

## Chapter 9

### From Afghanistan to the Arab Spring: A Critical Moment for Transatlantic Crisis Response

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As allies on both sides of the Atlantic struggle with defining an end game in Afghanistan, new challenges in the realm of crisis response are rapidly emerging in the Middle East. The time is critical for NATO allies to examine lessons learned from their intervention in Afghanistan as they decide how to approach the emerging crises and opportunities resulting from the Arab Spring. With historic changes underway at a time of severe resource constraints in the United States and Europe, more effective transatlantic cooperation is vital. The challenges are great, but as the outcome of current events in the Middle East will likely determine the course of transatlantic security challenges for decades to come, cooperation between transatlantic partners is as important as ever.

Applying appropriate lessons for transatlantic crisis response from Afghanistan is important, though not all of the challenges will be the same. The case of Afghanistan provides no relevant lessons in terms of defining whether a military invasion is warranted—the operation to remove the Taliban from power was a case of self-defense following attacks on the NATO alliance. However, many of the lessons defining the difficulty of on-the-ground crisis response post-invasion apply. The overarching lesson is that the nation-building project undertaken by NATO allies in Afghanistan was hard and expensive, even when defined narrowly in terms of capacity building to prepare local Afghan forces to secure their own country from a return of Taliban rule and the accompanying safe havens for Al-Qaeda terrorists.

### Key Challenges in Afghanistan

It has been very difficult from the outset to see what the exit strategy would look like. Indeed over ten years into the conflict allies are still trying to define how and when they can remove their forces from Afghanistan. That all depends on how successful Afghans are at developing their own security forces, and how willing and successful Pakistani forces are at degrading the Taliban elements that operate in Afghanistan from bases within Pakistan. Dependence on the will and abilities of host-country and regional actors is an inherent weakness in Western ability to define a reasonable timeline for success in their mission. At the same time, any successful long-term strategy must be linked with a mission that is supported broadly within the host country.

A second large challenge has been the fact that key players have not defined the mission in the same way. This is true among NATO allies, but also between the allies and Afghans, and between those players and regional players like Pakistan. NATO allies have taken differing views of the military strategy on the ground and their roles in it, with varying national caveats defining the limits of military engagement. Public support of the war has also differed strongly between Americans and Europeans, though American public support has recently weakened, matching European levels of skepticism. Even after the killing of Osama bin Laden, according to a June ABC/Washington Post poll, only 43 percent of Americans said they believe the war in Afghanistan is worth

fighting. Afghan leaders, including President Karzai, have often been openly critical of coalition military operations. Pakistani leaders have not necessarily shared the western view of what a stable Afghanistan should look like and what would be their role in determining that outcome.

The intervention of transatlantic allies in Afghanistan has also revealed stark challenges in rectifying a security mission focused on immediate stabilization with a development mission more focused on sustainable improvements in local quality of life. Despite the recent execution of a largely successful counter-insurgency campaign that has blended focused military operations with efforts to win over the Afghan population, there are still inherent contradictions between the security and development missions. A recent report prepared by the staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations<sup>1</sup> was critical of the nation-building effort in Afghanistan, citing the ineffectiveness of many of the aid programs. The report noted that specific programs designed to help stabilize Afghan towns often had the effect of distorting local markets to the detriment of their long-term viability. One example was the hiring of the best local talent to work for foreign missions at salaries far beyond what the Afghan government institutions or other elements of civil society can afford to pay. In many instances, the focus on short-term gains has made the achievement of long term goals less likely. Even when short- and long- term goals aligned, coordination among donors has been inconsistent, as funding sources have often been interested in pursuing similarly popular projects rather than allocating program funds for the best overall effect.

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1 <http://foreign.senate.gov/reports/download/?id=e8637185-8e67-4f87-81d1-119ae49a7d1c>.

## Lessons for Broader Application

An examination of the challenges in Afghanistan reveals some key take-aways in terms of how to improve similar crisis interventions. First, the definition of mission goals and likely costs at the outset is ideal. This aids in the communication of the mission to publics who are called upon to sacrifice their people and resources, and it assists in coordination among allies. Though this clarity is admittedly difficult to achieve, it is important in crafting a successful intervention. Part of this definition includes managing expectations, both on the part of western publics in terms of the potential costs but also on the part of the local public in the host country about the capabilities of the mission. Just because Americans put a man on the moon does not mean they can bring electrical power rapidly to all parts of Afghanistan, although that fact may be a tough sell to many Afghans. It is also important to incentivize host nationals to support the overall mission goal, and to attract the support of key regional players as well. They will determine whether mission goals can be sustained. Finally, better coordination among donors makes the success of the development effort more likely.

Some of the broad lessons from Afghanistan are already being reflected in how allies are preparing themselves for future crisis response. For example, U.S. military and civilian forces are now conducting significant joint training before deploying to the field in Afghanistan. This joint approach brings together the actors who will be tasked with working together in a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) environment so they can become familiar with their various roles and resources before they arrive at the PRT. This is already helping with better coordination of missions in the field. German military officers are also studying the role of development agencies and how they overlap missions with military counterparts,

often along-side officers from alliance countries. In its recent Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, the U.S. Department of State, has identified future changes in its approach to crisis response and stabilization that will better focus civilian resources and promote better coordination with military forces. These represent reforms that will aid in more effective crisis response when military and civilian forces are deployed in the same environment, but in future crisis response scenarios, military resources will not always be on site. In both cases, there is still a growing question of whether allies will continue to have the resources that effective crisis response will require.

