

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM: MILITARY POWER AND POLITICAL LIMITS

AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ANALYSIS OF THE U.S.
INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN (2001–2014)

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Abstract

English

This thesis examines Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, analysing its evolution across three distinct phases: the initial overthrow of the Taliban and institutional groundwork (2001–2005), the escalation and consolidation phase (2006–2010), and the transition towards Afghan security leadership and U.S. withdrawal (2011–2014).

Using Rodt's (2011) success criteria, the study evaluates OEF from both internal and external perspectives. Particular emphasis is placed on the interplay between military operations, political objectives, and the structural constraints of intervention in a fragile state.

A central analytical challenge arises from the increasing operational and resource overlap between OEF and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from the second phase onwards, complicating the attribution of specific outcomes. Through qualitative analysis of academic literature, policy reports, and primary sources, this research assesses the degree to which OEF achieved its stated aims and identifies the factors that limited its strategic success, offering broader insights into the conduct of complex multinational interventions.

Nederlands

Deze thesis onderzoekt Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan van 2001 tot 2014 en analyseert de evolutie ervan in drie onderscheiden fases: de initiële omverwerping van de Taliban en het leggen van de institutionele basis (2001–2005), de escalatie- en consolidatiefase (2006–2010), en de transitie naar Afghaans veiligheidsleiderschap en de Amerikaanse terugtrekking (2011–2014).

Aan de hand van de succescriteria van Rodt (2011) wordt OEF zowel intern (militaire effectiviteit, staatsopbouwresultaten) als extern (internationale legitimiteit, coalitiedynamiek) geëvalueerd. Bijzondere aandacht gaat uit naar de wisselwerking tussen militaire operaties, politieke doelstellingen en de structurele beperkingen van interventies in een fragiele staat.

Een centrale analytische uitdaging wordt gevormd door de toenemende operationele en middelenoverlap tussen OEF en de door de NAVO geleide International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) vanaf de tweede fase, wat de toewijzing van specifieke uitkomsten bemoeilijkt. Door middel van kwalitatieve analyse van academische literatuur, beleidsrapporten en primaire bronnen beoordeelt dit onderzoek in welke mate OEF haar doelstellingen heeft bereikt en welke factoren het strategisch succes hebben beperkt, met bredere inzichten in de uitvoering van complexe multinationale interventies.

Foreword

This master's thesis marks the conclusion of my studies in the Master of International Politics. It builds upon the fascinating topic I had the opportunity to explore in my earlier research paper, allowing me to deepen my knowledge and refine my analytical skills. I am grateful for the opportunity to further develop and deepen this topic into a comprehensive study covering the entire intervention from 2001 to 2014.

Hereby, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervising professor, Prof. Dr. Tim Haesebrouck, whose guidance, critical insights, and constructive feedback were invaluable throughout this process. I am especially thankful to him for enabling me to further explore this subject in depth during the past academic year.

I am equally thankful to my family and friends for their unwavering support, patience, and motivation during the many months of research and writing. Their belief in me provided the perseverance needed to bring this project to completion. This work is not only an academic achievement but also a personal milestone, and I am grateful to all who contributed to its realisation.

Table of contents

Abstract	1
English	1
Nederlands	2
Foreword	3
Table of contents	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Focus study	7
3. Afghanistan	7
4. The U.S.	10
5. Status quaestionis	10
5.1. World Trade Center Attacks	11
5.2. Operation Enduring Freedom	12
5.2.1. The first phase (2001-2005)	12
5.2.2. The second phase (2006-2010)	21
5.2.3. The third phase (2011–2014)	41
5.3. Criteria military operations	51
5.3.1. Rodt	51
5.3.2. Other researchers	53
6. Research design	54
6.1. Selection final criteria	54
6.1.1. Rodt's success model	54
6.1.2. Other researchers	55
6.2. Research limits	55
6.3. Operationalizing	56

7.	Research	58
7.1.	First phase	58
7.1.1.	Internal goal attainment	58
7.1.2.	Internal appropriateness	59
7.1.3.	External goal attainment	61
7.1.4.	External appropriateness.....	62
7.1.5.	Conclusion first phase.....	64
7.2.	Second phase	64
7.2.1.	Internal goal attainment	64
7.2.2.	Internal appropriateness	66
7.2.3.	External goal attainment	68
7.2.4.	External appropriateness.....	70
7.2.5.	Conclusion second phase.....	72
7.3.	Third phase.....	73
7.3.1.	Internal goal attainment	73
7.3.2.	Internal appropriateness	75
7.3.3.	External goal attainment	77
7.3.4.	External appropriateness.....	78
7.3.5.	Conclusion phase three	80
8.	General conclusion	81
9.	Bibliography	84
10.	Appendices	104
	Appendix A: Key figures within the Taliban	104
	Appendix C: Composition of the Afghan interim Administration (AIA) 2001-2002.....	107
	Appendix D Composition of the Transitional Government 2002–2004	108
	Appendix E: Composition of first elected Government of Afghanistan 2004-2009	110
	Appendix G: differences between various missions.....	115

Appendix H: Data Management and Ethics form	121
Title of the research project and date	121
Name of the researcher(s).....	121
Data management PLAN	123
Personal data or not	123
Data formats, contents, and modes of collection	124
Plans for sharing or providing access to data	128
Ethical and legal issues	129
Other issues	130

1. Introduction

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, Afghanistan has become the epicenter of the global fight against terrorism. The subsequent U.S. military intervention under the banner of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) marked the onset of prolonged international engagement in Afghanistan. Initially framed as a swift military campaign, OEF evolved into a complex mission centered on state-building and democratization, with far-reaching consequences for Afghan society and international politics.

This study first outlines the research focus and its relevance. The contextual framework then examines the historical background of both Afghanistan and the United States that culminated in this operation. The literature review addresses the historical relations, the conflict's origins, major events of the first phase, and various success criteria for military operations. The operation is evaluated using scientifically grounded success criteria established in Rodt's (2011) framework.

To answer the central research question – “Can Operation Enduring Freedom be considered a successful military operation?” – a qualitative research design is applied, combining literature review, document analysis, and theoretical evaluation. The analysis systematically assesses the operation across three distinct phases, using predefined indicators linked to the success criteria. The key findings derived from this assessment ultimately lead to a conclusion that delivers a targeted and evidence-based answer to the research question.

2. Focus study

Although Operation Enduring Freedom encompassed a global campaign with subsidiary missions in, among others, the Philippines and the Horn of Africa, this study confines its scope to the Afghan context. Afghanistan served as the primary theatre of OEF; sub-operations outside Afghanistan lie beyond the parameters of this analysis. The abbreviation OEF-A is omitted; all references to OEF pertain specifically to the Afghan operation.

The inquiry proceeds via a success-criteria analysis across three phases: 2001–2005, 2006–2010, and 2011–2014. The criteria derive from Rodt’s (2011) framework, with attention to military objectives and broader political and societal implications. Adopting this framework aligns with the wider academic debate on defining and measuring operational success. Applying Rodt’s criteria to OEF provides a structured assessment based on measurable indicators and normative benchmarks. It also clarifies trade-offs between military effectiveness, political legitimacy, societal resilience, and durable institutional capacity.

The study is relevant because OEF was among the first large-scale multilateral interventions of the global “war on terror,” introducing a new dynamic of external involvement in the internal restructuring of a fragile state. The use of this analytical model is original in this context; to our knowledge, it has not previously been applied to the Afghan theatre of OEF. Through its focused scope and method, the study seeks to advance the historical understanding of OEF and to inform wider debates on the effectiveness of multilateral interventions and post-conflict reconstruction in fragile states.

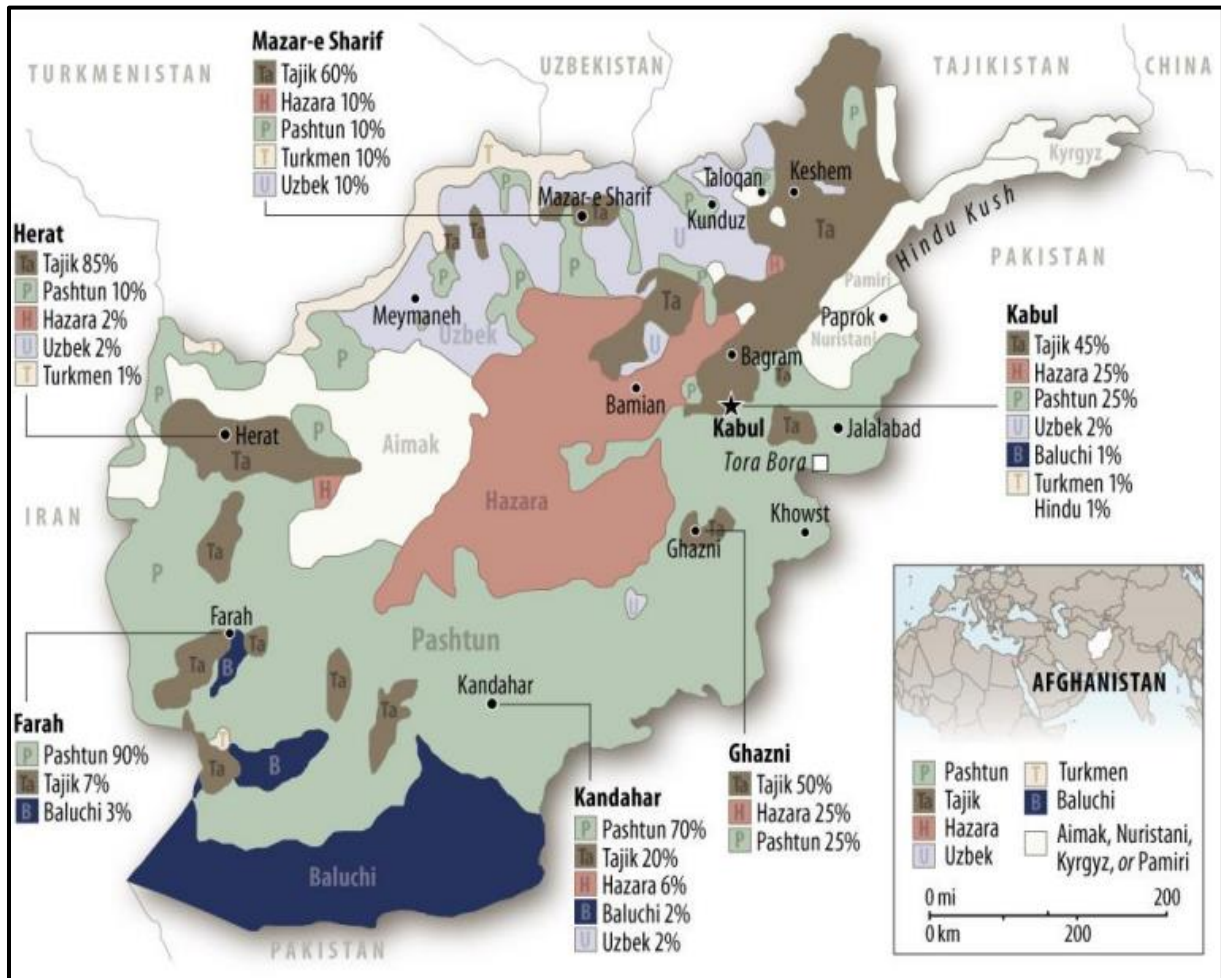
3. Afghanistan

Even before the 2001–2021 period, Afghanistan had endured a long history of conflict. Consequently, the Afghan state is frequently classified as a fragile state (Barakat & Larson, 2014). Fragility is often invoked to justify “civilizing” missions—an approach repeatedly applied to Afghanistan (Ibrahimi, 2023). Yet such interventions have typically failed to account for the adverse effects of international, militarized stabilization and have, in practice, exacerbated insecurity (Barakat & Larson, 2014). A fragile state is a sovereign entity that falls short in legitimacy, authority, and capacity—or fails to meet one or more of these fundamental requirements for effective governance (Ibrahimi, 2023). In Afghanistan, this fragility translated into deficient state legitimacy, enabling conflict, corruption, and a range of domestic and international security challenges (Ibrahimi, 2023).

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity structurally reinforces internal fragmentation. The largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, predominates in the south and east, with Qandahar and Jalalabad as political strongholds. A map of the geographic distribution of major ethnic groups appears below (see Figure 1).

Because of its strategic location—at the crossroads of South and Central Asia and the Middle East—the country has repeatedly been exposed to foreign interference and invasion. In the nineteenth century, Russia and Great Britain competed for influence, placing Afghanistan at the center of the Great Game (Clements & Adamec, 2003). This persistent geopolitical vulnerability fostered successive conflicts after the Second World War: resistance to the Soviet occupation (1979–1989), civil war (1992–1996), the Taliban insurgency against former Mujahideen factions (1996–2001), and the Taliban insurgency against U.S.-led operations (2001–2021) (Ibrahimi, 2023; Shaikh, 2024). These successive phases entrenched fragility and prevented the Afghan state from fully recovering from a near-continuous cycle of violence.

Figure 1: Ethnic distribution of major groups in Afghanistan



Source: Katzman, K., & Thomas, L. (2017, p. 643). Afghanistan: Post-Taliban governance, security, and us policy (updated) [Map]. *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East*, 8(4), 531-643. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/afghanistan-post-taliban-governance-security-u-s/docview/2273146378/s-2>. Based on 2003, National Geographic Society, <http://www.afghan-network.net/maps/Afghanistan-Map.pdf>. Bewerkt door Amber Wilhelm, CRS Graphics.

4. The U.S.

The United States' decision to launch Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 stemmed from a convergence of security threats, strategic interests, and ideological motives. The immediate trigger was the September 11, 2001 attacks, in which Al-Qaeda—operating under the protection of the Taliban regime—inflicted severe damage on symbols of American power. This assault not only shocked the national psyche but also precipitated a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign and security policy (Brooks, 2023). The Bush administration interpreted the attacks not as a criminal act but as a declaration of war, prompting a strategy focused on military retaliation and the prevention of future assaults (Walldorf Jr, 2022).

In addition to immediate retribution, geopolitical considerations played a decisive role. A military presence enabled the United States to assert itself as the dominant power in a strategically pivotal region near Iran and China, granting the intervention significance that extended beyond counterterrorism alone (Chandra, 2015). The conflict was also framed in ideological terms, casting states as either “with” or “against” the United States. American objectives subsequently expanded to include transforming Afghanistan into a model state founded on Western democratic principles (Brooks, 2023).

In response to these threats, and embedded within the broader “War on Terror,” OEF commenced in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. What had initially been conceived as a short, targeted military campaign evolved into a two-decade-long intervention. Despite domestic pressures—including advocacy from proponents of restraint, mounting public war-weariness, and repeated calls for withdrawal—the United States maintained a military presence in Afghanistan for twenty years (Walldorf Jr, 2022).

5. Status quaestionis

The literature review in this study will be divided into three thematic sections, each with a specific focus aligned with the central research question.

Although bilateral relations between Afghanistan and the United States lack a long historical trajectory, their interaction since the official U.S. recognition of Afghanistan in 1934 reveals a number of clearly delineated phases (Jabeen et al., 2020). To conduct a thorough analysis of Operation Enduring Freedom and its underlying motives, it is essential to briefly revisit the cause of OEF: the attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11, 2001. While earlier events such as the Soviet occupation, the civil war, and the rise of the Taliban are crucial for understanding the broader context, this research refers to prior scholarly work concerning the first phase of OEF.

The second and most extensive section of the literature review focuses on OEF itself, applying a tripartite division based on substantive and temporal breakpoints in the course of the operation. The first phase (2001–2005) covers the initial intervention, the fall of the Taliban regime, and the institutional

reconstruction under the Bonn Agreement. The second phase (2006–2010) is characterized by an intensifying insurgency, an increasing number of attacks, and a strategic shift in U.S. policy. The third phase (2011–2014) follows the elimination of Osama bin Laden and concentrates on the drawdown of military forces and the transfer of responsibilities to Afghan institutions.

The third and final section of the literature review addresses academic debates on measuring success in military operations. This section introduces diverse theoretical approaches and clarifies the rationale for employing Rodt’s analytical framework. Her fourfold model—with emphasis on internal and external goal achievement and suitability—provides the foundation for the empirical analysis of the three identified OEF phases. In doing so, the literature review delivers the essential analytical basis for a substantiated evaluation of the effectiveness of Operation Enduring Freedom.

5.1. World Trade Center Attacks

Although the World Trade Center (WTC) had previously been targeted in a 1993 bombing, the coordinated assault in 2001 demonstrated Al-Qaeda’s capability to conduct large-scale terrorist operations on U.S. soil (“National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States,” 2004). The WTC had already been selected in 1993 with the explicit intent to cause the highest possible number of casualties (Parachini, 2000). The 2001 attacks resulted in significantly higher fatalities and marked a fundamental turning point in the international order, prompting a reorientation of U.S. foreign and security policy. They exposed the vulnerability of even a militarily superior United States to external assaults. In 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States published a detailed report on the entire event and Al-Qaeda’s involvement.

Strategically, Al-Qaeda sought to fracture relations between the Western and Islamic worlds by polarizing through religious identity and delegitimizing Western presence in Muslim countries (Dorronsoro & King, 2005, pp. 315–317). In doing so, the organization aimed to engineer a fundamental shift in public opinion.

The September 11, 2001 attacks constituted the first—and thus far only—occasion for the activation of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. Although originally drafted to contain the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, the article was invoked in this case to legitimize a collective response to a terrorist attack. The attacks not only provided the immediate catalyst for Operation Enduring Freedom but also triggered a geopolitical realignment in which alliances such as NATO significantly expanded their strategic reach and mandate (Münch, 2021).

5.2. Operation Enduring Freedom

This analysis delineates OEF into three distinct phases, each defined by specific contexts, objectives, and strategic choices. The first phase (2001–2005) entailed the initial military defeat of the Taliban, the establishment of an interim administration, and the institutional foundations of the new Afghan state apparatus. The focus rested on fostering political stability and initiating constitutional reforms. The second phase (2006–2010) witnessed an escalation of armed resistance, prompting the United States to intensify counterinsurgency efforts and regional security operations. This period saw an increasing overlap between ISAF and OEF, with greater resources allocated to ISAF, thereby relegating OEF to a secondary role. The third phase (2011–2014) signaled a strategic reorientation toward transferring security responsibilities to Afghan forces and scaling down direct U.S. combat operations.

This tripartite structure underscores the gradual shift in military and political strategy, as well as the evolving nature of the conflict and U.S. engagement. Each phase is examined in terms of key events, policy decisions, and strategic developments, providing a comprehensive understanding of the divergent approaches employed in the pursuit of a stable and secure Afghanistan.

5.2.1. The first phase (2001-2005)

The first phase of Operation Enduring Freedom marks the transition from a targeted military intervention to a broader state restructuring of Afghanistan. This analysis focuses on five pivotal moments that together define the essence of this early phase.

