

The Cacti and the Grass: The Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces

Description

Introduction

For those of us who fought, bled, and lost friends in Afghanistan, it is hard to fathom the approaching third anniversary of the American withdrawal on August 30, 2021 and the subsequent collapse of the Afghanistan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) soon thereafter. Years later, we are still asking ourselves, "Why did the ANDSF dissolve so quickly?" For current and future practitioners of irregular warfare, understanding the answer to this question could mean the difference between repeating history's mistakes or not.

In the beginning, many had hoped the establishment of an effective ANDSF would help fulfill the fundamental objective of the United States' efforts by [preventing any further attacks by terrorists taking advantage of safe havens in Afghanistan](#). Over the next 20 years, and with this objective in mind, the United States proceeded by pouring resources into the ANDSF. By 2021, the United States had spent nearly [90 billion dollars in security sector assistance to the development and sustainment of the ANDSF](#). This staggering figure was further subsidized by American, Coalition, and Afghan blood. Despite the massive amount of resources dedicated to its establishment, the ANDSF did not withstand its first true test: the 2021 withdrawal. According to the [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction](#), the collapse of the ANDSF can be attributed to numerous strategic failures. However, the following analysis will explain the failure of the ANDSF from a holistic standpoint by offering an analogy entitled "The Cacti and the Grass," which compares the creation of the ANDSF to planting grass in a desert. This analogy, informed by my experience training and fighting alongside the ANDSF on the ground, seeks to illustrate the key challenges in creating an effective and sustainable security force in Afghanistan.

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Similar to the way an Arizona country club stubbornly attempts to build a golf course in a desert, the United States attempted to build the ANDSF in ways incompatible and unsustainable with the socio-political climate of Afghanistan. Like grass in a desert, the ANDSF thrived only under external support. The grass appeared green while the United States pumped money, airstrikes, and advisors into the ANDSF. However, when that support vanished, the grass withered, exposing the flawed strategy that

ignored Afghanistan's unique socio-political landscape. Cacti, on the other hand, are native to the desert. In this analogy, the cacti represent pre-intervention Afghani security structures such as the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. The Taliban and the Northern Alliance represent different varieties of cacti but are both cacti nonetheless. In the wake of the destruction of the ANDSF, the cacti, no longer facing resistance from an externally supported and non-native invasive species, once again reclaimed the terrain the Taliban returned. The following analysis will further break down this analogy, illustrating why the collapse of the ANDSF was a calamity that did not occur over a few weeks, but rather [was years in the making](#).

Origin of an Analogy: A War Story in the Pech River Valley, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, Fall 2009

The Cacti and the Grass analogy occurred to me during [my first combat deployment](#) as an infantry officer in the Pech River Valley, where I spent months painstakingly training the Afghan National Police (ANP) a sub-organization of the ANDSF. Like many Americans at the time, I thought they were progressing nicely. That was until one night when my platoon discovered one of the ANP-controlled checkpoints smoldering in ruins without a trace of any type of resistance.

At sunrise, I spoke with the local ANP district commander. Nobody had answers until the squad of ANP manning the fallen checkpoint walked into the district center. They offered up a story of an intense battle that ended with the Taliban overrunning them, taking them prisoner, blowing up the checkpoint, and then releasing them at sunrise. It was apparent they were lying. At that moment, I suspected they were either Taliban supporters or that they had been asleep for the whole ordeal. However, as I have reflected over the years, I now realize that the ANP were aware of the reality that the enemy forces controlled the area and simply did what they had to do to survive. I was disheartened as my hard work was turned into rubble. I could not understand why the ANP didn't defend their checkpoint. That was the first time I felt as though we were planting grass in the desert cultivating something that looked good in the short term, but that had little hope of enduring.

Examining the Decision to Plant Grass

A newcomer to a desert may be shocked by the cacti's seemingly harsh appearance. They might see the native desert species' spines as brutal, unaware that the spines themselves are the result of years of evolution to meet the harsh demands of its unique climate. They may wish to terraform the desert in the likeness of their home biome by replacing the cacti with something more familiar, like grass. Perhaps this was how United States strategic planners viewed the existing security environment in Afghanistan in 2001. Indeed, one of the biggest criticisms of the United States strategy focuses on the decision to design the ANDSF as a [mirror image](#) of American forces. Instead of harnessing

existing local [security structures](#), the United States planted Western-style security forces in the form of the ANDSF, completely ignoring factors such as the tribal nature of Afghan society, the mountainous terrain, or the socio-political context. Even though the ANDSF was composed of Afghanistan citizens, the structure, organization, and fighting tactics the United States planted were distinctly Western.

The above characterization of the United States's decision to plant grass may be oversimplifying what, in reality, was a series of smaller decisions that were made to solve problems as they manifested. For example, in the beginning, widespread illiteracy, absenteeism, and high casualties consistently vexed both United States and Afghan leaders in their pursuit of progress. To address these issues, the United States military attempted to bolster Afghan security forces by building regional training centers and conducting an assortment of [integrated, partnered, and parallel patrols](#). Later, in response to a need to [show progress in a way that American policy-makers could measure](#), the United States introduced Western organizational structures by creating battalions, divisions, and police departments aligned with American [cultural and nationalistic values](#), completely ignoring the [proud warrior tradition](#) that existed in the mountainous country long before Western forces arrived. Facing these challenges on the ground, many of those directly involved in the training of the ANDSF experienced significant frustrations, often stemming from the disconnect between Western strategies and the existing Afghan socio-political realities and military traditions.

