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OBAMA GIVING UP ON AFGHANISTAN?

Benny Avni

[New York Post](#), Jan. 31, 2014

With one word, “if,” President Obama this week raised the fear that America’s gains in Afghanistan will go down the drain, as they did in Iraq. True: Afghanistan is no Iraq. After all, as Obama’s told us time and again, the latter was a terrible blunder while the former was “the good war.” That’s why, at the end of his first year as president, Obama ordered (albeit unenthusiastically, according to his defense secretary at the time, Bob Gates) an Afghan “surge” of 30,000 troops.

Yet their successes, hard won with blood and guts, could well be reversed now, as Afghan President Hamid Karzai refuses to sign an agreement that his own government negotiated with Washington last year. That pact would allow some US presence in Afghanistan even after most of our troops leave at the end of this year. Obama says he wants to finalize the accord, but he mostly sounds enthusiastic about getting out.

More than 60,000 troops have already left Afghanistan, Obama boasted Tuesday in his State of the Union Address. To thundering applause he said that soon “America’s longest war will finally be over.” Great. Then what? “If the Afghan government signs a security agreement that we have negotiated, a small force of Americans could remain” for training and assisting Afghans in their pursuit of al Qaeda, Obama said.

Flashback: Soon after taking office the new president faced a similar situation in Iraq. He half-heartedly tried to negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, with the Iraqi government to leave a residual US presence after the bulk of the force left. But Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki made unreasonable demands, and Obama, whose overarching goal was to get out, gave up and ordered all the troops to leave by the end of 2011. Remember, this was not long after a surge of US troops defeated al Qaeda in Iraq, something that had seemed like mission impossible. But Sunni Iraqis were sick and tired of the foreign terrorists that usurped their main stronghold, Anbar Province. So the US force, led by Gen. David Petraeus, rallied them and managed to chase al Qaeda out. Zoom back to now: Last month an al Qaeda offshoot, this time called “the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” took over Anbar’s main cities, Falujah and Ramadi. Before Obama “ended” the Iraq war, we got good at rallying Iraqi partners to help us and themselves — and for that, not too many US troops are needed. But with none in the country, the gains of the Iraqi surge are now gone.

Ditto Afghanistan. “We won’t survive unless the United States maintains some presence” next year, a top Afghan diplomat told me recently. To be sure, that’s clearly not what Karzai says. He’s amassing impossible new demands (including, weirdly, a US promise to negotiate with the Taliban, his own enemies) before signing the agreement. Obama says he wants Karzai to sign on — but that little “if” on Tuesday indicates that he’s markedly less sure about it than he is about “ending” the war. And there’s more: According to the administration’s favorite paper, *The New York Times*, Obama recently gathered a panel of experts “to devise alternatives to mitigate the damage if a final security deal cannot be struck with the Afghan president.” He’s worried because the mainstay of his terror-fighting, drone strikes, is about to be lost. If we leave Afghanistan with no agreement, his security aides tell him, we’ll lose our drone bases in the entire region. As the Afghan diplomat made abundantly clear to me, a SOFA pact is in the Karzai government’s interest. Yet Obama, who’s made room for so much understanding of how adversaries like Iran have political needs that sometimes makes them say horrible things in public, fails to see the same in Karzai’s posturing.

Seven decades after World War II, we still have troops in Germany. US troops still guard the 38th parallel, though a Korean War ceasefire was reached back in 1953. Obama, however, seems to think that “ending” wars is more important than securing the gains made in them. And no matter that, of the 1,500 Americans killed in the Afghan war, 975 were slain on Obama’s watch. If we let Afghanistan fall apart now, what was the point? Let’s face it: Karzai is there because of America and he’d be in real trouble if we don’t maintain some presence in his country. More importantly, a residual force in Afghanistan is vital to America’s security. So where does this nagging “if” come from?

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HAMID KARZAI'S COZY HISTORY WITH THE TALIBAN

Sarah Chayes

Los Angeles Times, Feb. 9, 2014

If anyone is surprised that with each passing day Afghan President Hamid Karzai seems to veer more sharply away from the U.S. and toward the Taliban, it might be time to remember some history. Karzai himself was once asked to become a high-ranking member of the Taliban government. His every word and

deed of late seems designed to appeal to the Taliban leadership and its backers in Pakistan, and to fracture the partnership between Afghanistan and the American people.

