad could begin.

But the jihad in South Asia continues despite the Obama campaign's celebratory chants. Al Qaeda affiliates and partner groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan -- including the Haqqani network and a variety of Pakistani Taliban groups -- remain resilient. The region is on fire, and growing instability creates a potential habitat for groups that will challenge regional security and, perhaps down the road, past the current U.S. election cycle, the American homeland.

Beyond al Qaeda, the U.S. president has achieved little of strategic importance in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is incorrect, if not disingenuous, when he says that the Taliban's momentum has been "blunted." The Taliban's spear is sharp as ever. Last week, on Sept. 14, it cut through Camp Bastion, one of the most secure foreign bases in Afghanistan. There, in a complex attack that cost \$10,000 or \$20,000 at most, it destroyed six jets valued at up to \$180 million. The ratio of cost to achievement of the \$100 billion-a-year war in Afghanistan is indefensible, though it must be said that the president, with his emphasis on "nation-building here at home," recognizes this uncomfortable fact.

The U.S. surge is over. All troops brought into Afghanistan after December 2009 will have returned home by the end of this week. But the Taliban surge has just begun. Attacks on coalition forces by Afghan security personnel -- the Taliban are responsible for a small, but probably growing number of these -- are on the rise. The Taliban reintegration campaign -- designed to bring low-level Taliban into the fold -- is working, but in an unintended way, with the penetration of the Afghan security forces by Taliban infiltrators.

The local militias raised by coalition forces and Kabul are a motley of opportunistic, quasi-jihadi criminals on temporary leave. The training program has been put on hold due to the rising green-on-blue attacks. The most crucial element of Obama's Afghanistan strategy -- the transition of control to Afghan security forces -- has been effectively suspended with the pause in joint coalition-Afghan operations.

And what of Afghanistan's civilians? The country's weakest are perilously vulnerable. Recall this past winter, when young children froze to death in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Kabul, just miles from the "splendors" (iced lattes, expensive carpets, child sex slaves, and more) enjoyed by Kabul's overnight millionaires and war-contractor expats. Afghan officials responded only after being shamed by New York Times reports on the spate of dying children. Meanwhile, in Helmand and Kandahar provinces -- the heart of Obama's surge -- nearly 30 percent of children suffer from acute malnutrition. They and the thousands of IDPs are the invisible faces of this surge, lost amid the president's indifference and the callous selfishness of Afghanistan's power elite.

Neighboring Pakistan has been both victim and culprit in this debacle. Pakistan's historical support of jihadists -- a lot that murders American, Afghan, and Pakistani civilians and soldiers - - has pushed the country toward strategic death. The generals in Rawalpindi are morally responsible for this cancer that is eating Pakistan from within and threatens its neighbors. And this is well-known. What few recognize, however, is the massive destabilizing impact of continued conflict in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Millions have fled violence in Pakistan's northwest, contributing to thousands of Pashtun migrants pouring into Karachi, settling in informal settlements in the crowded megacity, and putting its ethnic, economic, and political fault lines under great stress. Since 2008, thousands have died in ethnic and political violence in Karachi, and the number grows every year. Obama's war is not the sole contributor to Karachi's ethnic violence, but it is an unrecognized cause of its uptick.

Remarkably, a president who ran on campaigning that Afghanistan was the good war and Pakistan was an even greater challenge has been inattentive to these two wars. There is a noticeable absence of presidential leadership and resolve. The ambitious surge announced in 2009 was time-limited, telegraphing to the Taliban that they just had to outlast limited American patience. The next year, the Obama administration downgraded its goals for Afghanistan, abandoning the pretense of nation-building. By 2011, counterinsurgency was completely tossed out the window.

Obama accelerated the pace of drone attacks in Pakistan, trying to win the war against al Qaeda on the cheap and without much consideration for the negative externalities of this phantom war. These unilateral attacks -- combined with the Raymond Davis episode, the bin Laden raid, and the accidental attack on a Pakistani base in November 2011 -- widened a rift with Pakistan, without which Obama will never get the political settlement with the Taliban that he needs to responsibly vacate Afghanistan.

But Obama let the NATO supply route crisis with Pakistan fester. He is at fault for delegating the decision-making to subordinates, who bickered for months over whether to give Pakistan an apology. The president's closest advisors were ill-equipped for the task. National security advisor Tom Donilon lacks foreign-policy experience. Donilon, according to James Mann's new book, was told by his predecessor, James Jones, "You frequently pop off with absolute declarations about places you've never been, leaders you've never met." Another close Obama advisor, Ben Rhodes, is in his early 30s. But administration officials, according to Mann's account, derisively call consultations with Washington's most experienced foreign-policy hands -- Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, and Zbigniew Brzezinski -- the "old farts" meetings.

It is difficult to imagine the "old farts" making irresponsible statements like those of defense secretary and former CIA chief Leon Panetta. In August, Panetta preempted Pakistan's military and told the media that Rawalpindi would probably launch operations in North Waziristan soon. The gaffe put the Pakistan Army on the defensive and weakened its ability to mobilize public opinion in favor of a limited campaign against the Pakistani Taliban. Panetta also recently described the successful Afghan Taliban attack on Camp Bastion as the insurgency's "last gasp" - which would be a more appropriate description for the U.S. mission there.

The troubles in Afghanistan and Pakistan did not begin with Obama, and America's failings there during his presidency are by no means his responsibility alone. Afghanistan's elites are myopic plunderers whose war wealth is spent on Italian shoes and Dubai mansions. And the Pakistani military's deadly tryst with jihadists began when Obama was a college student. Rawalpindi remains wedded to using jihadists, even as they point a gun at their own heads, though the Army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, recognizes the existential threat they pose and could be looking for a way out. In August, in his Independence Day address, Kayani condemned rising religious extremism and warned that jihadi militants could push Pakistan toward civil war.

Therein lies the common ground. Pakistan needs a political settlement in Afghanistan to avert a civil war that will bleed into its territory and reignite ethnic tensions and jihadism. And that settlement can only be forged while U.S. forces are in Afghanistan. America, too, has little interest in seeing chaos spread in nuclear-armed Pakistan and the re-emergence of jihadi havens in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration, which once thought it could strong-arm Pakistan, must work with it and partners in Kabul to avert a civil war in Afghanistan. The Pakistani foreign minister is in Washington now. President Asif Ali Zardari will be at the U.N. General Assembly meeting later this month. And Kayani could visit in October. There's an opportunity for the Obama administration to revive a trilateral peace initiative, but the clock is running out. It is time for Washington and Islamabad to work with Kabul for a lasting solution to the Afghanistan problem, as equals.