The first section addresses the preparatory stage of the operation, emphasizing strategic planning within U.S. security structures and the formulation of operational objectives. The second examines the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime. Despite the military success, a dominant yet flawed assumption quickly emerged regarding the complete elimination of the Taliban, resulting in a missed opportunity for consolidation. The third section explores the initiation of state-building, with the Bonn Agreement serving as the normative framework for establishing an interim government and gradually developing administrative institutions. The fourth highlights subsequent institutional developments, marked by fragmentation, elite rivalries, and the resurgence of local power networks that shaped the political transition.

The fifth section concludes with the constitutional Loya Jirga, the presidential elections, and the 18 September 2005 Wolesi Jirga (lower house) elections, marking the completion of the first institutional cycle (Reynolds et al., 2005). As last, the sixth section provides an overview of the transition from the first to the second phase.

5.2.1.1. *Start OEF*

Although Operation Enduring Freedom formally commenced on October 7, the Bush administration declared that America would respond decisively to the attacks. This resolve culminated in the launch of its doctrine: the War on Terror. The initial focus centered on conducting airstrikes against Al-Qaeda and toppling the Taliban regime (Lambeth, 2005, pp. 1–12; Laub & Maizland, 2017). Soon thereafter, Washington adopted a comprehensive set of measures, including military interventions, the establishment and consolidation of international coalitions, the intensification of intelligence gathering, and the tracking and freezing of Al-Qaeda's financial networks (Lambeth, 2005, pp. 1–12). An overview of these measures is presented in Figure 2 (Katzman & Thomas, 2017, p. 33).

Figure 2: American strategy and implementation in Afghanistan after 2001

Stated and Implied Goals: To prevent Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups from using Afghanistan to plan attacks on the United States, and to prevent the Taliban insurgency from overthrowing the Afghan government.

U.S. Strategy Implementation: U.S. forces train, advise, and assist the ANDSF to secure Afghanistan and to conduct counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province. Combat is also authorized to counter imminent Taliban and other insurgent threats to U.S. forces and to Afghan forces and the Afghan government.

Drawdown and Provision of U.S. Enablers: Following the 2009 “surge,” U.S. force levels reached a high of 100,000 in mid-2011, then fell to 68,000 (“surge recovery”) by September 20, 2012, and to 34,000 by February 2014. Current U.S. force level is about 9,800 plus about 6,400 forces from NATO partners in the “Resolute Support Mission.” The U.S. force remained at 9,800 during 2015-16 and declined to 8,400 (the current authorized level) at the end of 2016. It was reportedly in August 2017 that the actual number of U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan averages between 11,000 and 12,000 at any given time, a product of units overlapping as they transition in and out of the country.⁹⁷ No subsequent drawdowns have been stipulated by the Trump Administration, which authorized Secretary of Defense James Mattis in June 2017 to send around 4,000 additional troops to the country.

Long-Term Broad Engagement: The SPA (see above) pledges U.S. security and economic assistance to Afghanistan until 2024. U.S. economic and Afghan force train and equip funding pledged by U.S. to remain roughly at current levels through at least FY2017.

Political Settlement/Pakistan Cooperation: U.S. policy is to support a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. As part of that effort, U.S. officials attempt to enlist Pakistan’s commitment to deny safe haven in Pakistan to Afghan militants and to promote talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives.

Economic Development: U.S. policy supports Afghan efforts to build an economy that can be self-sufficient by 2024 by further developing agriculture, collecting corporate taxes and customs duties, exploiting vast mineral deposits, expanding small industries, and integrating Afghanistan into regional diplomatic and trading and investment structures.

Source: Katzman, K., & Thomas, L. (2017, p.584). Afghanistan: Post-Taliban governance, security, and us policy (updated). *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East*, 8(4), 531-643. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2273146378?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

From the September 11 attacks onward, U.S. international engagement shifted decisively toward the pursuit of global military hegemony and the consolidation of a singular position in world affairs (Laub & Maizland, 2017). Although this trajectory had begun under the Clinton administration, it became more explicitly articulated under President Bush (Dorronsoro & King, 2005). The United States sought to maintain its military dominance and claim a unique role in international relations, grounded in what it perceived as its exceptional status and corresponding responsibilities (The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002). This doctrine marked a clear departure from international law. The foundational principle of the UN Charter—prohibiting the use of force except in self-defense, as codified in Article 51—was

supplanted by a strategy of preemptive action (United Nations [UN], 1945). Given that Operation Enduring Freedom was not a peacekeeping mission but rather a counterterrorism and combat operation aimed at toppling the Taliban, it was easier to justify. Citing Afghanistan's fragile state, the U.S. framed this as a legitimate intervention (Ibrahimi, 2023), viewing itself as the victim of an attack and therefore entitled to respond.

Although OEF enjoyed broad international support—with contributions from the UK, France, Canada, and others—it remained, at its core, an American-led operation (Laub & Maizland, 2017). The mission was not conducted under NATO command. NATO's formal involvement began only in 2003, when it assumed leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which had initially operated under rotating national leadership (Williams, 2011). ISAF was established under UN Security Council Resolution 1386, tasked with assisting Afghan transitional authorities in maintaining security and stability (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2001d). The U.S. deliberately pursued an autonomous course, distancing itself from NATO's defensive orientation by emphasizing offensive and preemptive operations.

In this initial stage, the United States consciously adopted an airpower-dominant approach, limiting ground troop deployment while heavily relying on air support and local allies. This provided an opportunity to implement new military doctrines, notably the Agile Combat Support (ACS) concept, in unpredictable environments (Tripp et al., 2004). ACS, developed within the U.S. Air Force, emphasizes the capacity to deliver rapid and flexible logistical and operational support to combat units (Tripp et al., 2004). On October 5, the first U.S. forces were stationed in Uzbekistan, aircraft carriers were positioned in the Indian Ocean, and the Taliban's international isolation unfolded at remarkable speed (Dorransoro & King, 2005).

The central aim of OEF during this phase was to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for terrorism (Brooks, 2023; Deshmukh, 2022). Alongside dismantling Al-Qaeda networks and overthrowing the Taliban regime, President Bush advocated for building a stable Afghan government with self-sufficient national security forces (Brooks, 2023; Durch, 2003). This vision would later shift under President Obama, who implemented a policy change marked by a short-term escalation of U.S. troop deployments (Deshmukh, 2022; Katzman & Thomas, 2017).

5.2.1.2. The 'fall' of the Taliban

On 12 November 2001, U.S. forces captured the Afghan capital, Kabul, shortly after the Taliban suffered its first major defeat in Mazar-e-Sharif on 9 November. The U.S. strategy shifted rapidly, adopting a model in which small American Special Forces units partnered with Northern Alliance forces (United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), supported by intensive U.S. airstrikes that weakened Taliban defensive lines (Durch, 2003; Katzman & Thomas, 2017).

The collapse of the Taliban regime stemmed primarily from military disintegration rather than political opposition or societal pressure (Durch, 2003). Its downfall reflected not a calculated act of martyrdom or

ideological sacrifice, but rather a misjudgment of the balance of power. Mullah Omar overestimated public support and underestimated the decisive effect of American air superiority (Dorransoro & King, 2005, pp. 325–328).

Despite tactical gains against the Taliban regime, a decisive victory remained elusive. Al-Qaeda regrouped swiftly, relocating core operations to Pakistan despite the presence of Pakistani border controls (Kerry, 2009). This exposed the symbolic nature of the U.S. triumph (Dorransoro & King, 2005). Failed operations eroded military momentum and fueled significant frustration within U.S. ranks (Kerry, 2009). The group's resurgence coincided with a rise in Taliban violence inside Afghanistan. A notable example was the December 2002 suicide bombing in Gardez targeting a meeting of U.S. and Afghan officials, killing multiple people. Such attacks pursued both military and psychological objectives: destabilising the state-building process and deterring collaboration with foreign actors.

One prominent failed operation unfolded in Afghanistan's eastern Spin Ghar mountains, where Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters had fortified their positions. This culminated in what became known as the Battle of Tora Bora (Krause, 2008; Kerry, 2009). Conducted in December 2001 ("Battle of Tora Bora," n.d.), U.S. intelligence had traced Osama bin Laden and an estimated 500–2,000 Al-Qaeda fighters to a cave complex ("Battle of Tora Bora," n.d.). Despite repeated calls for greater ground deployment, the U.S. Department of Defense persisted with an airstrike-focused approach, supplemented by Afghan allies (Kerry, 2009).

5.2.1.3. Beginning of State Reform and the Bonn Agreement

The Northern Alliance's capture of Kabul (November 2001) inaugurated a new institutional phase. On 14 November, UN Security Council Resolution 1378 mandated a central UN role in forming an interim administration, initiating state-building in parallel with ongoing combat (UNSC, 2001b; Durch, 2003).

The development of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)—the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP)—became the core pillar of institutional consolidation (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). U.S. Department of Defense reporting nevertheless documented persistent manpower gaps, limited training capacity, and pervasive corruption. As Katzman and Thomas (2017) note, U.S. policy prioritized security-sector construction as the bedrock for re-establishing the rule of law.

The Bonn Conference (four Afghan factions; Taliban excluded) provided a blueprint for transition: constitution-making, presidential and parliamentary elections by 2005, DDR of militias, and social-economic recovery with attention to women's rights (Jalali, 2006; Rubin & Hamidzada, 2007). Under UN auspices it was not a peace accord but a power-sharing design for an Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) tasked to: (1) enable ISAF deployment in Kabul via UNSC 1386, and (2) cooperate internationally against terrorism, narcotics, and organized crime (UNSC, 2001d; Fields & Ahmed, 2011).

Despite the "Afghan-led" framing, inclusivity was thin. Reliance on 1990s belligerents entrenched factional leverage; the Northern Alliance retained disproportionate influence, including in intelligence services, as

quid pro quo for battlefield cooperation (Ayub & Kouvo, 2008; Jabeen & Shauket, 2019). Hamid Karzai—cast as a neutral Pashtun broker—won the 2004 and 2009 elections but governed through internationally backed, transactional bargains with strongmen; the June 2002 Loya Jirga legitimated transfer to a transitional government (Rubin & Hamidzada, 2007; Buchholz, 2007; Smith, 2019).

The Bonn Agreement reflected an international preference for stability over accountability. Afghan and international actors—explicitly or implicitly—prioritized short-term security above long-term principles of rule of law and justice. As Dorronsoro and King (2005) note, this choice entrenched patronage networks dating back to the Mujahideen era. The “big tent approach” sought to integrate warlords and elites into state structures in exchange for support of the peace process (Fields & Ahmed, 2011). While intended to broaden support, it excluded large segments of the rural population and reinforced informal power structures. Schmeidl (2016) concludes that this produced a hybrid state model, marked by a significant gap between formal democratic institutions and the actual political order.

Two parallel agendas—political stabilization and technical state-building—often conflicted. The marginalization of informal systems in favor of formal institutions resulted in weak alignment with Afghanistan’s socio-political realities (Ayub & Kouvo, 2008). Subsequent phases would expose the agreement’s inherent fragility and invite a more critical assessment.

Parallel to state-building, Afghanistan remained a combat theatre. Operation Anaconda—among OEF’s most consequential early campaigns—targeted concentrated Al-Qaeda/Taliban forces in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, Paktia (Lambeth, 2005; Grey Dynamics, 2024). Launched on 2 March 2002, it met entrenched resistance. Operational deficiencies were salient: inadequate intelligence, underestimation of enemy strength, and incomplete terrain knowledge impeded coordination (Kugler et al., 2009). The operation concluded on 19 March with eight U.S. fatalities, underscoring the battle’s intensity.

Like Tora Bora, Anaconda exposed enduring flaws in early U.S. warfare: reliance on unreliable militias, insufficient operational planning, and limited understanding of enemy dispositions—compounded by mountainous terrain that facilitated exfiltration (Kugler et al., 2009; Grey Dynamics, 2024). Lessons distilled by Kugler et al. (2009) include: (1) unified command with integrated structures and joint planning; (2) intelligence-led, contingency-ready, adaptive planning for mobile units; (3) joint air–ground doctrine with disciplined communications and fires; and (4) clear mission directives and rules of engagement that preserve tactical flexibility and interoperability.

To underpin Bonn, UNAMA (UNSC 1401) was created to promote governance, rule of law, human rights, and to coordinate aid; its leverage over OEF was minimal. Together with ISAF and OEF, it formed the triad of international interventions, whose mandates increasingly overlapped in the conflict’s second phase (UNSC, 2002; UNAMA, n.d.-a; Dorn, 2017).

5.2.1.4. *Institutional Developments and Countermovements*

After Operation Anaconda (spring 2002), Washington's strategic focus moved rapidly toward Iraq; in 2003 the Bush administration launched Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Although not analysed here, OIF diverted resources and political attention from Afghanistan, constraining OEF's objectives. Afghanistan thus remained reliant on international assistance to sustain state-building and security; Kabul gained some control, but extending central authority nationwide was urgent (Goodson, 2004).

To address this, the U.S. military cooperated with the UN on initiatives to expand governmental authority nationwide. However, the slow development of the Afghan National Army (ANA)—fewer than 6,000 troops by late 2003 against an initial target of 70,000—combined with the need to dismantle warlord militias, prompted a policy shift (Goodson, 2004). In December 2002, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were introduced as hybrid civil-military units of 60–90 personnel (Chandra, 2015, pp.79–85; Goodson, 2004). These teams sought to promote stability in provincial areas through security provision, reconstruction, and governance support (Chandra, 2015, pp.79–95). Yet, both Chandra (2015) and Goodson (2004) conclude that PRTs were insufficiently scaled to achieve meaningful impact and remained hampered by structural weaknesses, including the absence of centralized oversight.

The U.S. choice to fund local militias instead of deploying substantial regular forces made structural centralization nearly impossible (Dorransoro & King, 2005, pp.331–338). Regional powerholders often saw Kabul's interventions as threats to their autonomy, producing renewed fragmentation reminiscent of the Mujahideen era.

A key milestone in institutional transition occurred in June 2002 with the convening of an Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ), designed to grant national legitimacy to the interim authorities. Under UN supervision, the assembly formally appointed Hamid Karzai as president for a two-year term. However, persistent insecurity and limited transparency undermined the process (Rubin, 2004). Both Chandra (2015) and Rubin (2004) note that many delegates criticized the restricted participation in forming the interim government, which lacked genuine representativeness. Despite these shortcomings, a government was formed under considerable pressure, with the distribution of key positions detailed in Appendix D.

Due to such tensions, the Karzai administration opted not to publicize the constitutional process before its planned conclusion in 2004—one of several strategies Rubin (2004) interprets as attempts to centralize power. Priority was given to establishing a stable power base, though broader inclusion remained essential. Rubin & Hamidzada (2007) argue that this environment allowed the Taliban to regroup. The Quetta Shura, under Mullah Omar, reorganized and executed more effective operations—avoiding direct confrontation with Western forces—laying the groundwork for renewed insurgency in OEF's second phase (Rehman, 2022). The Taliban retained strongholds particularly in Pashtun areas of eastern Afghanistan.

According to Goodson (2004) and Rubin (2004), this regrouping was fueled not only by governance failures but also by U.S. troop conduct, including reports of civilian casualties, prisoner abuse, and intimidation. These incidents intensified anti-Western sentiment and bolstered Taliban propaganda, framing foreign presence as a violation of Afghan sovereignty and Islamic values. Consequently, the Taliban targeted state institutions (Akbar & Akbar, 2011; Rubin & Hamidzada, 2007).

Meanwhile, the Karzai transitional government was tasked with drafting a new constitution, holding national elections, and consolidating a sustainable political order (Dorronsoro & King, 2005, pp.329–331). Yet institutional reform proved difficult, as central authority extended little beyond Kabul (Rubin, 2004).

5.2.1.5. A New Constitution and Elections

On 4 January 2004, the Constitutional Loya Jirga ratified Afghanistan's constitution (Smith, 2019). The charter entrenched a strong presidential system aligned with Karzai's preferences, vesting the presidency with powers, including a legislative veto and appointment of one-third of the Meshrano Jirga (Rubin, 2004). Parliament became bicameral—Meshrano Jirga and an elected Wolesi Jirga (Katzman, 2015). Half of presidential appointees to the Meshrano Jirga must be women (Dorronsoro & King, 2005, pp. 331–338). The constitution also mandated that Wolesi Jirga seats be allocated "in proportion to the population" (Rubin, 2004).

Yet drafting lacked transparency and inclusion, vital for consensus. Moderate Islamic groups were excluded from the commission, while factions such as Shura-yi Nazar were overrepresented (Finkelman, 2005). Disputes centred on Islam's role and minority rights. Article 2 recognised Islam as the state religion and permitted religious freedom "within the limits of the law," heightening tensions between conservative clerics and moderates ("Afghanistan 2004 Constitution," art. 2, n.d.). The constitution enabled the first presidential elections in October 2004 (see Figure 3). Though turnout was 84%, Ra'ees (2005) argues representation remained narrow. A very young median age (~14), widespread illiteracy, limited information access, and administrative hurdles excluded many, while refugees and exiles were largely disenfranchised.

Figure 3: results of the 2004 presidential election

Valid Votes: 8,024,536		Invalid Votes: 104,404	
Total Votes: 8,128,940			
Candidate	Affiliation	Votes Polled	% Votes
Hamid Karzai	Independent	4,443,029	55.4
Yunus Qanooni	Hezbe-Nuhzat e Mili	1,306,503	16.3
H M Mohaqiq	Independent	935,325	11.7
A Rashid Dostum	Independent	804,861	10.0
A Latif Pidram	Hezbe-Cangara e Mili	110,160	1.4
Masooda Jalal	Independent	91,415	1.1
Syed Ishaq Gilani	Nuhzate Hambastage Mili	80,081	1.0
Ghulam Farooq N	Hezbe-Istiqlal	24,232	0.3
10 candidates*	Independent	228,930	2.8

Source: Ra'ees, W. (2005, p.42). Presidential Election in Afghanistan: Democracy in the Making. *Intellectual Discourse*, 13(1). Based on The Joint Election Management Body, "2004 Afghan Election Project: Afghanistan's Presidential Election Results" [Online] available from, <http://www.electionsafghanistan.org.af/Election%20Results%20Website/index.htm>, accessed April, 21, 2005.

Following the elections, a new government was formed (Appendix D). Critics highlighted the rushed organization, deteriorating security, Taliban and Al-Qaeda threats, narcotics networks, weak institutional capacity, and resource shortages – all undermining public trust (Katzman & Thomas, 2017).