In one recent display, he held a news conference for Afghan villagers who claimed U.S. bombing had killed a dozen neighbors on Jan. 15. They identified mourners in a photograph purportedly taken at a funeral the next day, Jan. 16. But it turned out the photo was from four years back. In fact, it has been featured on Taliban websites, according to the *New York Times*. Karzai was indulging in just the type of heavy-handed propaganda we've come to expect of the Taliban itself. He has also ordered the release without trial of three dozen suspected insurgents, some of whom U.S. officers have tied to specific attacks. And, by his refusal to sign a security pact with the United States, he seems to be actively expediting the departure from Afghanistan of all foreign forces.

This behavior is not all born of current events. It is not some recently conceived hedging strategy pegged to the impending U.S. troop draw-down. Rather, it is entirely consistent with Karzai's own past. That past, presumably known to U.S. officials, has shaped his actions since the Taliban regime fell in 2001. I began noticing the pattern in 2003, when I lived in Kandahar, running a nonprofit founded by Karzai's older brother Qayum. Repeated, perplexing anomalies in Hamid Karzai's decision-making — his choices for filling certain positions, or the way he interacted with specific communities — were so egregious and inexplicable that I was driven to hunt for some underlying logic. I began asking family retainers, neighbors, tribal elders and former resistance commanders what Karzai's relationship with the Taliban had been when the religious militia swept into the city in 1994. The story I heard, with consistent details, took me aback.

In those days, Kandahar, like most of Afghanistan, was in turmoil. Resistance fighters, who had helped drive the Soviet army out of Afghanistan in 1989, had not disarmed and gone back to tending their orchards. They had turned on one another. Neighborhoods were plowed up in pitched battles, while travelers on the roads were shaken down at gunpoint for money or goods. "If you had five guys with guns, you were the mayor of your street corner," a former bus driver named Hayatullah once told me. In this context, according to several witnesses, Karzai began holding meetings with many of the proto-Taliban leaders, organizing them into a force that could gain control of Kandahar, and eventually the rest of the country. These meetings were taking place across the border in Quetta, Pakistan. And the Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI, which has long made use of Islamic extremism to further its policies, supported the project.

In October 1994, the Taliban moved on Afghanistan. "I lived next to the bus station in Quetta," a former refugee named Shafiullah told me. "Busloads and busloads of them left for the border, army officers with them." The Taliban and their Pakistani advisors fought one battle just inside the line, where they captured a weapons cache, then another in the small town of Takhta Pul, halfway to Kandahar. Within a week they owned the city. One reason the assault went so easily was the work Karzai had done ahead of time. The strongest commander in Kandahar was a thick-bearded tribal elder named Mullah Naqib. For weeks before what amounted to the Taliban invasion, he and others told me, Karzai argued with him to stand his men down so the Taliban could come in. "He told me it was the best thing for Afghanistan," Mullah Naqib recalled in 2004. "He said the Americans supported this." Without Mullah Naqib's tribesmen, no fighting force would last long against the ISI-supported Taliban.

Once in power, the Taliban leadership asked Karzai to be their U.N. ambassador, a position he later said he turned down. My Kandahar sources disputed that claim. And as it turned out, the U.N. never recognized Taliban rule, so the Kabul government could not send an ambassador. According to information found by journalist Roy Gutman in the U.S. National Archives, however, Washington launched a diplomatic demarche to ambassador-designate Karzai in December 1996, requesting the extradition of Osama bin Laden. None of this is to say that Karzai personally shares the fundamentalist religious ideology espoused by the Taliban. I don't think he is driven by any ideology at all. However, he has repeatedly marched with the Taliban when it has seemed expedient. As he suggested to the *Sunday Telegraph's* Christina Lamb on

Jan. 27, Karzai wants to matter. U.S. officials and Afghan citizens alike should not assume they will be rid of his influence after next April's presidential election.

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KARZAI ARRANGED SECRET CONTACTS WITH THE TALIBAN

Azam Ahmed & Matthew Rosenberg

New York Times, Feb. 3, 2014

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has been engaged in secret contacts with the Taliban about reaching a peace agreement without the involvement of his American and Western allies, further corroding already strained relations with the United States. The secret contacts appear to help explain a string of actions by Mr. Karzai that seem intended to antagonize his American backers, Western and Afghan officials said. In recent weeks, Mr. Karzai has continued to refuse to sign a long-term security agreement with Washington that he negotiated, insisted on releasing hardened Taliban militants from prison and distributed distorted evidence of what he called American war crimes.

