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# A Better Deal Afghanistan Finish the Job

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## A Better Deal

### Afghanistan Finish the Job

By Seth G. Jones

*Seth Jones is a RAND political scientist and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and the Naval Postgraduate School.*

**I**t is time for the United States to finish what it started when it overthrew the Taliban in 2001. The United States and NATO must now proceed swiftly on multiple fronts simultaneously. The allies should increase their forces in Afghanistan, fortify Afghan security forces, support tribal groups, strengthen local governance, and work with neighboring Pakistan to eliminate the insurgent sanctuaries across the Afghan border.

U.S. intelligence agencies have identified terrorist plots stemming from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as perhaps the single most important threat to the U.S. homeland. NATO's reputation is also at stake over its first-ever involvement in ground combat, and its credibility would be severely tarnished if it failed to stabilize Afghanistan.

There are more than 50,000 international troops in Afghanistan, along with more than 50,000 Afghan National Army soldiers. The number of U.S. and NATO forces should rise by at least 28,000 until indigenous soldiers can fill those ranks. This will entail making difficult choices, such as redeploying some U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan.



AP IMAGES/RAFIQ MAQBOOL

Ali Akbar, an Afghan pomegranate seller, arranges his produce at the World Pomegranate Fair in Kabul, Afghanistan, on November 20, 2008. Afghan officials have launched a marketing campaign for the fruit in the hope that it will give farmers an alternative to growing opium poppies.

At the same time, the United States and its allies must redouble their efforts to build the Afghan security forces, particularly the police. In most operations against al Qaeda, local police forces have greater legitimacy and a better understanding of the environment than U.S. forces have. But the Afghan National Police force is in disarray, is incompetent, and is almost uniformly corrupt. Corruption is detrimental to the counterinsurgency campaign because it diminishes the population's support for its leaders. Based on the low quality of the Afghan police in 2001, when the Taliban regime was overthrown, police reform there will take at least a decade, or until 2011. Persistence is essential to police reform.

In addition, security and stability in Afghanistan have historically required a balance between top-down efforts to create a central government and bottom-up efforts to secure local support. Since 2001, the United States and the international community have focused predominantly on top-down security efforts, including the establishment of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army. But the deteriorating situation and local nature of the insurgency now require Western support for local tribes, subtribes, and clans to help establish order and governance.

Indeed, the United States and its allies must sharply augment their efforts to improve the quality of local government, particularly in rural regions. The poor security environment has kept reconstruction and development efforts from reaching outlying areas. The lack of roads, electricity, and water is a foremost concern of the population, especially in rural areas. The counterinsurgency will be won or lost in

the rural communities of Afghanistan, not in urban centers such as Kabul. This means that the counterinsurgency must find ways to reach rural communities despite security concerns.

Failing to eliminate the insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan will cripple the efforts to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan. Every successful insurgency in Afghanistan since 1979 has enjoyed a safe haven in Pakistan and assistance from individuals within the Pakistani government, which must now be convinced to undermine the sanctuaries on its own soil.

There is room for hope in Afghanistan. Many Afghans express optimism in the face of their country's difficulties, and most Afghans still oppose the Taliban and other insurgent groups. But support for the U.S. presence is dwindling. The key is to funnel sufficient resources and coordination through a narrowing window of opportunity and to build Afghan capacity quickly. ■

#### Related Reading

*Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study — Volume 4*, Seth G. Jones, RAND/MG-595-OSD, 2008, 176 pp., ISBN 978-0-8330-4133-3.

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*Getting Back on Track in Afghanistan*, Seth G. Jones, RAND/CT-301, testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on April 2, 2008, 10 pp.

[Full Document](#)

*How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, Seth G. Jones, Martin C. Libicki, RAND/MG-741-1-RC, 2008, 250 pp., ISBN 978-0-8330-4465-5.

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*In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, Seth G. Jones, W. W. Norton, RAND/CB-416, 2009.

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