The Bonn Process concluded in 2005 with parliamentary and provincial elections. These provided an opportunity to address earlier shortcomings (Dimitroff, 2006). However, the absence of party structures led to a field dominated by independents, including former warlords (Reynolds et al., 2005). Fraud, proxy voting, and local interference undermined integrity, though the process was internationally – albeit mistakenly – celebrated as progress towards democratic institutionalisation (Dimitroff, 2006). The Wolesi Jirga reflected ethnic, religious, and political pluralism, with women securing nearly 30% of seats without relying on quotas (Reynolds et al., 2005). The Meshrano Jirga was appointed indirectly.

The institutional design debate mirrored entrenched ethnic expectations. Scholars such as Akbar & Akbar (2011) judged the elections negatively, citing the fragility of the political process after the Taliban's fall and Karzai's limited authority. Washington's push for rapid elections aimed to legitimise its leadership and marginalise challengers, casting doubt on the Bonn Process's credibility.

5.2.1.6. *End of the first phase*

The credibility of the Bonn Process was a central priority for both the United States and the United Nations. Early elections functioned not only as a legitimizing tool for Karzai but also as a guarantee to maintain international confidence in Western-led state-building.

Karzai, however, failed to establish firm central control over various provinces (Münch, 2013). By fostering divisions within the Jamiat party and appointing Hezb affiliates, he ensured no single faction became dominant. Yet, the constant renegotiations and fragmentation undermined national unity, leaving his influence weak in regions such as Badakhshan in northern Afghanistan. Internationally funded state authority allowed Karzai to distribute power, but foreign actors often preferred alliances with established local powerholders—frequently Jamiat-linked—rather than Karzai’s own allies. As Münch (2013) argues, the intervention thus entrenched existing power structures with only marginal functional changes.

Giustozzi’s *Empires of Mud* (2009) highlights how local warlords exploit weak central authority to seize subnational control, claim autonomy, and still play a role in state formation. Consequently, Karzai was forced into numerous concessions, hampering central governance and sustaining his dependence on international—particularly American—support. By the end of this first phase, stability was limited largely to Kabul, while other provinces remained beyond effective control, paving the way for renewed instability and Taliban resurgence in the second phase.

As this phase concluded, OEF shifted focus. International engagement entered a new dynamic, marked by escalating violence and growing instability—developments that intensified military operations and signaled the start of OEF’s second phase.

5.2.2. *The second phase (2006-2010)*

Whereas the first phase centered on regime change and state-building via the Bonn process, phase two pivoted to military predominance. The Taliban’s resurgence exposed limits of the initial approach, prompting a shift from political consolidation to force. This shift manifested in five trends.

Strategically, operations moved from conventional campaigns to integrated counterinsurgency (COIN) oriented toward eventual Afghan control. U.S. forces prioritized ANSF training. Under an expanding ISAF lead, coalition coordination intensified around reconstruction and stabilization, while OEF focused on small, covert support to ISAF—creating increasingly overlapping command chains.

From 2006, Washington escalated deployments and embedded U.S. and Afghan units, culminating in Obama’s 2009–2010 surge. By 2010, over 100,000 U.S. troops were deployed—most under ISAF, with dual OEF–ISAF mandates. OEF’s role narrowed to counterterrorism/COIN support. The July 2010 Kabul Conference set the handover timetable and prepared transition to phase three. In parallel, the August 2009 presidential elections—marred by violence and fraud—eroded legitimacy; Karzai’s contested re-

election deepened mistrust in Kabul. The September 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections closed the period and framed the final phase.

5.2.2.1. Rise and Intensification of the Taliban & Al-Qaeda

Despite notable achievements, the Bonn process suffered from critical shortcomings. The exclusion of the Taliban fostered conditions for militant regrouping and insurgency, which escalated over time. This insurgency mirrored Iraqi tactics, targeting police, aid workers, and foreign troops. Johnson and Mason (2007) argue that integrating Taliban actors could have mitigated structural resistance.

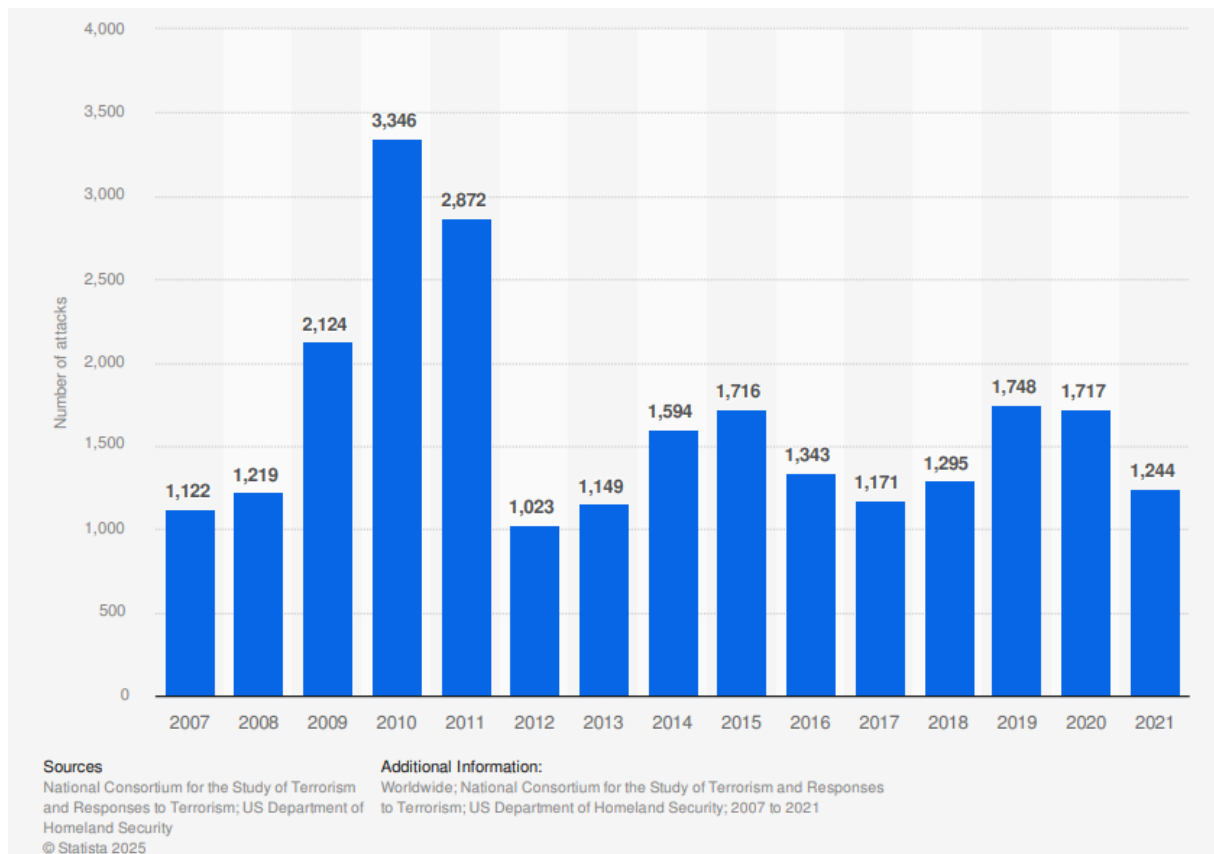
A second deficiency was the neglect of entrenched warlords and militias (Jones, 2008; Lafraie, 2009). Their authority—sustained by drug revenues—was underestimated (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). U.S. reliance on strongmen for intelligence and counter-Al-Qaeda operations eroded Kabul’s authority and impeded national integration (Jalali, 2006), while financing and arming them consolidated local autonomy.

From 2006, Taliban/Al-Qaeda operations intensified, with rising civilian harm. An IED-centric strategy drove disproportionate casualties while security forces insulated themselves with armor; politico-military nodes were persistently targeted (Feickert, 2006; Williams, 2008; Tariq et al., 2018), as in the failed 27 April 2008 attack on President Karzai.

A post-2006 doctrinal convergence with Iraqi insurgents emerged (Chandra, 2015), aided by cross-border learning and drug finance (Johnson & Mason, 2007; Williams, 2008). Patterns included:

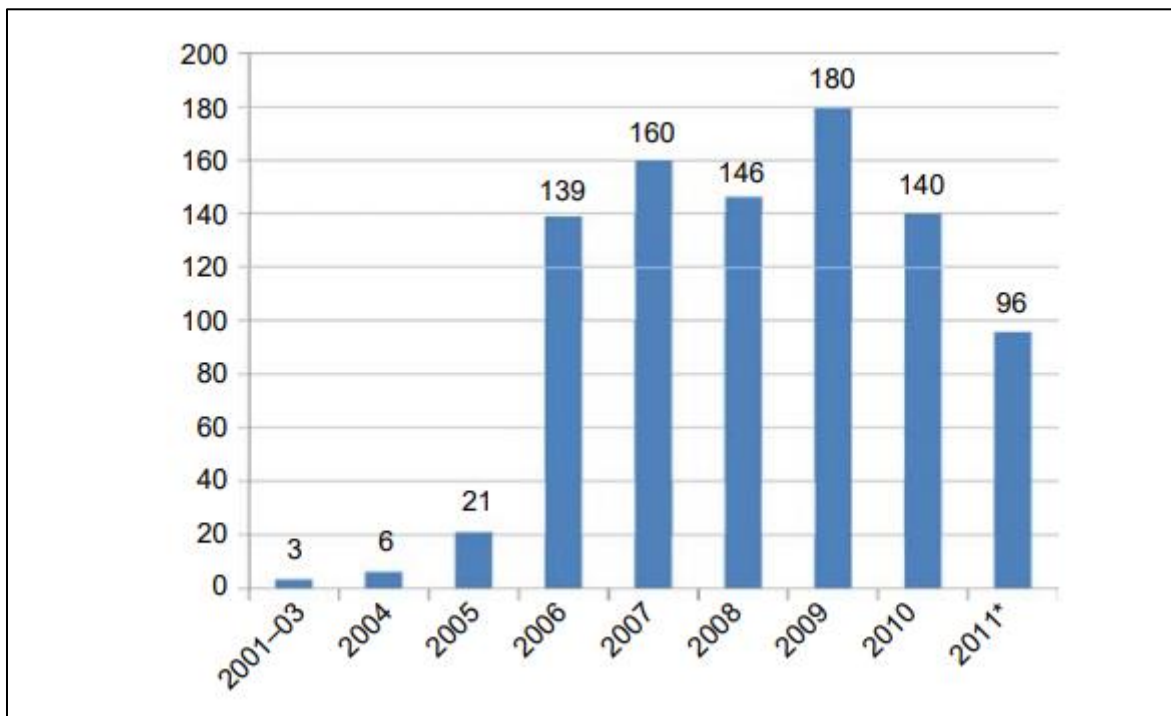
- 1) escalating VBIED/BBIED use (see Figures 4–6) (Johnson, 2013; Williams, 2008);
- 2) systematic attacks on security/diplomatic targets (“U.S. Department of State,” 2013);
- 3) reduced restraint toward civilian fatalities (Johnson, 2013; Williams, 2008);
- 4) metal-shrapnel lethality (Williams, 2008);
- 5) synchronized multi-target raids (Jones, 2008; Williams, 2008);
- 6) propaganda engineered to instill fear and recruit (Jones, 2008).

Figure 4: Number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2021



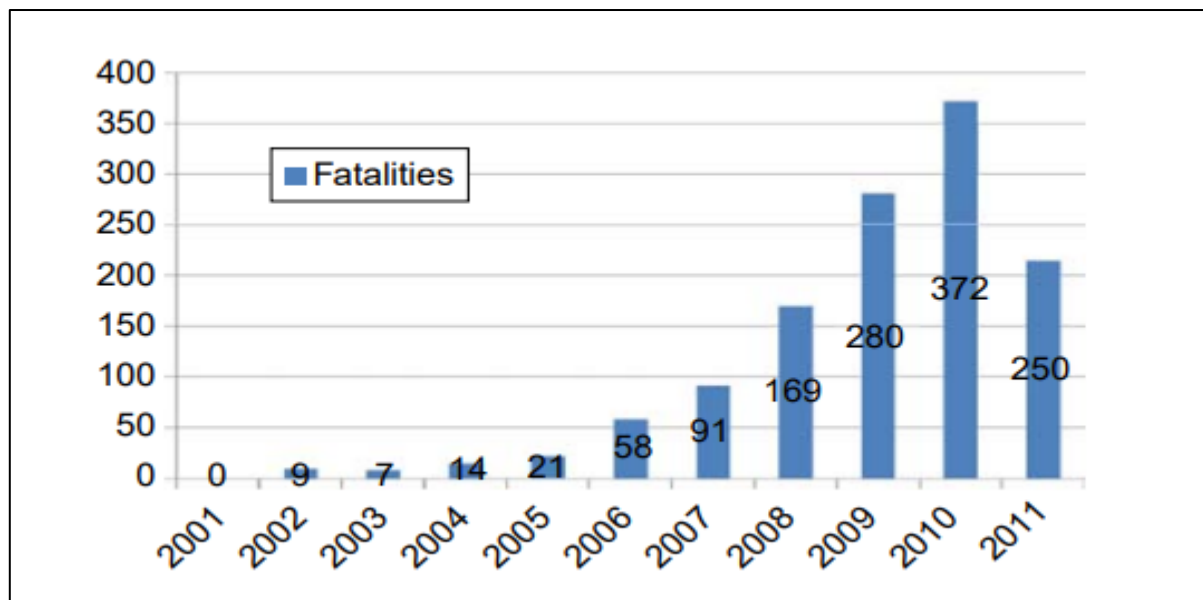
Source: US Department of Homeland Security; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. September 2022. Accessed on April 8, 2025, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250566/number-of-terrorist-attacks-in-afghanistan/>

Figure 5: Afghanistan suicide attacks, 2001–2011



Source: Thomas H. Johnson (2013, p.11): Taliban adaptations and innovations , Small Wars & Insurgencies, 24:1, 3-27. Accessed on May 9, 2025, from <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/ecfe05bd-24e1-4812-8ac1-a486ea365cc9/content>.

Figure 6: Afghanistan IED fatality trends, 2001–2011

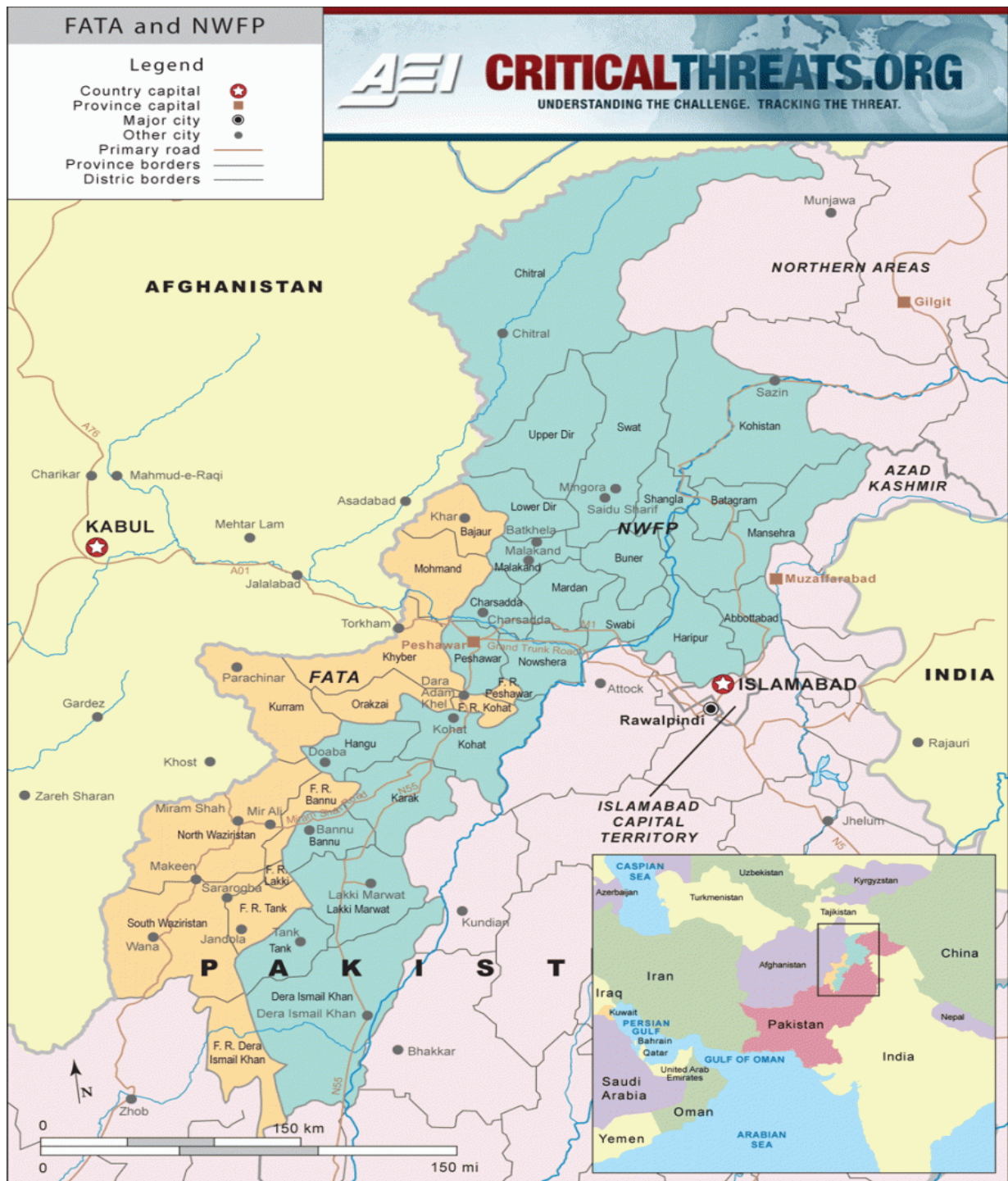


Source: Thomas H. Johnson (2013, p.12): Taliban adaptations and innovations , Small Wars & Insurgencies, 24:1, 3-27. Accessed on May 9, 2025, from <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/ecfe05bd-24e1-4812-8ac1-a486ea365cc9/content>.

Many attacks failed due to reliance on young, coerced madrasa recruits (Erez & Berko, 2014). While their lack of skill caused operational failures, unregulated madrasas continued to provide recruits (Choudhury, 2017).

From 2006, cross-border infiltration from Pakistan became integral to the insurgency (Grare, 2006; Sial, 2013). The FATA region (see figure 7) served as a logistical and operational hub (“Critical Threats Project”, 2016). Islamabad selectively tolerated pro-Pakistani Taliban factions like the Haqqani network while targeting anti-Pakistani groups such as TTP (Grare, 2006; Sial, 2013). Viewing Afghanistan as a strategic buffer against India, Pakistan’s policy indirectly strengthened the insurgency and hampered reconstruction. This asymmetrical approach boosted insurgent effectiveness in border regions and deepened Taliban fragmentation. “Taliban” came to encompass diverse groups, some aligned with Al-Qaeda, others acting autonomously with divergent agendas (Lafraie, 2009; Maloney, 2008). This fragmentation complicated counterinsurgency and rendered the conflict more unpredictable.