Understanding Afghanistan's Culture

The patchwork of [Afghanistan's different ethnic groups and local loyalties](#) prevented the cohesive national identity and civic responsibility necessary to mold the foundation for a national force with a shared identity. Afghan society is not a [homogeneous nation-state](#) but rather is made up of diverse ethnic groups and regional loyalties, which present challenging conditions for creating a Western-style security force. [Western-style security forces require the unification and organization at the scale of large amounts of people under a central identity, i.e. nationalism](#). However, the socio-political landscape of Afghanistan is not conducive to producing the level of nationalism necessary to sustain a Western-styled security force. Despite the immense cultural challenges in building the ANDSF, many Afghan soldiers fought valiantly to defend their country from the Taliban, and [approximately 66,000 Afghan security forces members paid the ultimate price](#).

Understanding the socio-political realities of Afghanistan was one of the most significant challenges the United States faced in installing and training an effective security force, but it was not the first time the United States military faced this challenge. In fact, United States counterinsurgency doctrine, in place at the time the build-up of the ANDSF began, cautioned against it. Army Field Manual z3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, recognizes the importance of [gaining an understanding of their \(our\) counterparts' culture before advising activities can commence](#) and

yet, the United States continued to raise and train an Afghanistan security force that fundamentally misunderstood the socio-political realities of Afghanistan. In the end, we learned the hard way of the follies of trying to cultivate another nation's security apparatus in our likeness when the environment is fundamentally unsuited for Western structures. Almost a decade preceding the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the then-Command Sergeant Major of the Afghan National Army foreshadowed the late ANDSF's fate when he stated ["We can learn from you, but we will never be you,"](#) but we didn't listen.

The Withdrawal

On April 14, 2021, the United States declared its intention to withdraw from Afghanistan, and this statement [further applied pressure to the already low morale](#) throughout much of the ANDSF. As the American withdrawal approached, the ANDSF, consisting of [approximately 300,000 members, appeared to be more than enough to defeat the approximately 75,000-strong Taliban](#). However, once the American contractors left and logistical support dried up, the grass was deprived of nutrients. [Lacking the direct United States military support it had become dependent upon](#), the ANDSF quickly withered. Early in May 2021, [the Taliban overran six ANDSF bases in Baghlan province](#) and dozens of other outposts and bases soon followed. Not all ANDSF surrendered without a fight, particularly in the Northern provinces. However, [without support or reinforcements, they, too, eventually surrendered](#). As the United States withdrawal neared, more and more ANDSF units succumbed. By August 15, [six out of seven of Afghanistan's ANDSF corps had either dissolved or surrendered](#). It became clear that the ANDSF, without the support of the United States, [had no legs to stand on](#), disintegrating like sandcastles against the coming tide of the Taliban.

Regrowth of the Cacti: The Resurgence of the Taliban

While the Taliban were certainly devastated in the years following 9/11, they were never completely eradicated; the cacti were damaged, but their roots remained. After 2003, as the United States shifted its focus to Iraq, the [Taliban regrouped and strengthened themselves deep in the mountains of Afghanistan and western Pakistan](#). As the United States ended its role in leading combat operations in 2015, the Taliban continued to gain territory. By 2017, the Taliban controlled [184 of Afghanistan's 407 districts](#). [Emboldened by the United States's Taliban Agreement in February 2020](#), the Taliban continued to gain ground.

As the United States prepared its final withdrawal into the summer of 2021, the Taliban seized the opportunity presented by the power vacuum the withdrawal created. The United States began removing forces from Afghanistan on May 1, 2021, and the [Taliban started their summer offensive](#) soon thereafter. From August 6 through August 16 of that year, the Taliban [successfully captured 33 of](#)

[34 Afghan provinces](#). On August 17, then-President Ghani fled to Uzbekistan, and the Taliban entered the presidential palace. The Taliban's resurgence was not merely a military takeover. Instead, it was both a cultural and ideological *coup d'état* reaffirming their deep-seated presence and wide acceptance throughout Afghan society.

Lessons for the Future

In the ashes of the ANDSF, we must seek some wisdom to apply to future endeavors. First, imposing American models without considering socio-political realities is a recipe for disaster. We must follow counterinsurgency doctrine and take the time to understand how different cultures view [their own security structures](#). Secondly, we should seek efforts to promote and foster civic identity. Consider this: compared to the 90 billion dollars the United States spent on creating the ANDSF, it only spent [1.3 billion on education](#). The additional emphasis on education and literacy could have helped produce a society more conducive to supporting national institutions. Thirdly, we need to periodically provide real tests on the security forces that we train, allowing them to operate independently to evaluate if they can fight, sustain themselves, and survive without our support.

The United States must learn from the bloody lessons of [Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan](#). The repeated collapse of security structures we installed is now a recurring trend that can and should be intensely studied. Unfortunately, this reoccurrence appears not to be an anomaly within the history of United States security assistance undertakings, [but rather a feature of it](#).

Conclusion

Unlike how it was portrayed in the media, [the collapse of the ANDSF did not occur in a few weeks](#); instead, its demise was years and decades in the making. The analogy of the cacti and the grass allows us to understand why. The seeds of the ANDSF collapse were sewn when the United States and its allies decided to make a Western-style security force in an environment for which it was fundamentally unsuited — grass in a desert. This resulted in the rapid dissolution of the ANDSF once Western support was withdrawn.

The United States' experience in Afghanistan highlights the importance of understanding socio-political realities when advising foreign security elements. Instead of imposing Western military culture and traditions, the United States must tailor its security assistance efforts to the unique needs of the host country's culture from the onset; otherwise, we risk repeating history's mistakes. Despite the frustrations I experienced first-hand in Afghanistan, I still believe that other warrior cultures can, in fact, [learn from us, but they can never become us.](#)•

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: Kabyk, Afghanistan – Afghan National Army soldiers take part in a combined graduation ceremony at the Kabul Military Training Center July 29, 2010 (Photo via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

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