

Building in a Battered Country

SMALL-SCALE INITIATIVES MAY BE THE BEST BET

At the beginning of this series, I planned a final column for May with the revelation that in all my work with Afghanistan, my proudest service has not been in uniform but as a civilian, working with the American University in Afghanistan (AUAF). The message was to be something like “No one hates war more than those who have lived it. As this war ends for the U.S. military, we can all seek ways to assist a country that remains so badly in need of peace, in the interest of Afghans as well as our own.”

The writing is on the wall for this fight, which now has less American support than the Iraq War, less support than Vietnam ever did. Only 17 percent of Americans back military efforts here. Even former secretary of defense Robert Gates published a primal scream about the difficulties of the ongoing conflict. Troops continue to flow out — 68,000 here in January 2013 will become approximately 32,000 by the end of next month. By the end of this year, there will either be 10,000 troops or none at all.

Most tellingly, the Green Bean coffee shop serving our nearest base closed. Time to push on.

As the military fight winds down, the work to build Afghanistan continues. Dedicated men and women working for NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and with the Afghan government and private sector continue to give up comfortable lives to pour sweat and tears in the hope that the people of this nation can avoid another generation of bloodshed. They work in cooperation with Afghans willing to put their lives on the line for their nation’s future.

Americans disagree about the wisdom of fighting here, but surely we can agree on the value of peaceful endeavors to build Afghanistan. I found supporting the AUAF during two years of writing and editing legal texts with the Afghanistan Legal Education Project (ALEP) while in law school more fulfilling than anything I accomplished carrying a weapon.

The military loves focused, unceasing effort toward a pre-set goal, effort that climbs over, goes around or blasts through any obstacle, even as the goal’s importance fades. Alternatively, ALEP’s cooperative energy and purposeful consideration among students and professors in America and Afghanistan convinced me that a long community meal can advance an Afghan cause more than a military campaign.



KABUL RESIDENTS PROTEST THE BOMBING OF THE LEBANESE TAVERNA LAST WEEK

In 2012 ALEP won a \$7.2 million grant to expand legal studies in Afghanistan in the hopes that conflicts could be resolved in the courtroom rather than by bullets in the street. There are many peaceful programs one can support that will make a difference for Afghanistan, the last Dispatch would highlight.

Like so many Afghan plans, my intentions for that piece were wiped out by an explosion, one that echoed across our Kabul neighborhood two weeks ago. On Jan. 17 a suicide bomber blew apart the doors of the Lebanese Taverna, a Rick’s Café-type favorite a few blocks away.

Following the blast, two gunmen entered the restaurant. Their homicidal undertaking rattled above the sound of a quiet night, ending the lives of 21 men and women — an Afghan couple married only five months, two UNICEF employees, the International Monetary Fund’s Afghanistan director, two employees of the AUAF and 14 others — citizens of nine nations. Kamel Hamade, the Taverna’s owner, had vowed to defend his restaurant to the death. He died, pistol in hand, rushing to protect his patrons, his much-loved dog, Jeff, shot feet away.

Through the night Mona Hamade, his daughter, pleaded for information over Twitter.

Lexie Kamerman and Alexandros Petersen, two American employees of AUAF killed in the attack, were the kind of tireless, globally minded individuals I planned to encourage readers to emulate and support. One was a student development specialist from Chicago dedicated to helping women get an education and take their rightful place as Afghan leaders. The other was a new political science professor, prolific policy writer and a man without a hint of pretension, according to friends. They were the type of people with whom I was proud to work while in ALEP. I implore readers to find ways to support peaceful efforts in Afghanistan in their honor and in memory of the 19 others lost.

The future here is up in the air. Perhaps with international military operations ending, the Taliban will stop such despicable attacks. Their statement after the Taverna slaughter claimed civilian casualties during airstrikes in Parwan’s Ghorband Valley provoked the attack, though the

timeline of events makes that claim implausible.

Civilian deaths in coalition airstrikes are appalling. Far from Kabul, with only Afghan victims, they rarely get the attention they deserve, serving instead as talking points. The names of the dead are rarely noted, in contrast with reporting on foreign victims at the Taverna.

I have received emails from surviving Afghan relatives pleading for information following an airstrike, and the heartbreak of those pleas were without doubt as devastating as Mona Hamade’s messages. Though the deliberate shooting of teachers and newlyweds hiding under tables is legally different from accidental deaths among civilians — often intentionally exposed to fire by the Taliban — Afghanistan deserves support in memory of all victims of this war.

After 2014 I expect the Taliban will double-down on violence, attempting to drive apart the international community and the Afghan people, cowing the latter into submission. Attacks such as the Lebanese Taverna point in that direction.

Simply because the American military ends efforts here does not mean the Afghan people must stand alone. Where generous men and women overseas assist, in person or at a distance, courageous Afghans will join forces and work tirelessly. With the U.S. government cutting development assistance in half this year, individual initiative is vital.

After all, if such initiative can save Eugene’s Civic Stadium and build a YMCA, perhaps in countless small ways it can make the difference here. That is how communities are grown and secured.

Many Afghans will continue the struggle. A few days after the attack hundreds of young men and women marched outside the Lebanese Taverna to denounce terrorism and the actions of the Taliban, and to reclaim their future. I hope Americans will find ways to stand with them.

Jake Klonoski is from Eugene and has been a U.S. Navy submarine officer since 2002, serving in Italy, Bahrain, Japan, Kosovo, Afghanistan and plenty of time at sea. He left active duty in 2010 and was mobilized after graduating Stanford Law School in June 2013 for service in Kabul assisting in economic development and stability operations.

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