Figure 7: eastern border of Afghanistan FATA

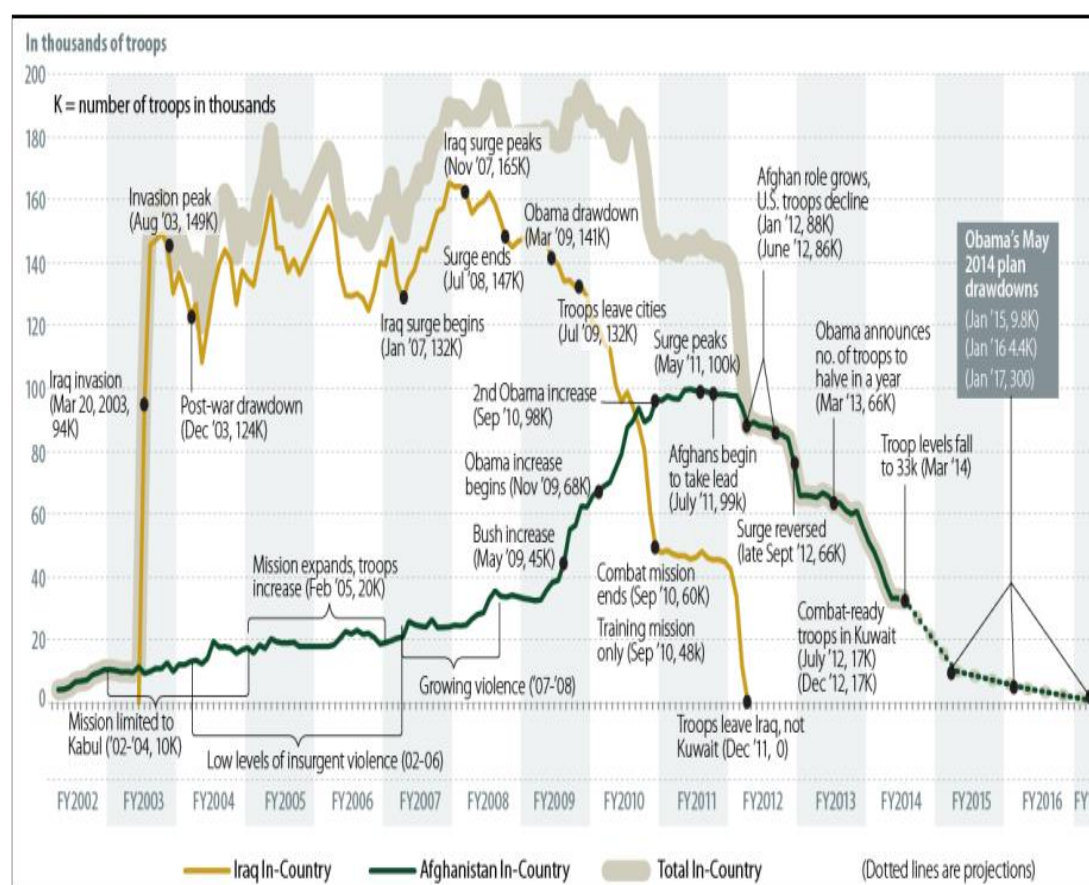


Source: Critical Threats Project. (2016). *FATA conflict map*. American Enterprise Institute [Map]. Accessed on, March 25, 2025 from <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/fata-conflict-maps>

5.2.2.2. Increasing troop deployment and shifts in American policy

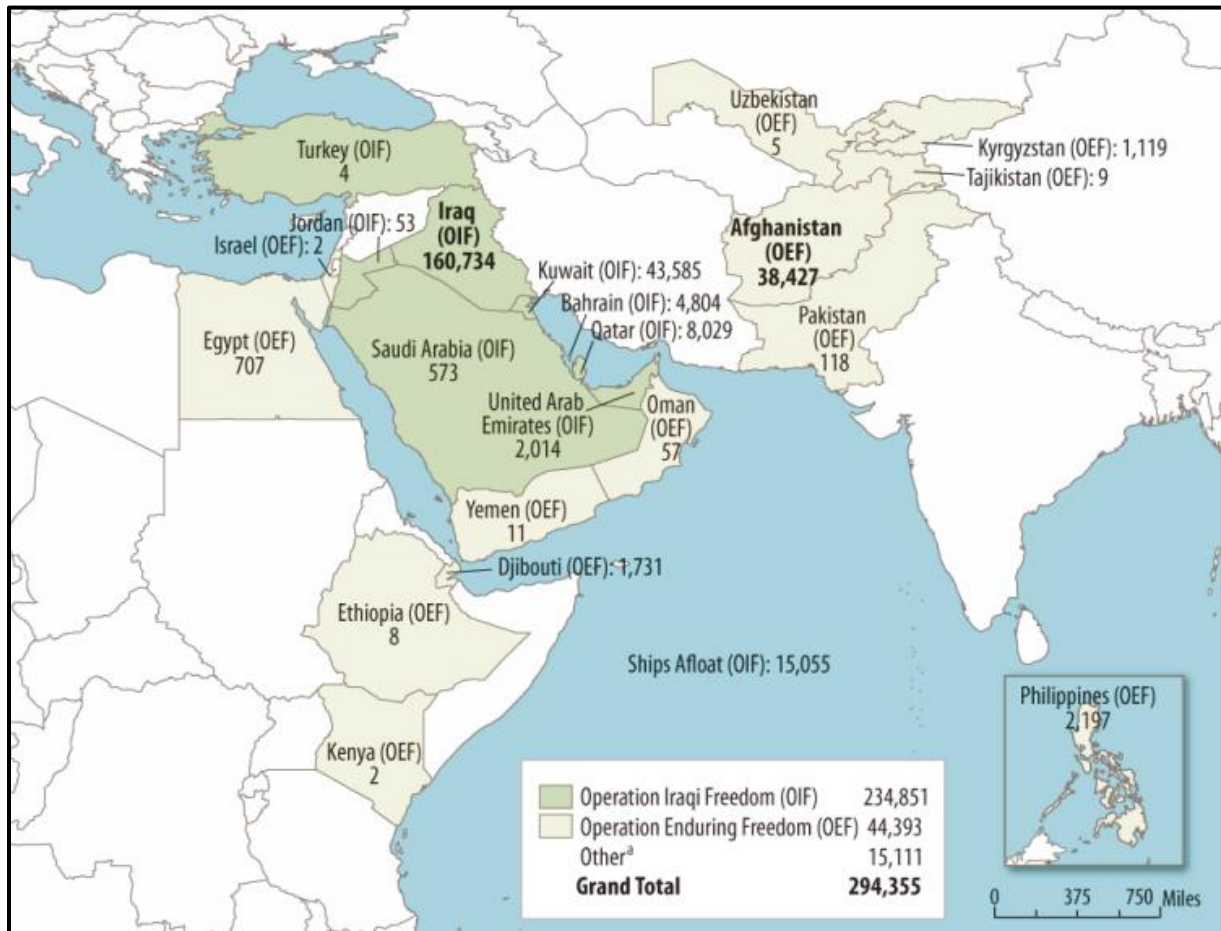
In response to intensifying Taliban and Al-Qaeda offensives, the United States progressively escalated its troop presence in Afghanistan from 2006 onward, integrating American and Afghan units more closely. This process culminated in President Barack Obama's 2009–2010 surge, largely executed in OEF's third phase, raising U.S. forces to over 100,000 by 2010. The surge aimed to repel Taliban advances before transferring security responsibilities to Afghan institutions, though it also produced higher casualties. Under President George W. Bush, official rhetoric continued to promote global democratisation, but actual priorities—according to Hassan & Hammond (2011) and Lindsay (2011)—were the elimination of Al-Qaeda and expulsion of the Taliban. Bush's Iraq focus diverted resources, leaving Afghanistan under-resourced (Indurthy, 2011; Belasco, 2009, 2014). Belasco's CRS reports show this disparity (Figures 8–10).

Figure 8: Boots on the Ground In-Country, FY2001-FY2017 In thousands of U.S. troops



Source: Belasco, A. (2014, p.9). *The cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Global War on Terror operations since 9/11*. CRS. Based on, DOD, Monthly Boots-on-the-Ground reports provided to CRS and congressional defense committees, 2001-June 2014. Accessed on April 22, 2025, from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>

Figure 9: Location of U.S. Troops Deployed for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), December 2008



Source: Belasco, A. (2009, p.6). *Troop levels in the Afghan and Iraq wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and other potential issues* (CRS Report R40682) [Map]. Congressional Research Service. BASED ON: Defense Manpower Data Center, Report DRS 11280, Modified Location Country Report, December 2008. Accessed on April 22, 2025, from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>

Figure 10: Average Monthly Troop Levels by War, FY2006-FY2012 Actuals through FY2008, Estimates for FY2009-FY2012 in Italics

Troop Levels and Estimated Costs	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
AFGHAN WAR							
In-Country Average Troop Levels ^a	20,417	23,658	30,142	<i>50,700</i>	<i>63,400</i>	<i>63,450</i>	<i>63,350</i>
Average BCTs In-Country/a/	2.3	2.6	3.3	<i>5.6</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>7.0</i>
Percent Annual Change	7%	16%	27%	<i>68%</i>	<i>25%</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>0%</i>
Share of Total	13%	14%	16%	<i>27%</i>	<i>42%</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>94%</i>
IRAQ WAR							
In-Country Average Troop Levels	141,100	148,292	157,775	<i>135,600</i>	<i>88,300</i>	<i>42,750</i>	<i>4,050</i>
Average BCTs In-Country/a/	15.7	16.5	17.5	<i>15.1</i>	<i>9.8</i>	<i>4.8</i>	<i>0.5</i>
Percent Annual Change	-2%	5%	6%	<i>-14%</i>	<i>-35%</i>	<i>-52%</i>	<i>-91%</i>
Share of Total	87%	86%	84%	<i>73%</i>	<i>58%</i>	<i>40%</i>	<i>6%</i>
AFGHAN AND IRAQ WARS							
In-Country Average Troop Levels	161,517	171,950	187,917	<i>186,300</i>	<i>151,750</i>	<i>106,200</i>	<i>67,500</i>
Average BCTs In-Country	17.9	19.1	20.9	<i>20.7</i>	<i>16.9</i>	<i>11.8</i>	<i>7.5</i>
Percent Annual Change	12%	6%	9%	<i>-1%</i>	<i>-19%</i>	<i>-30%</i>	<i>-36%</i>
Share of Total	100%	100%	100%	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Sources: Belasco, A. (2009, p.12). *Troop levels in the Afghan and Iraq wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and other potential issues* (CRS Report R40682). Congressional Research Service. Based on: White House, “Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq,” Speech by President Obama at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, February 27, 2009; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/iraq/>; White House, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” February 17, 2009; http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-by-thePresident-on-Afghanistan/; Joint Staff, Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Boots on the Ground Reports.”

In sharp contrast to prior emphasis, President Barack Obama cast Afghanistan as a “necessary” and legitimate war (Obama, 2009). Early in office he authorized a surge of 30,000 troops—deploying rapidly in early 2010 to target the insurgency and secure key population centers. Rejecting Vice President Biden’s light-footprint option and, backed by General McChrystal, he adopted an intensive COIN approach that integrated civil–military instruments to defeat insurgents and restore governmental legitimacy by mobilizing civilian support (Salt, 2018, p. 109).

The surge elevated U.S. forces to roughly 100,000 in 2010—more than triple 2008 levels—with a concomitant rise in combat and casualties (Belasco, 2014). Hassan and Hammond (2011, p. 543) specify four aims: halt Taliban momentum (and buy time for review); secure the 2009–2010 elections; refocus on Al-Qaeda; and accelerate ANSF training. They question the logic of stationing ~8,000 troops in sparsely populated Helmand (<1% of the population), where electoral returns were minimal. Marsh (2014) contends the surge reflected domestic bureaucratic–political dynamics shaping presidential choice. Simultaneously, the administration distanced itself from expansive nation-building, seeking rapid transfer to a functional—

albeit weak—Afghan state (Hassan & Hammond, 2011; Obama, 2009). Strategic focus shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan: a 5:1 troop imbalance in 2008 narrowed to parity by 2010, and by FY2011 Afghanistan hosted more personnel (Belasco, 2014, p. 9). Obama also announced withdrawal of Iraq combat forces by August 2010 and adopted an “Af-Pak” lens enlisting Pakistan; troop levels peaked near 100,000 by mid-2011 before tapering under a transition strategy (Hassan & Hammond, 2011, pp. 542–546; Belasco, 2014, p. 9).

Drawing lessons from Iraq (≈80% of U.S. losses from IEDs), forces replaced light vehicles with heavier armor and enhanced protective suites; LAVs were increasingly fielded from 2005 (Williams, 2008). Despite up-armor, casualties rose alongside expanded deployments (Figures 11–12).

Figure 11: American Casualties by Year

		A. Year	B. Number of US Military Deaths			A. Year	B. Number of US Military Deaths	
George W. Bush 626 US Military Deaths	1.	2001	11		12.	2012	314	Barack Obama 1,752 US Military Deaths
	2.	2002	49		13.	2013	132	
	3.	2003	43		14.	2014	55	
	4.	2004	52		15.	2015	21	
	5.	2005	99		16.	2016	10	
	6.	2006	98		17.	2017	15	Donald Trump 65 US Military Deaths
	7.	2007	118		18.	2018	16	
	8.	2008	156		19.	2019	23	
	9.	2009	311		20.	2020	11	Joe Biden 13 US Military Deaths (as of 9/15/2021)
	10.	2010	498		21.	2021	13	
	11.	2011	411			Total	2,456	

Source: *Afghanistan War: U.S. Deaths and Costs* - A-Mark Foundation. (Updated October 19, 2022 | Published November 21, 2021). A-Mark Foundation. Accessed on March 12, 2025, from <https://amarkfoundation.org/reports/afghanistan-war-costs/#ref-18>

Figure 12: American soldiers wounded by year

		A.	B.			B.	
		Year	Number of US Military Wounded			Number of US Military Wounded	
George W. Bush	1.	2001	33	12.	2012	2,983	Barack Obama
	2.	2002	75	13.	2013	1,369	
	3.	2003	100	14.	2014	457	
	4.	2004	218	15.	2015	79	
	5.	2005	271	16.	2016	75	17,629 US Military Wounded
	6.	2006	403	17.	2017	111	
	7.	2007	752	18.	2018	118	Donald Trump
	8.	2008	804	19.	2019	195	
2,656 US Military Wounded	9.	2009	2,167	20.	2020	15	439 US Military Wounded
	10.	2010	5,267	21.	2021	46	
	11.	2011	5,232		Total	20,770	Joe Biden
							46 US Military Wounded (as of 12/31/2021)

Source: *Afghanistan War: U.S. Deaths and Costs* - A-Mark Foundation. (Updated October 19, 2022 | Published November 21, 2021). A-Mark Foundation. Accessed on March 12, 2025, from <https://amarkfoundation.org/reports/afghanistan-war-costs/#ref-18>

The shift from large-scale U.S. involvement to Afghan lead was codified in the Afghanistan Compact, which set five-year, time-bound benchmarks in security, governance, and development (Rubin & Hamidzada, 2007). The London Afghanistan Conference (January 2010) confirmed the exit trajectory: the ANSF would progressively assume security, full transition by end-2014; Kabul pledged governance reforms and anti-corruption (commission included); partners launched a reintegration programme (UN, 2006; “Kabul Conference Communiqué,” 2010).

Held for the first time on Afghan soil under Afghan chairmanship, Kabul operationalised London’s commitments, aligning them with Obama’s revised strategy (Indurthy, 2011). Over 70 states and organisations endorsed “Afghan ownership.” Government submitted sequenced plans with performance indicators and assumed aid coordination. Participants endorsed district-by-district transfer from late 2010 toward end-2014 (Belasco, 2014; “Kabul Conference Communiqué,” 2010, pp. 27–32). The timetable was intertwined with the 2009–2010 surge as security enabler (Goldberg, 2017).

Escalation was framed as instrumental – justified only if coupled to sustainable transfer to a functioning Afghan state (Goldberg, 2017). Afghanistan was “necessary,” but U.S. engagement had to remain temporary and conditional (Indurthy, 2011; Obama, 2009). OEF shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan and from pure

counterterrorism to a hybrid with ISAF state-building (Münch, 2013), marking a pivot to phase three (“Kabul Conference Communiqué,” 2010).

Transition unfolded within both OEF and ISAF. Because U.S. resources were frequently aggregated, attribution blurred. The next section analyses how converging mandates in phase two—while ISAF attracted most resources—shaped effectiveness, legitimacy, and OEF’s assessment.

5.2.2.3. modification of orders/Various operations

From 2006 onward, OEF and NATO’s ISAF increasingly overlapped. That year ISAF expanded into southern and eastern Afghanistan, creating shared operating areas and permitting U.S. forces to serve simultaneously under OEF and ISAF (UNSC, 2003; Belkin & Morelli, 2009, p. 9; North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], 2022). By June 2007 a single U.S. general held combined command; from 2009, the ISAF commander—through USFOR-A—also commanded all U.S. troops in country (“U.S. Department of State,” 2013; McChrystal, 2010).

This convergence raised persistent command-and-policy questions. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) flagged six issues in Feickert (2006, pp. 19–20):

- 1) Is there a formal transition plan for the transfer of command to NATO?;
- 2) What will be the U.S. military role in the NATO command structure?;
- 3) How much authority will NATO wield over security/offensive operations—could it alter U.S. policy or dampen pursuit of insurgents?;
- 4) Are there credible, long-term NATO force commitments, or continued ad hoc “hat-passing”?;
- 5) Does NATO field an effective counternarcotics plan?;
- 6) What is NATO’s strategy to transition security to Afghan forces and police?

