

Afghanistan: Making It Worse

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Since assuming office President Donald Trump has barely mentioned Afghanistan, a country where US forces have been engaged in the longest war in American history. Perhaps this is because, after more than fifteen years and \$700 billion, the US has little to show for it other than an incredibly weak and corrupt civilian government in Kabul and a never-ending Taliban insurgency. Now Afghanistan faces a new horror—as a testing ground for what can only be called a US weapon of mass destruction.

Trump's silence on Afghanistan was finally broken on the evening of April 13—not with the announcement of a new political strategy but with the dropping of a monster bomb, the GBU-43, nicknamed the “Mother of All Bombs,” on an ISIS base in a rural area of the country near the Pakistan border. Worse, while causing untold damage and giving local populations new reason to hate the United States, the bomb did nothing to address the country's primary security problem, which is not ISIS but the ever-strengthening Taliban.

The target of the 21,600-pound bomb was a network of caves and tunnels in a twenty-five-mile-long valley in the Achin district of Nangarhar province. For the past two years the area has been the main base for ISIS in Afghanistan. On April 8, an American Special Forces soldier, Staff Sergeant Mark R. De Alencar, thirty-seven, was killed near there.

Local officials told Afghan journalists that ISIS was retreating into the caves and tunnels when under fire. Frustrated Afghan officers then requested air support from the US, and on Thursday the US dropped the GBU-43, which carries 11,000 pounds of high explosives and is the most powerful non-nuclear device ever used. Its blast radius stretches for more than a mile, and the blast waves knocked people to the ground and punctured ear drums five miles away, according to Afghan journalists. General Dawlat Waziri, a spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Defense, **said** on the day after the strike that initial information indicated that thirty-six militants had been killed and three large caves destroyed. That seems a low figure, given the fire power used. Later, Afghan officials said that ninety-one militants were killed. Neither figure is verifiable.

Although ISIS poses a global danger, it has not been a major threat to the Afghan government. Afghan and US officials place the number of ISIS fighters in the country at around seven hundred, compared to three thousand last year; attacks by the Taliban and by US forces have reduced their strength. By contrast, there are an estimated 40,000 Taliban fighters who now control one third of the country and last year attempted to capture major cities and topple the regime.

Whereas ISIS fighters in the region are isolated, the Taliban now receive clandestine support from Pakistan, Iran, and possibly Russia, according to US officials. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has long demanded that the US focus on stopping this assistance of the Taliban by neighboring countries. Ghani has also been insisting that the US help him put pressure on Pakistan to force the Taliban to enter into talks with the Kabul government. The bombing has only strengthened the Taliban conviction that US forces must leave Afghanistan before any cease-fire can take place, and they are likely to increase their military activity in the coming weeks.

Ghani faces multiple crises: a collapsing economy, tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the country, and tens of thousands more refugees being forced back into Afghanistan by Iran and Pakistan, and European countries that deport illegal Afghan migrants. Meanwhile, in Kabul, Ghani is facing dwindling popularity, the loss of support from his ruling partner and chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, a power struggle between various warlords, and challenges from former President Hamid Karzai and his supporters.

The bombing will worsen this situation; already several leading politicians, including Karzai, have condemned Ghani for allowing such a bomb to be used. Afghans know about bombardment. The Soviets destroyed much of the country in their brutal conquest in the 1980s, the civil war in the 1990s turned much of Kabul into a cemetery, and the endless war with the Taliban has destroyed even more lives and property. “This is not the war on terror but the inhuman and most brutal misuse of our country as testing group for new and dangerous weapons,” Karzai wrote on Twitter on April 13. Even the Taliban condemned the bombing.

Much of the \$10 billion a year in foreign aid that is needed to run the Afghan government and fund the army comes from the US, and Afghan leaders are deeply apprehensive that the Trump administration will not provide its share. So far the only promise being made by Washington is to send more troops, though the 8,500 American and 5,000 NATO soldiers currently deployed have accomplished little.

General John Nicholson, head of US-NATO forces in the country, told reporters in Kabul that the bomb “was the right weapon for the right target.” The US military has not yet released a formal estimate, but US officials insisted that most civilians had already fled the area to escape ISIS. However, it is difficult to imagine there were zero civilian deaths, as the region is a fertile agricultural zone.

With no apparent strategy behind it, the bombing appears merely to intensify the dramatic militarization of US foreign policy we have already seen in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia. Trump has now clearly expressed his preference for force (as I **discussed** last month). “We have the greatest military in the world,” Trump said after the bombing. “We have given them total authorization and that's what they're doing, and frankly, that's why they have been so successful recently.”

The effects are clear in Yemen and Somalia, where the US military now has free-fire zones in which it can attack any target even at the cost of civilian casualties. The increase in US bombing in Iraq and Syria has resulted in many more civilian casualties in both countries. Airwars, a group that tracks bombings, says that civilian casualties have **doubled from February to March**. Such an open-ended bombing campaign has killed and wounded not just civilians but also friendly forces. In mid-April, a US drone strike in northern Syria killed eighteen members of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a rebel group allied with the West.

In Afghanistan, American and NATO forces have had limited success in training and supporting a demoralized Afghan army, which will face new Taliban offensives. Although there are 170,000 regular Afghan soldiers, 70 percent of the army's offensive operations have been undertaken by a much smaller contingent of 17,000 US-trained elite forces, because the rest are not considered competent enough; nevertheless the non-elite forces have suffered very high casualties. The current debate in Washington about sending troops—how many, what kind, with what mandate—is over exactly the same issues that preoccupied the last years of the Obama administration.

Afghanistan desperately needs an overarching political strategy, which should include dialogue and diplomacy to deal with the

problems that Ghani faces, as well as a regional strategy to counter external support for the Taliban. So far Trump's team—even though it includes several former "Afghan hands," such as the highly respected National Security Adviser Lt. General H.R. McMaster—has only come up with excessive use of force. The capacity of the military to create lasting change remains limited. How many more lives will have to be lost before the Trump team figures that out?