The clandestine contacts with the Taliban have borne little fruit, according to people who have been told about them. But they have helped undermine the remaining confidence between the United States and Mr. Karzai, making the already messy endgame of the Afghan conflict even more volatile. Support for the war effort in Congress has deteriorated sharply, and American officials say they are uncertain whether they can maintain even minimal security cooperation with Mr. Karzai's government or its successor after coming elections. Frustrated by Mr. Karzai's refusal to sign the security agreement, which would clear the way for American troops to stay on for training and counterterrorism work after the end of the year, President Obama has summoned his top commanders to the White House on Tuesday to consider the future of the American mission in Afghanistan.

Western and Afghan officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the private nature of the peace contacts, said that the outreach was apparently initiated by the Taliban in November, a time of deepening mistrust between Mr. Karzai and his allies. Mr. Karzai seemed to jump at what he believed was a chance to achieve what the Americans were unwilling or unable to do, and reach a deal to end the conflict — a belief that few in his camp shared. The peace contacts, though, have yielded no tangible agreement, nor even progressed as far as opening negotiations for one. And it is not clear whether the Taliban ever intended to seriously pursue negotiations, or were simply trying to derail the security agreement by distracting Mr. Karzai and leading him on, as many of the officials said they suspected...

The first peace feeler from the Taliban reached Mr. Karzai shortly before the *loya jirga*, Afghan officials said, and since then the insurgents and the government have exchanged a flurry of messages and contacts. Aimal Faizi, the spokesman for Mr. Karzai, acknowledged the secret contacts with the Taliban and said they were continuing. "The last two months have been very positive," Mr. Faizi said. He characterized the contacts as among the most serious the presidential palace has had since the war began. "These parties were encouraged by the president's stance on the bilateral security agreement and his speeches afterwards," he said.

But other Afghan and Western officials said that the contacts had fizzled, and that whatever the Taliban may have intended at the outset, they no longer had any intention of negotiating with the Afghan government. They said that top Afghan officials had met with influential Taliban leaders in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in recent weeks, and were told that any prospects of a peace deal were now gone. The Afghan and Western officials questioned whether the interlocutors whom Mr. Karzai was in contact with had connections to the Taliban movement's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, whose blessing would be needed for any peace deal the group were to strike.

Though there have been informal contacts between Afghan officials and Taliban leaders since the very early days of the war, the insurgents' opaque and secretive leaders have made their intentions difficult to discern. Afghan officials have struggled in recent years to find genuine Taliban representatives, and have flitted among a variety of current and former insurgent leaders, most of whom had only tenuous connections to Mullah Omar and his inner circle, American and Afghan officials have said.

The only known genuine negotiating channel to those leaders was developed by American and German diplomats, who spent roughly two years trying to open peace talks in Qatar. The diplomats repeatedly found themselves incurring the wrath of Mr. Karzai, who saw the effort as an attempt to circumvent him; he tried behind the scenes to undercut it. Then, when an American diplomatic push led to the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar, Mr. Karzai lashed out publicly at the United States. Afghan officials said that to them, the office looked far too much like the embassy of a government-in-exile, with its own flag and a nameplate reading "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." Within days, the Qatar initiative stalled, and Mr. Karzai was fuming at what he saw as a plot by the United States to cut its own deal with Pakistan and the Taliban without him.

In the wake of the failure in Qatar, Afghan officials redoubled their efforts to open their own channel to Mullah Omar, and by late autumn, Mr. Karzai apparently believed those efforts were succeeding. Some senior Afghan officials say they did not share his confidence, and their doubts were shared by American officials in Kabul and Washington.

Both Mr. Karzai and American officials hear the clock ticking. American forces are turning over their combat role to Afghan forces and preparing to leave Afghanistan this year, and the campaigning for the Afghan national election in April has begun. An orderly transition of power in an Afghanistan that can contain the insurgency on its own would be the culmination of everything that the United States has tried to achieve in the country.

"We've been through numerous cycles of ups and downs in our relations with President Karzai over the years," Ambassador James B. Cunningham said during a briefing with reporters last week. "What makes it a little different this time is that he is coming to the end of his presidency, and we have some very important milestones for the international community and for Afghanistan coming up in the next couple of months."