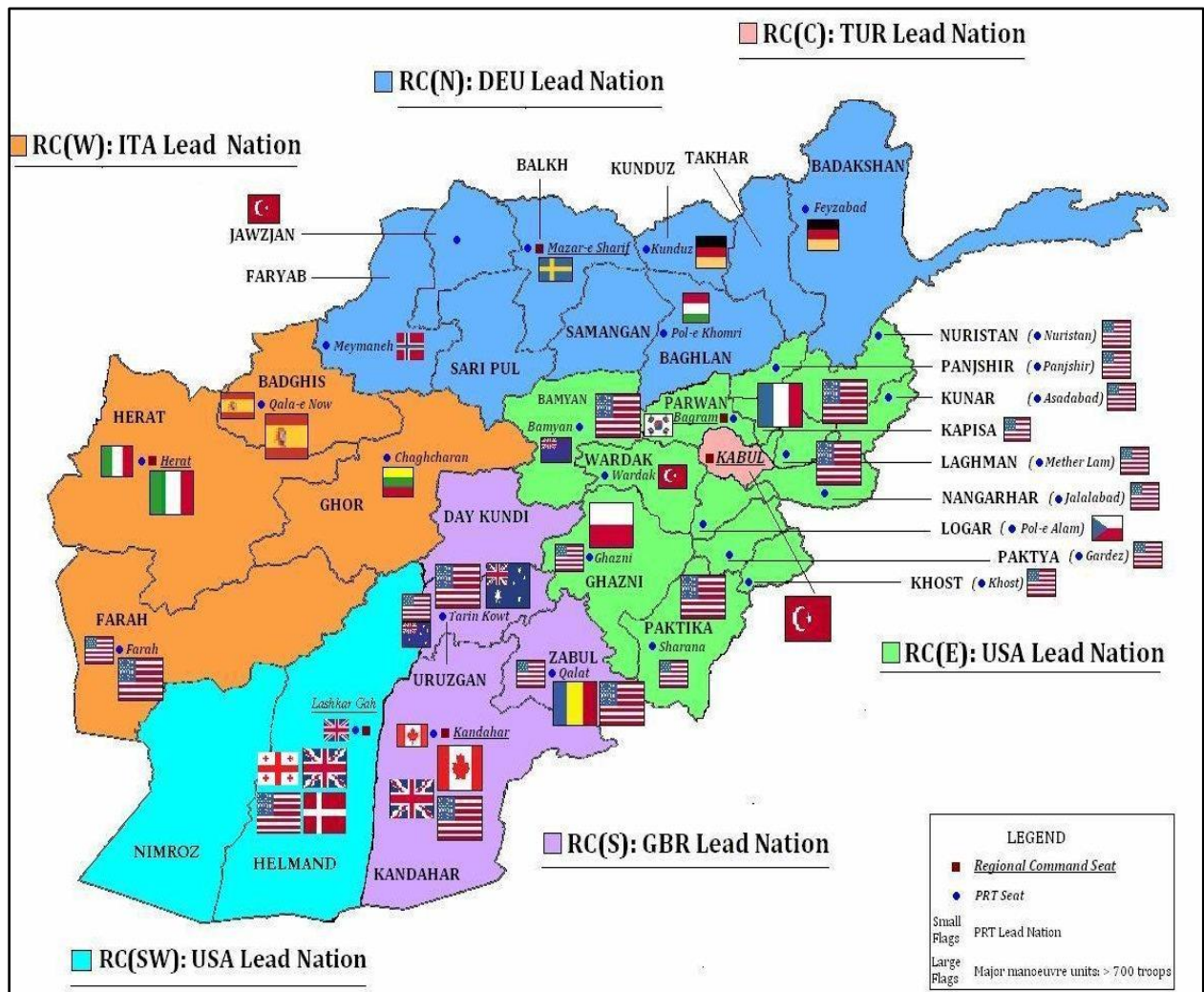
Roles also diverged institutionally. OEF remained a warfighting operation with a counterterrorism focus; ISAF emphasized counterinsurgency (COIN), stabilization, and security-sector reform (Belkin & Morelli, 2009; Dorn, 2017; NATO, 2022). UNAMA, a civilian mission, led political guidance, development, and human-rights support, using force only in self-defence (UNAMA, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Although both OEF and ISAF aimed to transfer security to Afghan authorities, friction emerged. European allies frequently imposed national caveats and avoided offensive operations, frustrating U.S. advocates of a robust COIN posture (Eikenberry . Gallis, 2007).

ISAF grew into one of NATO’s largest multinational missions—over 130,000 troops from 51 partners at its 2010 peak—becoming NATO’s first major out-of-area test of political resolve and capability (NATO, 2022). Yet disagreement persisted over ISAF’s scope—especially COIN—prompting sharper allied criticism of OEF’s broader remit (Bowman & Dale, 2010; Münch, 2021; Gallis, 2007, pp. 23–25; Chandra, 2015, pp. 102–104). Initially, COIN sat uneasily on NATO’s agenda, lacking a workable consensus (Belkin & Morelli, 2009).

Intertwined chains of command also complicated accounting. Agencies used varying definitions and methods, but by roughly 2010 most U.S. personnel operated under dual OEF/ISAF mandates (Peters, 2021). A reliable mandate-by-troop breakdown through 2014 is therefore unattainable; Campbell and Shapiro's (2009, p. 10) early attempt was not updated, reducing cross-dataset comparability (CRS; GAO; Brookings).

Meanwhile, OEF shifted toward SOF-driven kill-capture against high-value targets under JSOC—night raids and drone strikes, culminating in Bin Laden's elimination (2011)—while many Special Forces served as light infantry under conventional command, diluting UW effectiveness (Feickert, 2006; Salt, 2018; Gielas, 2024). OEF assumed the profile of a small, clandestine counterterrorism campaign; ISAF remained the visible arm through wide-area patrolling and reconstruction. Regardless of label, U.S. forces concentrated in RC-East (e.g., Paktia, Kunar; see image), while RC-South (e.g., Helmand, Kandahar) formally fell under NATO/ISAF from 31 July 2006 (Campbell & Shapiro, 2009; Belkin & Morelli, 2009).

Figure 13: ISAF Troop Distribution by Region



Source: Globalsecurity.org [Map]. https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oef_orbat_isaf_100806.htm#google_vignette. Accessed on 28 April, 2025

Within the U.S. SOF architecture, a key distinction exists between JSOC and the regular Special Forces (SF). JSOC, operating under the OEF mandate, enjoyed extensive autonomy and tight intelligence integration (Gielas, 2024). By contrast, SF—together with the CIA—were later folded into conventional commands, reducing their effectiveness and community-level flexibility.

As Gielas (2024) shows, SF faced structural constraints:

- 1) Embedded in geographic commands, they relied on conventional units for logistics, protection, and transport.
- 2) Unlike JSOC operating outside standard hierarchies, SF fell under conventional commanders, narrowing them to traditional combat roles.

- 3) Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) were chronically under-resourced and understaffed.

For clarity, an appendix summarizes OEF, ISAF, and UNAMA and delineates their differences. Amid this intensification, the 2009 presidential and 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections were marred by intimidation, fraud, and violence, producing weak representative legitimacy.

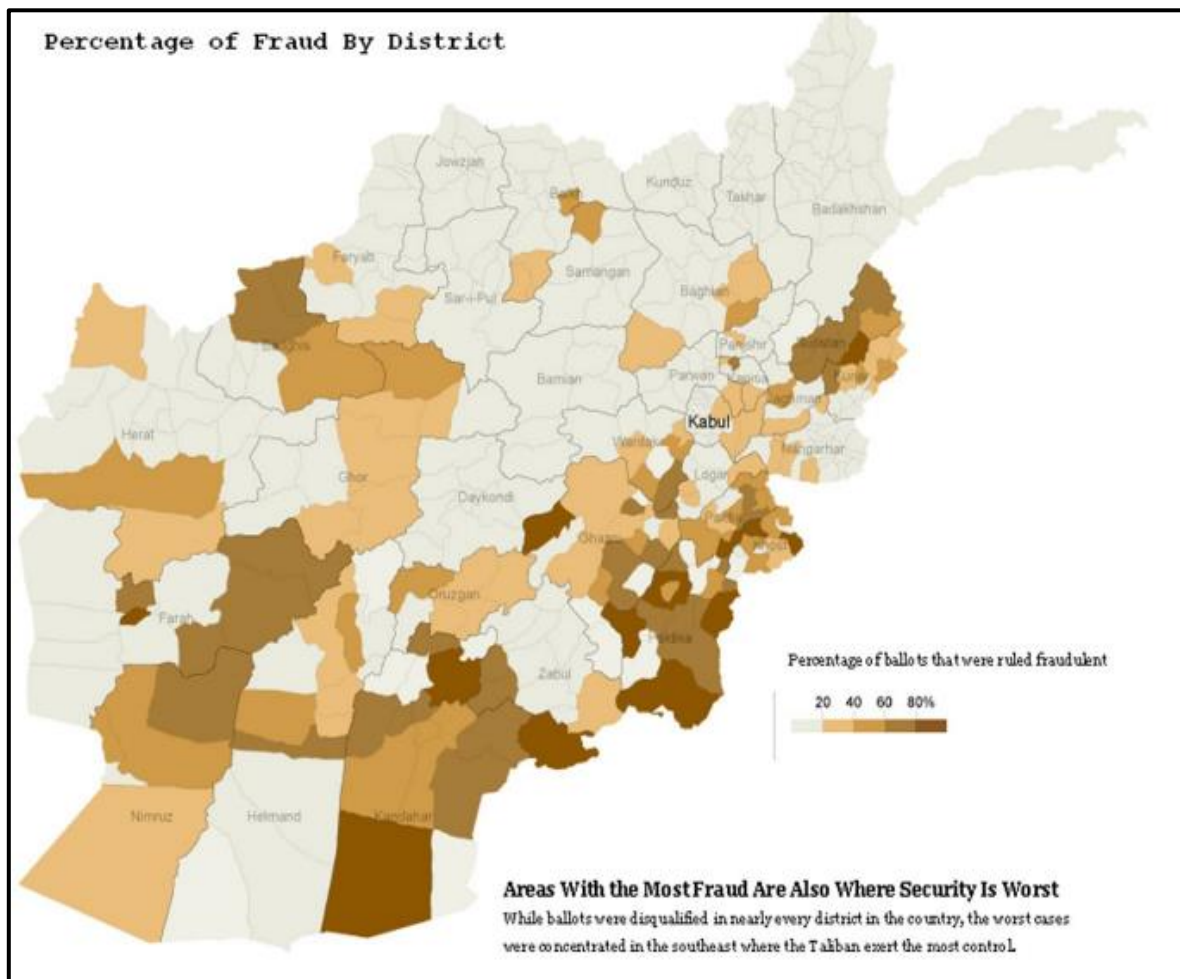
5.2.2.4. Counter-movements and elections under threat

A second political opposition surfaced in 2007 alongside the Taliban insurgency: the National Front of Afghanistan (NFA), largely composed of former Northern Alliance figures advocating deeper decentralisation (Chandra, 2015; Katzman, 2015). Heterogeneous and ultimately limited in impact, the NFA nonetheless signalled persistent tension between Kabul's central authority and regional power blocs. Karzai sought to delegitimise the Front as "illegal" and foreign-backed; simultaneously, both the government and the NFA maintained channels to the Taliban.

Amid this counter-movement and the Taliban's rise, the 20 August 2009 presidential elections unfolded under severe duress—marked by fear, fraud, and violence. Karzai secured re-election, but the opposition's failure to unite behind a single candidate—an option Humayoon (2010) judges would have increased their prospects—proved decisive. Extensive fraud was recorded, especially in Pashtun areas, and turnout was low ($\approx 45\%$) due to Taliban intimidation (Johnson, 2018a; International Republican Institute [IRI], 2010a). Humayoon (2010) further highlights Karzai's effective divide-and-rule tactics that narrowed his rivals' bases; notably, Nangarhar governor Gul Agha Sherzai withdrew. Humayoon (2010) infers a likely bargain trading political loyalty for greater regional latitude—consistent with Karzai's broader strategy of transactional compromise.

The Taliban were the principal spoilers of these—and subsequent—elections. Now far stronger, they exerted (partial to full) control over multiple districts. Independent Election Commission (IEC) staff were attacked or kidnapped, and the convoy of Karzai's running mate Fahim was targeted (France24, 2009; Reuters, 2009). Such coercion curtailed the mobility of candidates, observers, and voters, yielding tangible strategic gains for the insurgency. Johnson (2018a) additionally finds that the most consequential ballot-rigging clustered in eastern districts where Taliban authority was strongest (see Figure 14), underscoring the nexus between territorial control, intimidation, and electoral manipulation.

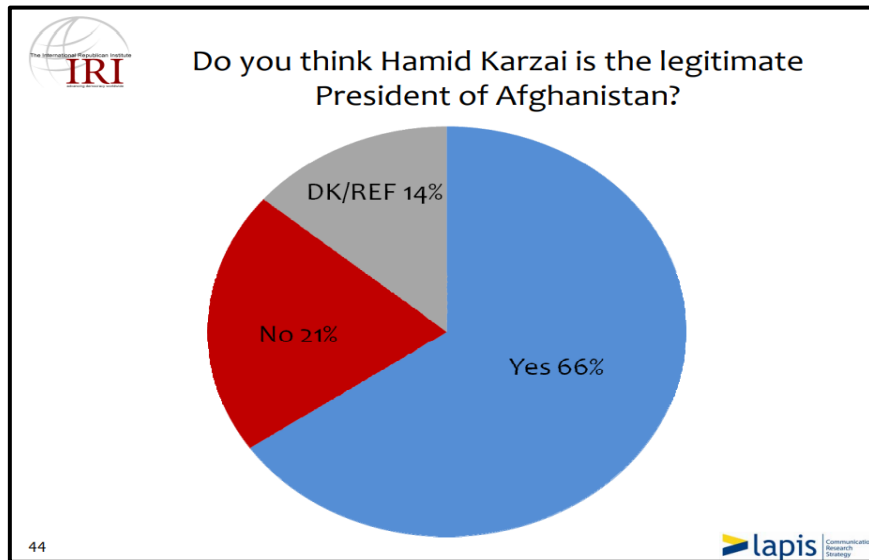
Figure 14: Voting fraud by Afghan provincial district



Source: Johnson, T. H. (2018a). The illusion of Afghanistan's electoral representative democracy: The cases of Afghan presidential and national legislative elections [Map]. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(1), 1–37. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/16d098a7-1bbc-4fd5-9c68-c1981dd4d202/content>

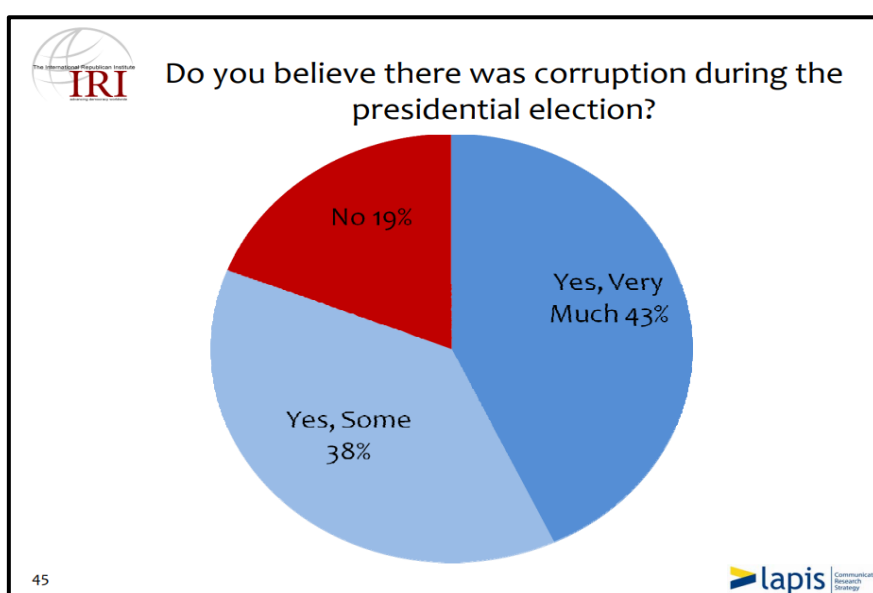
International observers concluded that, while the elections approximated democratic principles, they had serious deficiencies. The International Republican Institute (IRI) judged them inferior to the 2004–2005 polls. In its survey (2,380 respondents in 34 provinces), 35% answered negatively and 44% positively to the question, “Was the 20 August 2009 presidential election free and fair?”; 21% said “don’t know/refuse.” Among 840 respondents who explained why the polls were not proper, 71% cited fraud (International Republican Institute, 2010a). Although a majority regarded Karzai as the legitimate president, 81% believed there was at least some corruption during the elections. Consequently, combating corruption and abuse of power rose in priority for Afghan citizens after 2009.

Figure 15: Survey IRI post-2009 elections



Source: International Republican Institute. (2010, 14 January, p.44). *Afghanistan post-election survey: November 16–25, 2009*. https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/2010_January_14_IRI_Afghanistan_Survey_November_16-25_2009.pdf

Figure 16: Survey IRI post-2009 elections



Source: International Republican Institute. (2010, 14 January, p.45). *Afghanistan post-election survey: November 16–25, 2009.* https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/2010_January_14_IRI_Afghanistan_Survey_November_16-25_2009.pdf

Figure 17: priorities for civilian's post 2009-elections

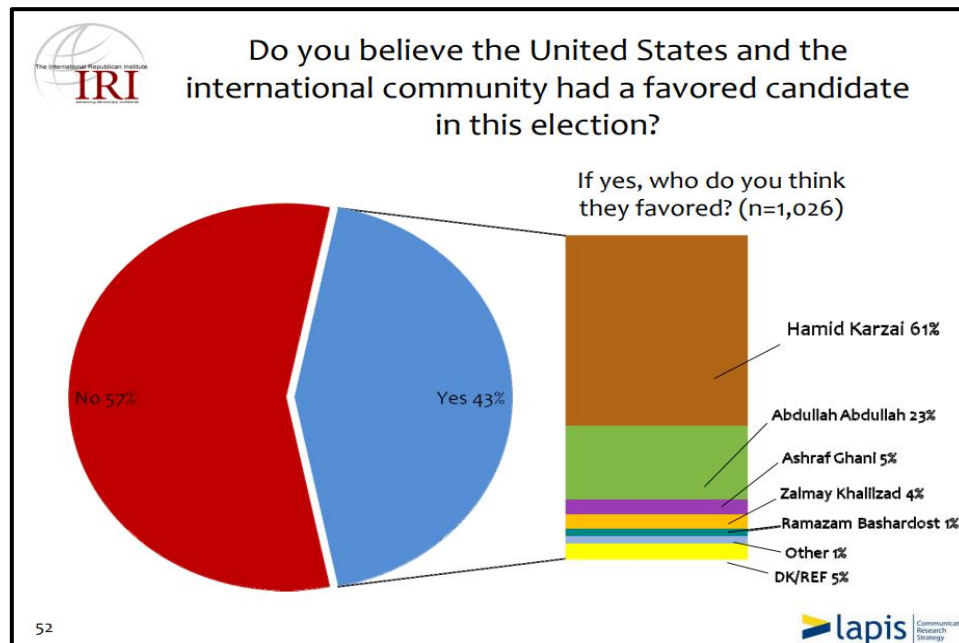
What should be the first priority of the president after the election?
(open-ended question)

First Priority	May 2009	July 2009	Nov 2009
Security	42%	30%	33%
The Economy/Unemployment/Improved Standard of Living	12%	22%	14%
Reconstruction/Development/Improving Infrastructure	7%	11%	6%
Social Assistance/Helping Citizens	7%	7%	5%
Education	4%	6%	3%
Improving Government	0%	4%	6%
Rule of Law/Peace/Justice	4%	4%	2%
Corruption/Abuse of Power	3%	4%	16%
Human Rights	3%	2%	1%
Religion/Cultural Issues	3%	2%	0%
Terrorism/Ending Internal Violence	5%	2%	1%
International Relations	2%	1%	1%
Other	5%	3%	0%
DK/REF	3%	3%	1%

Source: International Republican Institute. (2010, 14 January, p.51). *Afghanistan post-election survey: November 16–25, 2009.* https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/2010_January_14_IRI_Afghanistan_Survey_November_16-25_2009.pdf

The survey not only highlights these shortcomings, but also, for example, the flaws of the IEC as not being independent. American involvement in these elections did not go unnoticed either (IRI, 2010, p.51).