Transatlantic crisis response is doubly challenged in the current economic environment. With Europeans facing Eurozone financial crises and Americans embroiled in a tough debate over how to control record national debt levels, pressure to reduce spending on overseas operations is mounting. The term 'resource-constrained' has increasingly come to define the times in which major decisions are required regarding how to respond to current challenges, particularly those arising from the Arab Spring.

### **Constraints in Coping with the Arab Spring**

Response to the crisis in Libya has become a good indicator of the constraints facing western policy-makers. The appetite within the United States for another military intervention, even one which is designed to support a clearly definable humanitarian objective, has been very small. In a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives, a bi-partisan majority voted to scold President Obama for committing American forces to the NATO operation in Libya without sufficiently consulting Congress. Europeans, particularly France and the

United Kingdom, showed a stronger willingness to take the lead in Libya. However some of their European partners rapidly expended available munitions and could no longer participate in a militarily meaningful way. This highlights a serious challenge in transatlantic military cooperation, where a large disparity of military assets exists between a United States now less willing to engage in new operations abroad and many European countries who invest far too little in defense to bring much capability to the table. Departed U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates spelled out clearly in an address before NATO how the disparity of resources threatens the ability of NATO to continue to operate as a functional alliance.

Beyond a common understanding on burden-sharing, transatlantic leaders need to craft a shared vision of how to confront new global challenges as they try to bring the Afghanistan war to a successful conclusion. The most pressing challenges are in the Middle East region, where domestic forces are pursuing democratic freedoms in dramatic fashion. Libya provides an interesting case study for transatlantic cooperation. The question of whether or not to intervene on behalf of a local opposition force was simplified by the urgent need to prevent a rapidly unfolding humanitarian crisis precipitated by a leader who promised to show no mercy on his own people. The invitation by the Arab League for international action in establishing a no-fly-zone to protect those civilians provided the regional political cover needed to expedite the decision to intervene. What made the intervention difficult, of course, was the uncertain capability of the opposition force to see through a change of regime without significant escalations in outside military assistance. U.S. and European leaders declared that it was time for Qaddafi to go, though the path to effecting that transition was still unclear. Even with Qaddafi out of the equation, NATO members can expect a large need for assistance from Libyans in transitioning to a functioning democracy.

In contrast to Libya, the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were prosecuted without outside assistance. Western approaches to these countries will certainly lack the challenges involved in a greater military intervention like Afghanistan. Despite differences in foreign intervention to bring about regime changes, however, the challenges in solidifying long-term stable democratic states are similar across the region. It is undoubtedly in the interest of western states to assist in the economic and political stabilization of these states and any other that successfully follows the same path. Given the cost of the war in Afghanistan, it would certainly be a wise investment of resources if allies could prevent the need for a large-scale military intervention in a Middle Eastern country whose dictator was deposed by the Arab Spring, by preventing potential instability that might allow that country to become a staging ground for global terrorists. However, the resources required to maximize the chance of long-term stabilization are great and are needed in the near term, precisely when the U.S. and European allies are struggling financially. So even if NATO allies agree that investing to prevent political crises from developing into military conflict is a top priority, they will have to find a way to sell that mission to their publics. President Obama announced a robust financial commitment economic development in Egypt to try to keep that country on track. But the limits of that scope of intervention in other Middle Eastern countries will certainly soon be tested.

Some of the more difficult policy challenges arising from the Arab Spring surround questions about possible interventions in places like Syria. Similar to Libya, the regime has reacted to opposition protests with violent crackdowns. The potential security gains to a successful democratic shift in Syria are monumental, particularly if it led to a cutoff of support from Syria to regional terrorist groups. The momentum from such a transition could also provide support to the opposition

movement in Iran, with similar potential rewards for regional security. And yet the maintenance of that stability would require significant financial support from the international community. And without a prominent regional player, like the Arab League, calling for international intervention to protect the civilian population, western intervention would bring with it serious risk of causing strong political blowback in the region. Regardless of the challenges, the fast-developing situation in the region necessitates maximum cooperation among transatlantic partners and maximum readiness to respond as developments play out.

### How to Convince Skeptical Publics?

One way to promote the notion of up-front investment in stabilization for Middle East transition countries is for allies to sell the idea of greater efficiency of mission through more effective donor coordination. Western public opinion may be more positive toward spending money to shore up new Arab Spring democracies if people are convinced that the U.S. and European partners have learned and are committed to a division of labor on international development that gives them more bang for each buck. Talks about better coordination of effort between American and European donor countries are already underway. As they harness recent lessons from the allied mission in Afghanistan to apply to new challenges in the Middle East, they may well be able to find a methodology of coordination that allows them to intervene effectively for less money. Given the public pressures in their home economies, it seems clear that in any event allies are going to have to make do with less whether they like it or not.

Transatlantic allies will have to deal with many questions in the months ahead. How will they decide when to intervene to assist a

democratic opposition force poised to overthrow a dictator? How does the U.N.-endorsed 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) principal apply to situations like the one in Syria where violent government crackdowns on democracy movements are resulting in civilian deaths and suffering? Where do you draw the line in the face of severe resource constraints? How do you balance the need for effective early stabilization efforts as a large saver of future military costs with the austere times at home? In the current times, what is most important: regional stability, a friendly regime, or democracy? Admittedly, some of these

questions are similar to challenges western leaders have faced for decades, and some of these may resolve themselves without western intervention. However, not all will self-correct, and the need for effective coordination between transatlantic allies is as great as ever. As the current events in the Middle East unfold, NATO members will need to apply all the lessons they learned together in Afghanistan to the current challenges in crisis response. Success in preventing another Afghanistan-sized intervention may well depend on it.