Mr. Karzai has been increasingly concerned with his legacy, officials say. When discussing the impasse with the Americans, he has repeatedly alluded to his country's troubled history as a lesson in dealing with foreign powers. He recently likened the security agreement to the Treaty of Gandamak, a one-sided 1879 agreement that ceded frontier lands to the British administration in India and gave it tacit control over Afghan foreign policy. He has publicly assailed American policies as the behavior of a "colonial power," though diplomats and military officials say he has been more cordial in private.

Mr. Karzai reacted angrily to a negative portrayal of him in a recent memoir by the former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, and he is still bitter over the 2009 presidential election, when hundreds of thousands of fraudulent ballots were disqualified and, as he sees it, the Americans forced him into an unnecessary runoff against his closest opponent...

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AN OBAMA FOREIGN POLICY IQ TEST

Wall Street Journal, Jan. 23, 2014

President Obama is a famously quick study, but does he learn from his own mistakes? Let's see what he does on Afghanistan. Mr. Obama must soon decide how many U.S. troops to keep in that country when the NATO mandate ends this year. *The Journal* reported Wednesday that the Pentagon has presented the White House with a plan for a 10,000 "residual" force (down from 37,500 now). The proposal came in at the higher end of Administration preferences, and Vice President Joe Biden is already opposed.

During a visit to Washington last week, U.S. commander in Afghanistan General Joseph Dunford offered a take-it-or-leave-it scenario: Maintain a post-2014 force of 10,000-strong that is minimally sufficient to train the Afghan military and protect U.S. diplomats, spies, aid workers and troops—or pull out entirely at year's end. The Pentagon added a political sweetener by calling for a complete withdrawal of the residual force within two years. In other words Mr. Obama could claim to have ended the Afghan war as he leaves office. The generals know their Commander in Chief. The White House said no decisions have been taken, and a spokeswoman said the U.S. first needed to conclude a Bilateral Security Agreement with the Afghans. The pact has already been negotiated and an Afghan assembly endorsed it. But erratic President Hamid Karzai has refused to sign it before elections for his replacement this spring. The Karzai bonzo act is no reason to stop the U.S. from moving ahead with its plans.

President Obama has been here before. In his first term he had to deal with a difficult leader about a future U.S. military presence in Iraq. He settled for a complete pullout. Unlike in Afghanistan today, at least the war in Iraq was over and the country's military was reasonably well-trained and funded. We now know the Iraqi withdrawal was one of the President's worst blunders. Without America's calming presence, Iraqi politicians reverted to bad sectarian habits. U.S. troops could have also helped stop the jihadist spillover into Iraq from Syria's civil war. Al Qaeda has returned and taken control of chunks of Anbar Province, which had been pacified at great cost in American lives.

The President can't undo the Iraq mistake, but he can avoid repeating it in Afghanistan. While he's at it he should throw out the Pentagon's 2017 withdrawal date. The main flaw in his own 2009 Afghan troop surge was to set a deadline to draw down American troops two years later, signalling to the Taliban and their Pakistani backers that the U.S. could be waited out. Why give Mullah Omar another date to circle on his calendar? America has kept far more than 10,000 troops in Germany, Italy, Japan and South Korea for decades. No one considers them "another Vietnam." An open-ended military presence signals a commitment that will reassure Afghans, send a message of resolve to the Taliban, and avoid a terrorist comeback that wastes 12 years of sacrifice.

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[German Official: Karzai Will Sign BSA](#): Paul D. Shinkman, *U.S. News*, Feb. 13, 2014—Afghan President Hamid Karzai will sign the agreement that will define U.S. forces after a combat drawdown at the end of this year, he told a German official.

[Afghanistan Frees Suspected Taliban Prisoners](#): Sayed Salahuddin, *Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 2014—Afghanistan freed 65 suspected Taliban prisoners from jail on Thursday, ignoring repeated warnings by the U.S. government that the men pose a threat.

[U.S. Won't Seize Taliban Ally's Cash](#): Eli Lake, *Daily Beast*, Feb. 7, 2014—In the last 17 months since the U.S. government financially blacklisted the Haqqani Network, one of the deadliest insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, not a single dollar associated with the group has been blocked or frozen, according to U.S. officials and one of the Congressman who oversees the Treasury Department's financial war on terrorism.

[Barack Obama May be Commander-in-Chief, But He's a Partisan at Heart](#): Robert Fulford, *National Post*, Jan. 11, 2014—A newly published account of Barack Obama's White House confirms the worst that outsiders have imagined: The Obama staff is over-politicized, over-confident and desperate to oversee every aspect of government.