Figure 18: US-involvement during Afghan 2009 presidential elections



Source: International Republican Institute. (2010, 14 January, p.51). *Afghanistan post-election survey: November 16–25, 2009.* https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/2010_January_14_IRI_Afghanistan_Survey_November_16-25_2009.pdf

Various international observer organisations reported suspicious voting behaviour. The EU Election Observation Missions (EU EOM) – under the authority of the European External Action Service (EEAS) – concluded (p. 44): ‘This phase of the electoral process was completely dominated by mounting evidence of significant fraud across the country, particularly in the south and south-east [...] overwhelmingly in favour of candidate Karzai [...] to encourage voters to accept in small doses a result that in one large dose would have been rejected as clearly fraudulent.’

It also criticised the IEC for being non-transparent and inconsistent with figures on the number of polling stations open, valid and invalid votes (EEAS, 2010). Due to the suspicious results, an audit was conducted, which revealed clear shifts in the election results (Johnson, 2018a, p.7).

Figure 19: Uncertified and certified presidential votes 2009

Candidate	September 16 uncertified votes (%)	October 21 certified votes (%)
Hamid Karzai	3,093,256 (54.6)	2,283,907 (49.67)
Abdullah Abdullah	1,571,581 (27.8)	1,406,242 (30.59)
Ramazan Bashedost	520,627 (9.2)	481,072 (10.46)
Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai	149,720 (2.7)	135,106 (2.9)
Total	5,662,758	4,823,090

Source: Johnson, T. H. (2018b, p. 1011). The myth of Afghan electoral democracy: The irregularities of the 2014 presidential election. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(5-6), 1006-1039. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/35dd6209-56df-4b0a-948f-7ae29a06a414/content>

Following an audit, roughly 1.3 million votes were invalidated. Abdullah Abdullah withdrew before the run-off, after which Hamid Karzai was declared winner without a second round. Many Afghans deemed the outcome illegitimate and associated it with corruption. In response, the EU EOM, NDI, and IRI recommended for the 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections:

- 1) Encourage party development, clarifying and simplifying party registration, given most candidates ran as independents.
- 2) Draft a new Electoral Law after 2010, reconsidering SNTV in favour of a more proportional system to safeguard minority representation.
- 3) Strengthen judicial independence, particularly the Supreme Court, and reinforce the legal framework.

Humayoon (2010) characterizes the 2009 presidential elections by institutional fragility, manipulation, foreign pressure, and a deficient legal–procedural architecture. Discourse analyses indicate strategic ethno-religious mobilization by both candidates; Karzai cast himself as the face of progress and unity while negatively framing Abdullah’s “Jihadi” network (Sharan & Heathershaw, 2011; Mobasher, 2015). This identity-based patronage politics persisted through the 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections, reflecting post-Bonn fragmentation (Mobasher, 2015).

For the 2010 parliamentary elections, local voters prioritized access to resources via patronage over fraud, transparency, or procedural legitimacy (Coburn, 2010; Sharan & Heathershaw, 2011). Political–economic relations were embedded in social networks, and limited access to politicians was the principal grievance (Coburn, 2010, pp. 3–6). Mobasher (2015) finds: (1) voters favour co-ethnic candidates; (2) cross-ethnic voting occurs mainly when no co-ethnic runs; (3) cross-ethnic blocs trade votes for patronage; (4) elites privilege ethnic mobilization, legal manipulation, and deal-making over substantive platforms.

Despite prior recommendations, 2010 reproduced similar flaws. Democracy International (2010, p. 34) audited 120 polling centers, finding numerous tabulation errors; in the 20 October results, ~10% of station

forms were missing or illegible. Johnson (2018a, p. 22) concludes Afghan elections suffer deep structural problems that erode regime credibility. SNTV remained unreformed, reinforcing a negative trajectory. Coburn & Larson (2011) add that the 2010 elections widened the citizen–state gap: Afghans desire representation, yet under insecurity, contests incentivize power grabs, fraud, and violence—underscoring the urgency of electoral and institutional reform.

5.2.2.5. End of second phase

The end of phase two (after the 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections) exposed the limits of a technocratic approach to state-building: institutional and security construction took precedence, while deeply rooted social and political relations were neglected (Münch, 2013, pp. 68–69). The personalization around Karzai—chosen for his non-partisan profile—and an electoral law that discouraged party formation entrenched fragmentation (Humayoon, 2010). Local power structures remained intact: warlords became police chiefs or district leaders, forces were integrated into the ANA/ANP, commanders obtained resources through companies, and appointment rules were circumvented—hence state-building is not a technical but a relational, power-laden process (Münch, 2013). The 2010 elections, marked by low turnout, fraud, and intimidation, undermined legitimacy and strengthened an arena of elite rivalry rather than inclusive representation (Sharan & Heathershaw, 2011). Karzai’s cabinet politics illustrated patronage and exchange (Sharan, 2013), while elections served to renegotiate conflicts rather than to create broad accountability (Coburn, 2010; Mobasher, 2015). Consequently, tangible results in state-building and stabilization failed to materialize; under Obama the focus shifted from large-scale COIN to targeted counterterrorism operations and preparations for transfer and drawdown (third phase of OEF).

5.2.3. The third phase (2011–2014)

The third phase following the September 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections was marked by a strategic reorientation within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom. Whereas earlier years had focused on state-building, electoral support, and broad counterinsurgency efforts, from 2010 onward the U.S. gradually shifted its emphasis toward drawdown and exit strategy. The killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 symbolized a pivotal milestone in the fight against jihadist terrorism and provided President Obama with political latitude to de-escalate the conflict. Under mounting domestic pressure and in line with his electoral pledges, Obama pursued accelerated troop reductions and a gradual transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) (Goldberg, 2017; Indurthy, 2011; Marsh, 2014). This transition unfolded amid persistent instability and doubts regarding Afghan institutional capacity, yet the principle of “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” security was upheld. The period culminated in the formal end of OEF on 28 December 2014, symbolically closing over a decade of military engagement under the banner of counterterrorism and regime support (Miller & Torreon, 2024).

The following analysis examines this final phase of OEF through five key moments: the course of the U.S. troop drawdown and the expanded role of special forces and targeted killings; the symbolic impact of the deaths of bin Laden and Mullah Omar; the strengthening and limits of the ANSF; the Afghan elections; and the gradual dismantling of OEF.

5.2.3.1. U.S. Troop Drawdown and the Increased Role of Special Forces and Targeted Killings

Following the initial phase of Obama's surge, the final element was executed: a drawdown tied to transitioning from OEF and ending the war "responsibly." After troop levels peaked near 100,000, Obama announced on 22 June 2011 that withdrawals would begin, pledging removal of the 33,000 surge troops by summer 2012 and a full transition by 2014 with the ANSF securing the country (National Guard Bureau, n.d.; Obama, 2011; Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015; Soherwordi, 2012). Numbers fell below 40,000 in 2014, but a complete withdrawal never occurred (Belasco, 2014, p. 9). Although internationally welcomed, the drawdown risked destabilizing Pakistan and Afghanistan: cross-border Taliban–Al-Qaeda threats persisted along the Pashtun belt (Akbar, 2015; Soherwordi, 2012; Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015, pp. 11–16).

Afghanistan then confronted formidable postwar tasks. Dialogue with the Taliban became unavoidable; despite vast resources, the United States never achieved full control (Blackwill, 2011). Political pressure, operational strain, and the cost of sustaining 100,000 troops drove the withdrawal. Former anti-Soviet factions turned against Washington; Akbar (2015) argues the United States exited as a perceived loser. Reconciliation and building a reliable government remained essential yet were constrained by distrust (Akbar, 2015; Soherwordi, 2012). Resource allocation skewed toward the military—nearly the entire \$300 billion—leaving education and health underfunded, while cultural and linguistic gaps limited effectiveness (Akbar, 2015; Blackwill, 2011, p. 42). Cortright (2015) urges fewer troops and greater diplomacy and development.

The drawdown created openings for Taliban and Al-Qaeda, especially in the east and south (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015; Majidyar, 2012), a danger realized in 2021. A hasty exit risked repeating 1989's civil-war pattern; an indefinite presence without economic progress was equally untenable (Abshire & Browne, 2011; Cortright, 2015). Abshire and Browne (2011), citing Kissinger, propose internationally guaranteed Afghan neutrality, coupled with investment, to incentivize respect for sovereignty and reduce Indo-Pakistani tensions.

A key milestone was NATO's transition from combat to support. At Lisbon (2010), allies agreed the ANSF would assume full security by late 2014; by June 2013, ANSF led all combat while ISAF shifted to "train, advise, assist" (The White House, 2014). Yet Afghanistan's economy remained aid-dependent (>70% of the 2009–2010 budget), with corruption, weak employment, limited taxation, misaligned

megaprojects, and a persistent narcotics sector (Abshire & Browne, 2011; Byrne, 2004; Stepanova, 2012). As conventional numbers fell, reliance on SOF and kill/capture accelerated, leaning on drones; Bachmann (2013, pp. 286–288) and Salt (2018) warn prolonged, weakly regulated use risks legal and moral erosion. Evidence on targeted killing is mixed: some deterrent effects remain contested (Carson, 2017; Fischer & Becker, 2021; Hepworth, 2014). Operation Neptune Spear (2 May 2011) delivered symbolic success by killing Osama bin Laden, without ending Al-Qaeda (Smit-Keding, 2015).

5.2.3.2. *The symbolic death Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar*

From the outset of OEF, removing the Taliban regime and dismantling Al-Qaeda were core priorities. Although targeted killings gained salience later, eliminating Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden remained a constant objective to disrupt both organizations and enable a Western-oriented Afghan polity.

Operation Neptune Spear projected global reach and deterrent capacity (CRS, 2011, p. 3). Setting legal debates aside, bin Laden's death carried major symbolic weight as the architect of 9/11. CRS (2011, pp. 4–6) argues it likely fractured Al-Qaeda's core, weakened cohesion with affiliates, and dampened recruitment, even as increasingly autonomous regional branches became harder to counter. Fischer and Becker (2021) identify three possible effects of high-value leadership removal: 1) Conflict escalation 2) Erosion of sovereign legitimacy and 3) Deterrence signaling .

The deterrent signal largely failed: transnational jihadist terrorism persisted (Carson, 2017). While it is unknowable whether more attacks would have occurred otherwise, reducing terrorism was not the sole aim; the action also served domestic political objectives (Carson, 2017, pp. 213–214). CRS (2011, pp. 13–14) stresses that bin Laden's death by itself did not advance U.S. strategic goals in Afghanistan, which hinged on durable security and effective governance, though it could justify gradual—rather than destabilizing—troop reductions.

Assessments of Al-Qaeda's post-bin Laden threat diverge (Jenkins, 2011). Ideological reach endured as ISIL, emerging under Zarqawi, split off as a more radical successor (Holbrook, 2015). Arosoaie (2015) highlights three differences:

- 1) Objective of jihad: ISIL seeks to seize power; Al-Qaeda seeks to weaken enemies.
- 2) Target focus: Al-Qaeda prioritizes the “far enemy”; ISIL focuses on the “near enemy.”
- 3) Strategy: Al-Qaeda applies caution; ISIL employs violence and apocalyptic rhetoric

Bin Laden's death arguably accelerated Al-Qaeda's geographic dispersion, particularly in Africa and Yemen (Fitzpatrick, 2019) (see Figure 20). Al-Qaeda now operates as a loose network of autonomous affiliates, embedding within local insurgencies. Although another 9/11-scale attack is less likely, smaller-scale violence remains probable (Jenkins, 2011, p.3). Prolonged instability in fragile states like Afghanistan ensures the persistence of extremist violence (Jenkins, 2011; Fischer & Becker, 2021). Jenkins (2021) concludes that this

is an enduring conflict without decisive victory, requiring a more realistic and sustainable U.S. strategy (Jenkins, 2011).

Figure 20: Al-Qaeda and affiliations locations



Source: Council on Foreign Relations. (2018, March 6). *Selected locations where al-Qaeda and its affiliates operate* [Map]. In B. Hoffman, *Al-Qaeda's resurrection*. Based on CFR research of open-source material. Accessed on March 19, 2025, from <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

The killing of bin Laden also illustrates the structural vulnerabilities of militant organizations dependent on key leaders (Fischer & Becker, 2021; Wilner, 2010). In contrast, Mullah Omar's 2013 death from illness (BBC News, 2015) was concealed for two years, disrupting peace talks and intensifying internal Taliban rivalries (Akbar, 2015). This fragmentation coincided with ISIL's rise, undermining negotiations and increasing intra-jihadist competition, which further threatened Afghanistan's stability.

Byrne et al. (2015) note that the Taliban's secrecy sought to preserve unity, but the resulting militant fragmentation enabled new extremist factions to emerge, echoing the post-Soviet civil war period. Although bin Laden's death in 2011 was hailed by some as a symbolic endpoint, Soherwordi (2012, pp.131–132) warns against such interpretation. U.S. officials quickly clarified that the broader "war on terror" persisted, highlighting strategic threats beyond one leader. Soherwordi identifies two key failures post-bin Laden: (1) the inability to defeat the Taliban militarily despite superiority, and (2) the political failure to create an inclusive peace strategy aligned with shifting ground realities. Fischer and Becker (2021) further argue that bin Laden's death marked a qualitative shift in terrorism, with a measurable rise in attacks by Al-

Qaeda affiliates in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria—suggesting that the intended deterrent effect instead intensified violence. Understanding deterrence thus requires attention to the evolving geographic spread of the threat.

5.2.3.3. Strengthening and Limitations of the ANSF

Due to the drawdown, the ANSF and related security bodies—after years of international training—were expected to operate autonomously. Their quality, however, remained doubtful. Effective forces require education, training, experience, and demonstrated effectiveness; Afghanistan was underdeveloped on all four, with illiteracy around 72% (Gingrich et al., 2011). Cordesman et al. (2010) therefore argue that quality must trump quantity in ANSF development. Yet, as U.S. troops withdrew, the assumption that the ANSF could secure the country proved untenable; deficits in experience, training, and performance persisted (Cordesman et al., 2010; Soherwordi, 2012). Withdrawal simultaneously strengthened the Taliban's bargaining leverage, while poor governance, corruption, and the Karzai administration's weak legitimacy compounded risks. Washington even removed select Taliban leaders from U.N. sanctions to spur talks. Survey evidence indicated fragility: once foreign forces left, 65% of respondents feared civil war and anticipated ANSF fragmentation, including coup risks by senior ANA leadership (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015, p. 8).

Although full transfer of responsibility was slated for end-2014, the pace of handover and the post-2014 foreign presence remained unclear (Abshire & Browne, 2011). The United States financed the bulk of ANSF costs—\$11.2 billion in 2012 (Jaffe, 2012). Via the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan and the U.S.-led Transition Command, thousands were trained, new units raised, and combat capabilities expanded (NATO, 2009c). Policy emphasized growth in numbers while trying—often unsuccessfully—to lift quality (Cordesman et al., 2010).

Structural limitations endured. Given Afghanistan's weak economy, ANSF sustainability depended on external funding. Rapid expansion degraded standards: minimally trained recruits deployed, and widespread illiteracy obstructed logistics and intelligence (Cordesman & Mausner, 2009; Gingrich et al., 2011). Training requires time, capacity, and competence—each scarce. A 2014 Centre for Security Governance eSeminar (p. 10) doubted the ANSF's survivability as Western attention and funding waned, leaving them to confront an emboldened Taliban largely alone. Endemic corruption and weak leadership further eroded discipline and effectiveness (Felbab-Brown, 2012).

These shortcomings—of a force not yet prepared to secure the state—contributed to highly contentious 2014 presidential elections and the postponement of the 2015 Wolesi Jirga elections.

5.2.3.4. 2014 Elections

Following the withdrawal of international forces, the 2014 presidential and planned 2015 Wolesi Jirga elections—organized for the first time under ANSF responsibility—became a crucial test of Afghanistan's democratization. The presidential contest was pivotal for a peaceful transfer after twelve years of Karzai.

