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Afghanistan Will Be a Quagmire for al Qaeda

The war on terror will end once we've empowered the Muslim majority to stand up against extremists.

By [JOSEPH LIEBERMAN](#)

Although President Barack Obama and all of us in Congress are understandably focused on the economic crisis, we also face multiple crises in the rest of the world -- beginning with the war in Afghanistan. Security there has been deteriorating as the insurgents have grown in strength, size and sophistication, expanding their influence over an increasing swath of territory.

Reversing the downward spiral will not be easy. But as Gen. David Petraeus once said of another war, "Hard is not hopeless." And we possess considerable strengths in this fight.

The biggest strength is the American military, which through the crucible of Iraq has transformed itself into the most effective counterinsurgency force in history. Although Iraq and Afghanistan are very different, many of the guiding principles of counterinsurgency do apply to both theaters -- most importantly, the need to provide security for the population. Moreover, our troops will be redeploying from Iraq to Afghanistan with the momentum, experience and morale that comes with success.

We also have an ally in the Afghan people -- a proud people with a proud history. Although their frustration with our coalition is growing, Afghans are not eager to return to the tyranny and poverty of the Taliban. That is why the insurgents have not won their support and must resort to self-defeating tactics of cruelty and coercion.

The other critical strength, and reason for hope, is the broad support for success in Afghanistan in the new administration and Congress. Mr. Obama has made clear this is a war he intends to win. He has pledged to deploy more troops and appointed one of our most talented diplomats, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, as special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The combination of Mr. Holbrooke and Gen. Petraeus led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is not a team to bet against.

That, then, is the good news. The bad news is that, even if we do everything right, conditions are likely to get worse before they get better, and the path ahead will still be long, costly and hard. The president's pledge to send more troops to Afghanistan is absolutely necessary and right -- but turning the tide will take more than additional troops. In fact, we must match the coming surge in troop strength with at least five other "surges" equally important to success.

- First and most importantly, we need a surge in the strategic coherence of the war effort. As we learned in Iraq, success in counterinsurgency requires integrating military and civilian operations into a seamless and unified strategy. In Afghanistan, we do not have in place a nationwide, civil-military campaign plan to defeat the insurgency.

This is an unacceptable failure. It is also the predictable product of a balkanized military command structure, in which different countries are left to pursue different strategies in different places. The international civilian effort in

Afghanistan is even more disorganized, as well as unsynchronized with the military.

Unquestionably, it is a good thing so many countries are contributing to the fight in Afghanistan, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to our allies for their sacrifices. But we also owe them success, and that demands an integrated campaign plan and stronger American leadership.

- *Second, we need a surge in civilian capacity.* The U.S. Embassy in Kabul needs to be transformed and expanded, with the necessary resources and the explicit direction to work side by side with the military at every level. In particular, the civilian presence must be ramped up outside our embassy -- at the provincial, district and village levels, embedding nonmilitary experts with new military units as they move in.

- *Third, we need to help surge the Afghan war effort.* This means expanding the Afghan army to 200,000 or more, and ensuring they are properly equipped, paid and mentored.

The U.S. needs to take tough action to combat the pervasive corruption that is destroying the Afghan government and fueling the insurgency. This requires a systemic response, not just threatening specific leaders on an ad hoc basis. Specifically, we must invest comprehensively in Afghan institutions, both from top-down and bottom-up.

In doing so, the U.S. should embrace a policy of "more for more" -- specifically, by offering the Afghan government a large-scale, 10-year package of governance and development aid in exchange for specific benchmarks on performance and progress.

- *Fourth, we need a surge in our regional strategy.* As many have observed, almost all of Afghanistan's neighbors are active in some way inside that country. Some of this activity is positive -- for instance, aid and investment -- but much of it is malign, providing support to insurgent groups. We must help "harden" Afghanistan by strengthening its institutions at both the national and local levels, empowering Afghans to stop their neighbors from using their country as a geopolitical chessboard.

The U.S. can help by beginning to explore the possibility of a bilateral defense pact with Kabul, which would include explicit security guarantees.

Some neighbors are hedging their bets today because they fear what happens "the day after" America grows tired and disengages from the region, as we did once before, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Nothing will discourage this destabilizing behavior better than a long-term American commitment to Afghanistan.

- *Fifth, success in Afghanistan requires a sustained surge of American political commitment to the mission.* Fortunately, and unlike Iraq, the Afghan war still commands bipartisan support in Congress and among the American people. But as more troops are deployed to Afghanistan and casualties rise, this consensus will be tested.

Indeed, there are already whispers on both the left and the right that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, that we should abandon any hope of nation-building there, additional forces sent there will only get bogged down in a quagmire.

Why are these whisperings wrong? Why is this war necessary?

The most direct answer is that Afghanistan is where the attacks of 9/11 were plotted, where al Qaeda made its sanctuary under the Taliban, and where they will do so again if given the chance. We have a vital national interest in preventing that from happening.

It is also important to recognize that, although we face many problems in Afghanistan today, none are because we have made it possible for five million Afghan children -- girls and boys -- to go to school; or because child mortality has dropped 25% since we overthrew the Taliban in 2001; or because Afghan men and women have been able to vote in their first free and fair elections in history.

On the contrary, the reason we have not lost in Afghanistan -- despite our missteps -- is because America still inspires hope of a better life for millions of ordinary Afghans and has worked mightily to deliver it. And the reason we can defeat the extremists is because they do not.

This, ultimately, is how the war on terror will end: not when we capture or kill Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar -- though we must do that too -- but when we have empowered and expanded the mainstream Muslim majority to stand up and defeat the extremist minority.

That is the opportunity we have in Afghanistan today: to make that country into a quagmire, not for America but for al Qaeda, the Taliban and their fellow Islamist extremists, and into a graveyard in which their dreams of an Islamist empire are finally buried.

Mr. Lieberman is an Independent Democratic senator from Connecticut. This op-ed is adapted from a speech he delivered last week at the Brookings Institution.

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