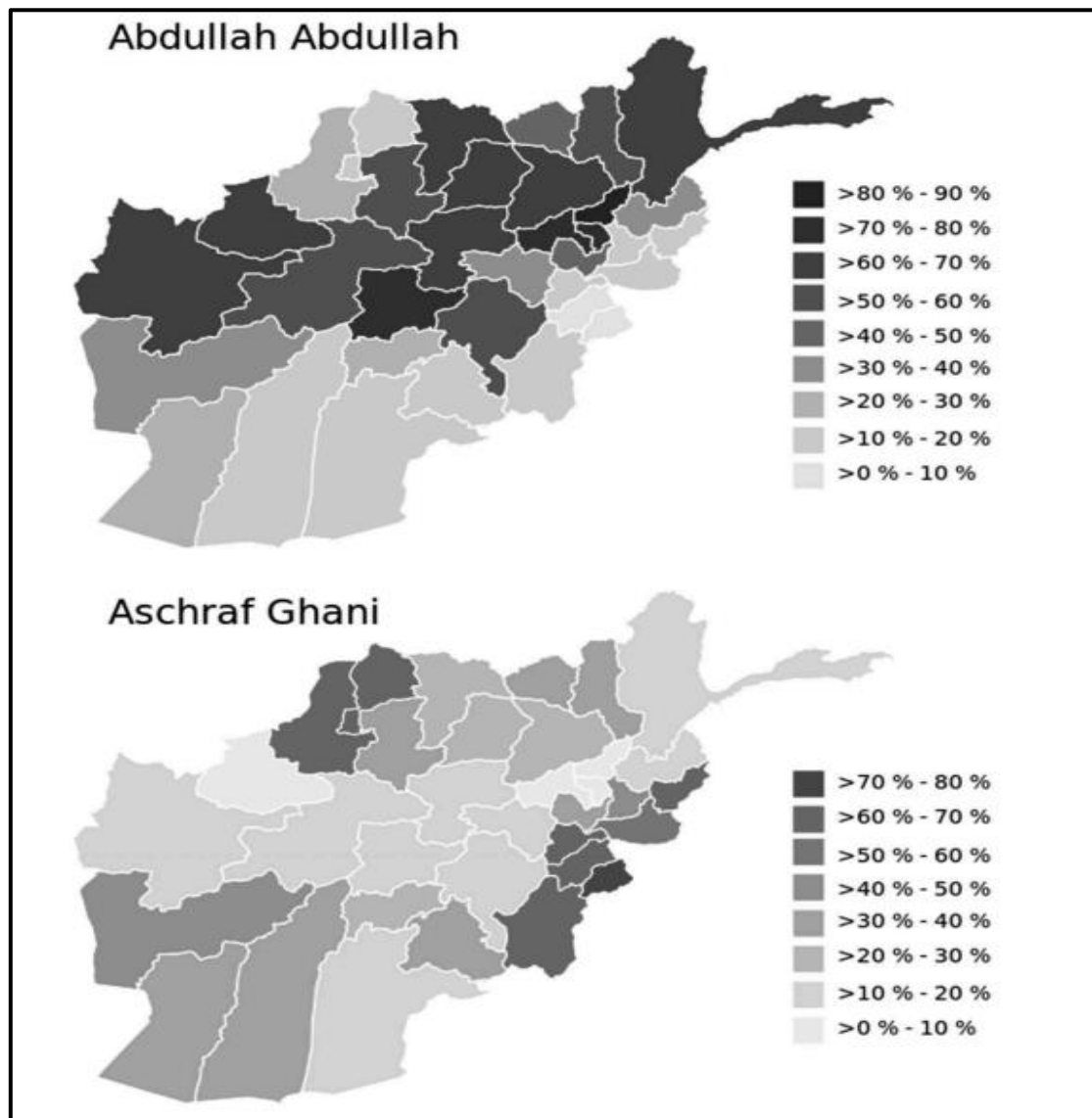
With no absolute majority, a runoff pitted Ashraf Ghani against Abdullah Abdullah. The second round drew widespread fraud allegations, especially in Taliban-held areas. Preliminary results unexpectedly put Ghani ahead (55% vs. 45%); Abdullah disputed the tally and threatened a parallel administration, risking ethnopolitical polarization (Sharan & Bose, 2016).

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a UN-supervised audit that invalidated roughly 850,000 ballots. The recount confirmed Ghani's victory (56.44% vs. 43.56%). To avoid institutional breakdown, a National Unity Government (NUG) was formed: Ghani as president, Abdullah as Chief Executive Officer, with an even division of key portfolios (Reuters, 2016).

Johnson (2018b) contests the election's credibility, documenting major round-to-round irregularities: despite Abdullah's initial lead and endorsements, swing votes shifted almost entirely to Ghani, with hundreds of stations reporting 100% Ghani ballots—patterns consistent with large-scale fraud and eroding democratic legitimacy (Coburn, 2015; Democracy International, 2015).

Johnson's provincial-level data show Abdullah's round-one dominance (Figure 21) and the improbable round-two surge for Ghani (Figure 22), with statistically unlikely turnout spikes. The United States could not reverse the fraud and instead brokered the NUG, tacitly acknowledging manipulation to avert violence (Johnson, 2018b; Sharan & Bose, 2016, pp. 621–623). He argues that annulling results, appointing an interim government, and holding new, internationally supervised elections would have been preferable, though difficult.

Figure 21: presidential election results first round



Source: Johnson, T. H. (2018b, p. 1016). The myth of Afghan electoral democracy: The irregularities of the 2014 presidential election [MAP]. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(5-6), 1006-1039.
<https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/35dd6209-56df-4b0a-948f-7ae29a06a414/content>

Figure 22: 2014 June Runoff presidential election results by province

Province	Dr. Abdullah		Dr. Ashraf Ghani		Margin (#)	Margin (%)
	Votes	Percentage	Votes	Percentage		
Totals	3,461,639	43.56%	4,485,888	56.44%	-1,024,249	-12.89%
Badakhshan	247,637	79.32%	64,578	20.68%	183,059	58.63%
Badghis	88,650	65.50%	46,702	34.50%	41,948	30.99%
Baghlan	212,223	55.19%	172,317	44.81%	39,906	10.38%
Balkh	224,506	63.11%	131,259	36.89%	93,247	26.21%
Bamyan	126,570	75.64%	40,758	24.36%	85,812	51.28%
Daykundi	136,779	77.49%	39,743	22.51%	97,036	54.97%
Farah	40,133	53.24%	35,252	46.76%	4,881	6.47%
Faryab	113,228	34.20%	217,895	65.80%	-104,667	-31.61%
Ghazni	181,791	58.47%	129,146	41.53%	52,645	16.93%
Ghor	238,303	72.48%	90,491	27.52%	147,812	44.96%
Helmand	18,083	30.64%	40,943	69.36%	-22,860	-38.73%
Herat	325,843	63.65%	186,118	36.35%	139,725	27.29%
Jawzjan	25,179	19.35%	104,957	80.65%	-79,778	-61.30%
Kabul	422,269	48.17%	454,296	51.83%	-32,027	-3.65%
Kandahar	51,186	15.99%	268,946	84.01%	-217,760	-68.02%
Kapisa	74,364	87.36%	10,756	12.64%	63,608	74.73%
Khost	11,628	2.91%	388,532	97.09%	-376,904	-94.19%
Kunar	25,521	12.03%	186,697	87.97%	-161,176	-75.95%
Kunduz	81,375	42.36%	110,742	57.64%	-29,367	-15.29%
Laghman	16,986	14.21%	102,556	85.79%	-85,570	-71.58%
Logar	8,722	9.15%	86,567	90.85%	-77,845	-81.69%
Nangarhar	91,738	22.37%	318,348	77.63%	-226,610	-55.26%
Nimroz	10,970	34.67%	20,668	65.33%	-9,698	-30.65%
Nooristan	57,193	70.68%	23,722	29.32%	33,471	41.37%
Paktika	47,389	11.71%	357,173	88.29%	-309,784	-76.57%
Paktya	26,960	8.06%	307,445	91.94%	-280,485	-83.88%
Panjshir	60,214	93.65%	4,085	6.35%	56,129	87.29%
Parwan	124,287	86.11%	20,044	13.89%	104,243	72.22%
Samangan	89,141	63.17%	51,962	36.83%	37,179	26.35%
Sar-e-pul	62,117	46.72%	70,830	53.28%	-8,713	-6.55%
Takhar	160,218	52.21%	146,648	47.79%	13,570	4.42%
Urozgan	6,709	32.52%	13,922	67.48%	-7,213	-34.96%
Wardak	49,281	20.91%	186,382	79.09%	-137,101	-58.18%
Zabul	4,446	7.43%	55,408	92.57%	-50,962	-85.14%

Source: Johnson, T. H. (2018b, p. 1018). The myth of Afghan electoral democracy: The irregularities of the 2014 presidential election. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(5-6), 1006-1039. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/35dd6209-56df-4b0a-948f-7ae29a06a414/content>

Linking the 2004 and 2009 contests, Johnson argues that elite-driven outcomes persisted. He faults the Bonn Agreement for installing governance amid conflict and cultural heterogeneity, rendering elections ritualized and ethno-segmented; proposed remedies—electoral reform, party strengthening, a census, staff training—remained largely unrealized (Coburn, 2015). Sharan and Bose (2016) depict Afghan politics as “network politics,” with rising pre-electoral loyalty prices and enduring intra-camp rivalries. Coburn (2015) likewise questions the Loya Jirga’s representativity given presidential control of invitations. As foreign forces withdrew, the UN, they contend, should have engaged all Afghan actors more assertively.

Ethnic polarization resurfaced: Ghani favored technocratic Pashtuns, yet only 9 of 26 ministers were approved, echoing Karzai-era executive–legislative tensions (Coburn, 2015; Sharan & Bose, 2016). Abdullah’s picks likewise signalled ethnic preference; Ghani vetoed his Panjshiri-Tajik ex-mujahideen

nominee for Interior. Last-minute bargains typified fragile-state elite pacts, producing institutional frictions that eroded NUG legitimacy and impeded crisis response (Kunduz, Helmand, youth unemployment). Democracy International (2015) notes two core NUG provisions—the CEO post and a constitutional Loya Jirga within two years—were ill-defined or unmet, underscoring bargaining rather than democratic transfer and renewing calls for reform. Byrd (2015) posits five election functions in fragile states: international legitimation, authoritarian legitimation, elite consensus, testing vote banks, and substituting for violence. Where coalitions shift, one-off high-stakes polls heighten instability; stability follows repeated peaceful transfers. Elections alone cannot secure reform or development. The 2014 race sought to displace Karzai’s allies; weak programmatic parties, minimal policy differentiation, and ethnic mobilization signaled contests over distribution, not policy vision (Byrd, 2015; Coburn, 2015; Sharan & Bose, 2016). The delayed Wolesi Jirga elections (to 2018) further illustrate limited democratization beyond OEF’s timeline.

5.2.3.5. The end of OEF

With the conclusion of the 2014 presidential elections, OEF formally ended and security authority transferred to Afghan institutions. Johnson (2018a, 2018b) cautions that democratic consolidation hinges on cultivating a shared national identity, bridging ethno-religious cleavages, and building transparent, inclusive institutions. Yet ordinary Afghans largely disengage from national politics, prioritising limits on central interference in local affairs. This enduring scepticism toward Kabul has enabled customary governance to persist and delayed institutional transformation. Preserving electoral democracy therefore requires strategies that accommodate traditional social orders while addressing entrenched corruption and fraud; without such alignment, incentives to support national institutions remain weak.

Despite repeated democratisation initiatives, Soherwordi (2012) argues the project faltered under the intervention’s complexity and an absence of long-term strategic design—conditions inimical to counterinsurgency and state-building. Early domestic and international backing eroded as costs and casualties mounted, intensifying pressure for withdrawal. Afghanistan, he contends, will not evolve into a Western-style democracy; political orders will be determined by Afghans, not external templates. Imposing democracy exogenously without local consent is infeasible (Biscop, 2021, pp. 159–162). U.S. interests accordingly narrowed to preventing Afghanistan’s re-emergence as a terrorist sanctuary (Akbar, 2015; Soherwordi, 2012).

To retain a limited footprint, Washington sought a legal anchor. After President Ghani’s inauguration, the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) was signed—long resisted by Karzai—authorising a follow-on mission focused on training, advising, and assisting the ANSF, alongside counterterrorism against Al-Qaeda and later IS. Notably, BSA Article 13 stipulates U.S. personnel fall under U.S., not Afghan, jurisdiction (“U.S. Department of State,” 2014). OEF ended on 28 December 2014 and was succeeded by Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (2015–2021); the chaotic 2021 exit facilitated the Taliban’s swift return. Operation Enduring

Sentinel (2021–present) continues with residual force protection and over-the-horizon counterterrorism.

Table 1 summarises key differences.

Table 1: Overview of characteristics of various operations in Afghanistan

Phase	OEF	OFS	OES (2021–present)
Objective	Eliminate Taliban, build democracy + stability	Train Afghans, counterterrorism	Post-intervention
Military presence	Large troop deployment	Limited troop deployment	Counterterrorism without troops
Operational focus	Combat operations, occupation	Training, advising, limited combat situations	No troops in Afghanistan
Afghan influence	Predominantly U.S. control	Handover to Afghan government	Intelligence, drone strikes
Phase	Invasion & occupation	Transition & withdrawal	Taliban in control

5.3. Criteria military operations

After extensively examining the various phases of military operations, this study cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of success or failure. Military interventions are usually situated on a continuum, with success depending on diverse, often context-specific factors. A nuanced evaluation therefore requires a multidimensional approach based on coherent and theoretically sound criteria. This section discusses various scientific approaches with a view to a balanced and analytically sound selection.

Furthermore, assessing success is time-bound. Classical thinkers such as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Jomini, Clausewitz and Liddell Hart offered valuable insights, but their models are insufficiently tailored to the complexity of contemporary operations (Jackman, 2009). Theoretical frameworks evolve, as do military strategies.

This study ultimately applies Rodt's (2011) four criteria for success, which will be explained in the first part. This is followed by a critical discussion of alternative approaches. The final selection of Rodt's criteria and the reasons why other approaches were not further elaborated are further substantiated within the research design.

5.3.1. Rodt

Rodt's research provides a systematic evaluation and creates a theoretical framework for successes in EU military conflict management operations. Although the model was developed within the European framework, it can be applied to US operations in Afghanistan, provided contextual adjustments are made.

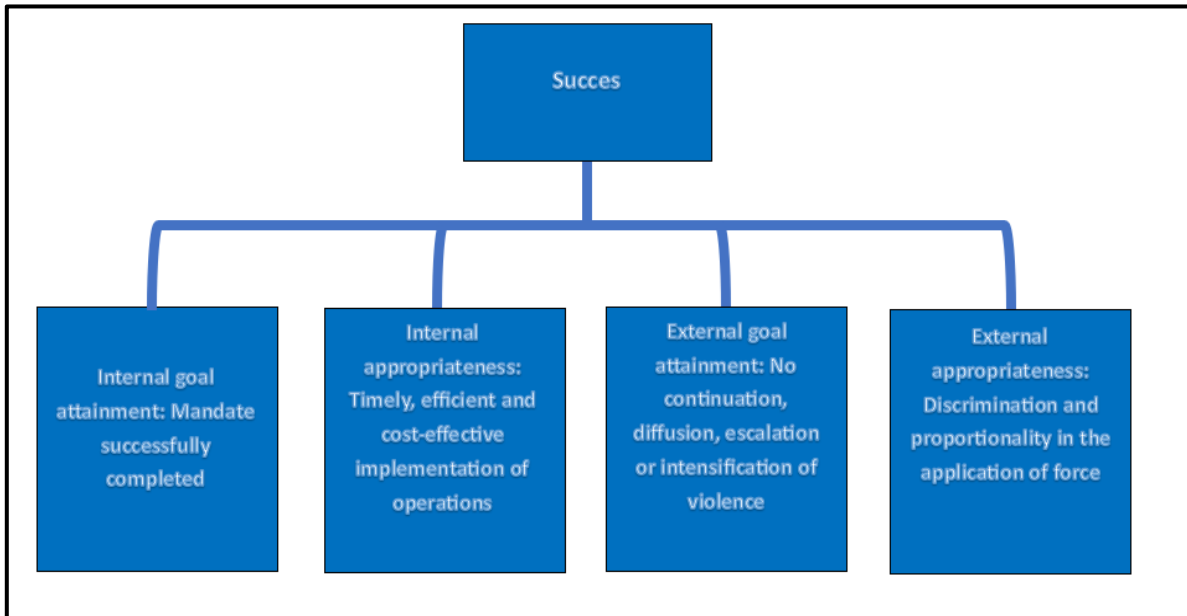
Rodt makes a fundamental distinction between the internal and external perspectives when assessing military operations. This distinction concerns the starting point from which success is analysed. The internal perspective focuses on the effectiveness of the operation in relation to the objectives of the actor carrying out the operation (the United States). The external perspective focuses on the impact of the operation on the conflict itself and on Afghan society at large, regardless of the strategic interests of the actor.

Both perspectives are further subdivided into goal attainment and appropriateness. With goal attainment, Rodt looks at whether the operation achieved its goal, and with appropriateness, he looks at the way in which the operation attempted to achieve its goal. This research will be assessed on the basis of these four criteria. According to Rodt, only when all four criteria are met can an operation be considered a successful military operation. The criteria are as follows:

- 1) Internal goal attainment: To what extent have the core objectives from the original mandate been achieved?
- 2) Internal appropriateness: Assessed based on timeliness, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of implementation.

- 3) External goal attainment: Evaluates whether the operation succeeded in preventing further escalation, spread or intensification of the conflict.
- 4) External appropriateness: Assesses the proportionality of the force used and the distinction made between combatants and civilians.

Figure 22: Success Military Conflict-Management Operations



Source: Rodt, A. P. (2011, p.42). Taking stock of EU military conflict management. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 7(1).

Internal goal attainment evaluates the extent to which a military operation has achieved its predefined political and strategic objectives within the set timeframe. Applied to OEF, this implies an assessment of the effectiveness with which the central objectives – such as ousting the Taliban regime and dismantling Al-Qaeda networks in Afghanistan – have been achieved. Internal appropriateness assesses the manner in which the operation was carried out, focusing on parameters such as efficiency and timeliness. This component therefore goes beyond mere goal achievement: it analyses the operational processes, including the deployment of military resources, strategic leadership, logistical coordination, and the degree of civil-military cooperation during the execution of OEF.

External goal attainment assesses whether the military intervention has contributed to reducing violence, preventing further escalation and stabilising the region. Given that OEF explicitly aims at a broader strategy of conflict management and state-building, this criterion is an essential part of the analysis. Finally, external appropriateness assesses the proportionality and legitimacy of the operation. In this dimension, the central question is to what extent the military action sufficiently respected the distinction between combatants and civilians and whether OEF was proportionate as a military

response to the 9/11 attacks. This dimension is of fundamental importance in terms of humanitarian law, moral legitimacy and international credibility.

This four-pronged approach makes it possible to analyse military operations not only in terms of outcome, but also in terms of execution and ethics. This provides a broader and more nuanced picture of the military operation and encompasses both actor- and goal-specific perspectives on success.

5.3.2. Other researchers

5.3.2.1. *Brooks*

Although Rodt's model is central to this study, there are other relevant theoretical frameworks. Brooks (2023), for example, emphasises military effectiveness as the ability of a state to convert resources and personnel into operational combat power. In earlier work (2007), she already investigated the sources of military effectiveness. Other aspects such as social capital and technology are also important components of military power (Brooks, 2007).

In her analysis of American involvement in Afghanistan, Brooks concludes that the United States failed to align military activities with political and strategic goals and to adapt operations to both its own and enemy capabilities. Three core problems are identified:

- 1) Inconsistencies between training programmes
- 2) The lack of coherence between political goals and military operations
- 3) Poor integration of strategy with operational and tactical levels

5.3.2.2. *Jackman*

Jackman's (2009) research developed a model that interprets military success as a combination of strategic and political success. His historical comparisons between the American conflicts in Lebanon (1958 and 1983) show that military victories remain meaningless without clear political objectives and communication. Successful operations must be defined in political terms. Politicians and military leaders must not only pursue military victories, but also demonstrate that the political situation has improved. By emphasising this, Jackman highlights a crucial element of OEF: the often inadequate link between military deployment and political objectives.

5.3.2.3. *Gray*

Colin S. Gray (1999) analyses the success factors of special forces operations and emphasises that tactical success does not automatically lead to strategic results, especially when political support or strategic coordination is lacking (Gray, 1999; Jackman, 2009). His findings are in line with Jackman, who also combines strategic military with political considerations.

According to Gray, the most important elements influencing the outcome of a special forces operation can be summarised under five factors that increase the likelihood of success:

- 1) Clear and achievable goals
- 2) Good intelligence and preparation
- 3) Surprise and speed
- 4) Quality of the team: The skills, training and motivation of the special units.
- 5) Flexibility and adaptability

6. Research design

As explained in the literature review, this study is based on Rodt's evaluation framework. First, the reasons for this choice are explained, followed by a brief explanation of why other approaches were not included. Next, the limitations of the research design are discussed. Finally, the third part deals with the operationalisation of Rodt's criteria in this study with the complete analytical framework.

6.1. Selection final criteria

This research design deliberately adopts Rodt's (2011) analytical framework, as her four-dimensional approach enables a systematic evaluation of military operations from both internal and external perspectives. Alternative models, such as those of Brooks, Jackman, or Gray, provided valuable insights but proved less suitable due to their one-sided focus on, for example, military effectiveness, political rhetoric, or special forces.

6.1.1. Rodt's success model

This study deliberately applies Rodt's (2011) evaluation framework, which uses four clearly defined criteria to address the research question. This approach facilitates an integrated assessment of both operational effectiveness and the broader political and humanitarian consequences of OEF. Although originally applied within EU policy, Rodt's model can be readily applied to this research without limitations.

The criteria provide insight into the coherence between policy formulation and operational execution, as well as the capacity for flexibility within the operation. The ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances in Afghanistan is crucial in a military operation (Gray, 1999). One of the central objectives of the United States during the initial phase of OEF was to prevent the emergence or regrouping of transnational terrorist organizations. This priority justifies the inclusion of external goal achievement as an essential evaluation criterion in the analytical framework. External suitability examines the degree of proportionality, compliance with international humanitarian law, and protection of the civilian population. It also helps

determine whether the strategy was morally defensible, and provides insight into the extent of infrastructure destruction and humanitarian consequences.

This four-dimensional analytical method enables a balanced and structured evaluation of OEF. Moreover, the framework can be easily applied to the other two phases of the operation, ensuring analytical consistency while allowing for substantive nuance and contextual differences.

6.1.2. Other researchers

The criteria of other scholars were not integrated into this research for substantive and methodological reasons. Brooks focuses on the generation of military power at the state level. However, his approach does not allow for assessing OEF at multiple levels, something Rodt's model does achieve. While Brooks offers valuable insights into the structural causes of American failure, Rodt provides a methodologically sound way to analyse whether and to what extent OEF was successful—aligning directly with the central research question.

In contrast to Rodt, who develops an evaluation framework, Jackman's model mainly describes procedural conditions for achieving success, which is less applicable to this research question. Jackman's approach focuses primarily on the political dimension of success and analyses military operations from a historical-comparative perspective, emphasizing the role of political leaders in defining objectives and communicating success to the public. This makes the model less suitable for a systematic, multidimensional evaluation of a specific military operation such as OEF. While Jackman offers theoretical depth on political-strategic leadership, Rodt's approach enables a systematic, case-specific evaluation better aligned with this study's central research question.

Gray's insights remain relevant, as the United States frequently employed special forces during the initial phase of OEF. His five success factors provide valuable operational guidelines that can serve as practical recommendations for improving the execution of military missions. Nonetheless, his approach is less suitable as the primary analytical framework for this study, which aims for a comprehensive evaluation of large-scale military intervention. While Gray focuses on tactical effectiveness and operational factors within small-scale and often clandestine operations, Rodt offers a methodologically grounded and multidimensional evaluation framework that better fits the scope of this research.

6.2. Research limits

Although Rodt's research is theoretically valuable, it also presents certain limitations. This study focuses exclusively on answering the four success criteria, without incorporating actor perspectives. Due to the lack of coherent literature on various Afghan groups, a multi-actor-based analysis remains unattainable. Furthermore, the fragmentation within Afghan society renders a uniform interpretation impossible.

In addition, the concept of ‘military success’ remains highly dependent on interpretation. It is therefore important in this research to introduce nuance. Nonetheless, a degree of subjectivity cannot be entirely excluded, particularly regarding elements that are difficult to quantify, such as proportionality or the protection of civilians. The study acknowledges this limitation and explicitly states that the research question is: Can OEF be considered successful based on Rodt’s criteria?

Despite these limitations, the use of Rodt’s success criteria offers a valuable and analytically sound method for systematically assessing OEF. This multidimensional approach enhances the analytical depth of the study and contributes to the academic debate on how military interventions can be evaluated in terms of their actual impact.

A significant methodological limitation of this study is the absence of an official, publicly accessible database that systematically distinguishes between U.S. troops under Operation Enduring Freedom and those under NATO’s ISAF command. From the second phase onward, both operational objectives and functional boundaries blurred, with U.S. forces often carrying out OEF and ISAF tasks simultaneously. Although specific, small-scale OEF operations were conducted by separate units, their size was considerably smaller than that of the ISAF contingent.

Consequently, in both official and academic publications, U.S. forces in Afghanistan are generally reported as a single entity, making precise quantitative differentiation impossible. This study therefore employs combined figures for the total number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, without undermining the substantive evaluation of OEF as a distinct operation.

6.3. Operationalizing

Following the discussion of the four success criteria, this section focuses on the practical application of these criteria to Operation Enduring Freedom. In line with Rodt’s approach, all four criteria must be positive for OEF as a whole to be classified as a successful military operation.

- 1) To what extent did OEF achieve its internal objectives?
- 2) How efficient and effective was the conduct of OEF?
- 3) Did OEF contribute to conflict management and de-escalation?
- 4) Was the military response proportionate, and was a distinction made between civilians and combatants?

The fourfold framework evaluates operations across outcomes, implementation, and normative compliance, integrating internal/external goal attainment and appropriateness. It yields a broader, actor- and objective-sensitive account of success, linking effectiveness, efficiency, and legality.

For each criterion, we derive indicators from Rodt’s definitions and formalize them in the analytical framework. The ‘Operationalization’ column maps abstract criteria to research variables; the ‘Indicators’

column enumerates measurable elements used to appraise each criterion. The full schema appears in the table below.

Indicators are rated ‘positive’, ‘partial’, or ‘negative’; only uniformly positive indicators yield a positive score on the criterion. ‘Partial’ denotes gains that fall short of the stated objective. We further apply an ordinal scale – ‘rather positive’, ‘neutral’, ‘rather negative’, ‘negative’, or ‘insufficient information’—and substantiate each rating with transparent reasoning and triangulated evidence from the literature and document analysis.

Table 2: overview of analytical framework criteria Rodt

Criterion	Definition	Operationalization	Indicators
Internal goal attainment	Extent to which OEF achieved the objectives of the United States	Assess whether OEF objectives were accomplished	• Weakened/expelled the Taliban regime • Defeated/weakened the Al-Qaeda insurgency • Reduced terrorist threat • Progress in state-building and governance • Development & transfer of security responsibility to the ANSF (third phase) • Completion of the exit strategy (third phase)
Internal appropriateness	Efficiency, timeliness, and cost-effectiveness of the operation	Evaluate how resources were deployed	• Speed of military victories (timeliness + efficiency) • Costs relative to achieved results (cost-effectiveness)
External goal attainment	Impact on the broader conflict and regional stability	Analyze whether OEF contributed to sustainable stability in Afghanistan and the region	• Prevention of conflict escalation • International responses • Effect on broader regional stability
External appropriateness	Proportionality and compliance with humanitarian norms	Assess the impact on civilians and the proportionality and precision of operations	• Number of civilian casualties • Proportional use of force • Compliance with international humanitarian law

7. Research

Between October 2001 and the parliamentary elections of 2014, Afghanistan underwent a profound institutional transition. The following section analyzes the U.S. intervention for each phase according to specific criteria, assessing each separately. The second part presents the conclusion of the research.

7.1. First phase

In the first phase, the distinction between OEF and military operations under a different command was most evident. This phase laid the institutional and political foundations for the subsequent course of the mission and was characterized by rapid military successes, the establishment of a new interim government, and the initiation of a formal transition process under the Bonn Agreement.

7.1.1. Internal goal attainment

‘Internal goal attainment’ evaluates the extent to which a military operation achieves its predefined political–strategic objectives within a specified timeframe, providing a time-bound lens for strategic planning. It also tests the plausibility of stated aims and the effectiveness of the chosen approach. OEF explicitly sought to eliminate Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and depose the Taliban regime that harbored it (Bush, 2001), to punish the perpetrators of 9/11, and to prevent Afghanistan’s re-emergence as a terrorist safe haven.

In the short term, OEF achieved core internal objectives. The Taliban were deposed within two months—Kabul fell in November 2001, Kandahar in December—satisfying the regime-change goal. Al-Qaeda’s training infrastructure was destroyed and the network fragmented and driven underground. Concurrently, the Bonn process installed a friendly government: an interim authority (December 2001), a transitional administration (2002), presidential elections and government formation (2004), and parliamentary elections (2005).

Yet key aims remained unmet. Osama bin Laden escaped from Tora Bora to Pakistan in December 2001; Mullah Omar and other senior figures also fled. The Taliban persisted and resumed operations from Pakistani sanctuaries. A “light footprint”—limited U.S. presence and reliance on local militias—hampered comprehensive threat neutralization. The survival of key leaders and the operation’s continuation beyond 2005 indicate that internal goal attainment was only partial.

Table 3: Results phase 1 Internal goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Weakening of Taliban regime	Positive	Taliban rapidly lost territory
2	Defeated/weakened Al-Qaeda insurgency	Partial	Weakened, but bin Laden remained at large
3	Reduced terrorist threat	Partial	International attacks still occurred, but many attacks were prevented
4	Progress in state-building and governance	Partial	Bonn Agreement, elections, but low turnout (fraud)

7.1.2. Internal appropriateness

The internal appropriateness of OEF encompasses the effectiveness of its strategy, resource allocation, timing, and coordination. This includes assessing how swiftly OEF was launched, whether troop deployment and tactics aligned with objectives, whether it was executed within a reasonable timeframe and cost, and the degree of coalition coherence. Militarily, the initial phase (2001–2002) was efficient. The U.S. and allies dismantled the Taliban regime within weeks using a “light footprint” model—small Special Forces and CIA units partnered with Northern Alliance militias, supported by targeted airstrikes (Kerry, 2009). This integration delivered rapid territorial gains with minimal U.S. casualties.

Resource allocation in this phase was relatively cost-effective: a few thousand U.S. troops achieved the mandate of regime removal within two months. However, reliance on local warlords to fill the post-Taliban vacuum undermined central authority and entrenched corruption, weakening state legitimacy (Duch, 2013). From 2003, the diversion of resources to the Iraq War further fragmented OEF’s focus and sustainability. The operation began 26 days after 9/11, reflecting decisiveness. Military gains were paralleled by diplomatic achievements at the Bonn Conference, where U.S. leverage facilitated a political agreement among anti-Taliban factions (Fields & Ahmed, 2011). A broad coalition—including NATO allies and even Russia—bolstered legitimacy and shared the operational burden.

Nonetheless, Washington's reluctance to extend ISAF's mandate beyond Kabul reflected a narrow counterterrorism focus, creating a strategic gap with state-building efforts. Operational rigidity, as at Tora Bora, and the resource shift to Iraq reduced effectiveness (Kerry, 2009; Hassan & Hammon, 2011). Overall, the first phase demonstrated short-term efficiency but planted structural weaknesses that undermined long-term objectives.

Figure 23: U.S. annual financial aid to Afghanistan and Iraq 2002–2009 (in millions of \$US).

	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009
Afghanistan	815.9	737	2483.2	4826.52	3527.16	9984.98	5656.53	10,352
Iraq		3798.1	18,530.2	6322.6	5362.2	8519.8	5199.7	1893

Source: Hassan & Hammon (2011, p.540), The rise and fall of American's freedom agenda in Afghanistan: counter-terrorism, nation-building and democracy. *The international journal of human rights*, 15(4), 532-551. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13642987.2011.561986> . Based on Tarnoff (2009), *Iraq: Reconstruction Assistance*, Congressional Research Service, RL31833. The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 24: U.S. average monthly 'boots on the ground' in Afghanistan and Iraq 2002–2009.

	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009
Afghanistan	5200	10,400	15,200	19,100	20,400	23,700	30,100	50,700
Iraq	0	67,700	130,600	143,800	141,100	148,300	157,800	135,600

Source: Hassan & Hammon (2011, p.540), The rise and fall of American's freedom agenda in Afghanistan: counter-terrorism, nation-building and democracy. *The international journal of human rights*, 15(4), 532-551. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13642987.2011.561986> . Based on *Congressional Research Service Report R40682*, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Within ISAF, the United States primarily provided support in logistics, intelligence, and liaison officers, with a modest troop presence in and around Kabul (Hassan & Hammon, 2011).

In conclusion, the internal suitability of OEF (2001–2005) can be assessed as 'rather positive.' On the one hand, this phase was characterized by a rapid response with efficient execution of the main operation, achieved with limited resources and low own-side casualties. The military success was accompanied by a diplomatic trajectory that resulted in a reasonably sound political transition plan. On the other hand, that same minimalist approach failed to adequately take into account the requirements for long-term

stabilization, preventing the consolidation of the initial gains. Policy choices such as limited troop deployment and the shift of attention to the Iraq War reflect internal, suboptimal decision-making.

Table 4: Results phase 1 Internal appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Timeliness	Positive	Rapid military response after 9/11 + swift results with the Bonn Process
2	Efficiency	Partial	Rapid territorial gains, but weak state-building + minimal footprint yielded mixed results
3	Cost-effectiveness	Partial	Limited resources with high efficiency, few U.S. casualties, but heavy reliance on local warlords + fragmented budget

7.1.3. External goal attainment

A core U.S. objective at OEF's outset was to preclude the (re)emergence of transnational terrorist networks. This justifies treating external goal attainment as a key criterion: the extent to which the intervention de-escalated violence, stabilized Afghanistan, and managed the conflict. The question is whether 2001–2005 marked a transition toward peace or a continuation, escalation, or diffusion of war. By late 2001 the anti-Taliban coalition had secured a clear military advantage. Under UN auspices, the Bonn Agreement inaugurated a political transition: an interim authority, a 2002–2004 transitional government, a new constitution, and nationwide elections (2004–2005). These steps signaled formal institutional progress.

Yet external goal attainment remained incomplete. After initial setbacks, the Taliban regrouped, reigniting an insurgency—especially in the south and east—by 2004–2005. Targeted attacks on officials and foreign troops intensified (see Figures 11–12), and U.S. casualties rose (“Afghanistan War: U.S. Deaths and Costs –

A-Mark Foundation,” 2024). This trajectory reflected a structural underestimation of Taliban resilience, recalling misjudgments in Vietnam and the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Elections in 2004–2005 did not resolve foundational legitimacy deficits. Doubts persisted about credibility and representativeness; external implementation without deep societal embedding generated skepticism. With roughly a third of the population eligible to vote, representativeness remained constrained. Beyond Kabul, center–periphery gaps persisted, unrest endured, and local warlords alongside resurgent Taliban groups retained territorial influence (Durch, 2003; Chandra, 2015).

Assessment. External goal attainment is mixed: OEF ended Taliban rule in the center, opened political space (Bonn), and temporarily attenuated violence, yet the conflict reconstituted as insurgency by 2005. The criterion therefore trends rather negative than neutral; sustainable peace was not secured by 2005.

Table 5: Results phase 1 external goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Preventing conflict escalation	Partial	Taliban largely driven out of the center, but escalation occurred in other provinces
2	International reactions	Partial	ISAF operation under NATO; OEF had coalition partners but conducted its own operations, with divisions within alliances
3	Effect on broader regional stability	Negative	Problematic broader regional stability, with destabilizing effects in neighboring countries Pakistan and Iran

7.1.4. External appropriateness

External appropriateness integrates moral–legal judgment with appraisal of infrastructural damage and broader humanitarian effects. OEF initially enjoyed broad international legitimacy. UN Security Council Resolution 1368 recognized the right to self-defense, and NATO’s first-ever invocation of Article 5 was read

as implicit authorization for action. The Bonn Agreement, endorsed in Resolution 1383, enabled the UN-mandated ISAF, which shifted to NATO command in 2003 (UN, 1945; UNSC, 2001a; UNSC, 2001c; UNSC, 2001d; Münch, 2021). However, no explicit UN mandate authorized OEF's invasion of a sovereign state. Domestically, U.S. public opinion initially legitimated the intervention under the "war on terror" frame.

In the first phase (2001–2005), civilian protection fared comparatively better: casualties were the lowest across phases, reflecting the swift removal of the Taliban from central areas and a "light footprint" that reduced large-scale incidents. The relative absence of a sustained insurgency supports a partially positive evaluation. Nonetheless, harm from combat, airstrikes, and indirect effects—food insecurity, displacement, reduced medical access—was substantial, alongside damage to infrastructure, agriculture, and the environment.

Ex post, some argue that targeted punitive measures plus diplomacy might have constrained Al-Qaeda without full-scale invasion, yet Taliban assurances lacked credibility and U.S. political pressure for action was acute; alternative pathways were rarely re-evaluated. Allegations of IHL violations (mistreatment of civilians and detainees) drew criticism as security remained fragile. Oversight was largely internal to U.S. military channels; UNAMA's monitoring lacked enforcement authority and access. Operating outside UN authorization, OEF reproduced asymmetric accountability in which many violations went unsanctioned.

Table 6: Results phase 1 external appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Proportional Use of Force	Negative	Disproportionate airstrikes + destruction of Afghan living environment
2	Protection of Civilians	Partial	Lowest number of civilian casualties compared to other phases, yet still significant
3	Respect for International Humanitarian Law	Negative	Violations of humanitarian law

7.1.5. Conclusion first phase

Applying Rodt's four criteria yields a mixed verdict: internal goal attainment and appropriateness are rather positive; external goal attainment is rather negative and appropriateness negative. In phase one, the U.S. shifted from regime change to Bonn-led state building, pursuing three aims—dismantle terrorist networks, deny Afghan sanctuary, and install a democratic pro-Western order (Chandra, 2015; Dorronsoro & King, 2005). Taliban removal and early al-Qaeda disruption evidence internal attainment; yet failure to neutralize bin Laden, al-Qaeda's resilience, and Taliban reconstitution reveal structural limits and hazards of external engineering (Biscop, 2021). Internal appropriateness is rather positive: rapid gains and Bonn launch under light footprint yielded short-term efficiency, though distraction undermined durability. External goal attainment is negative: conflict management failed as Taliban violence resurged by 2005. External appropriateness is negative: disproportionate force and civilian harm outweighed limited protection.

Table 7: Final results phase 1

	Criterium	Result
1	Internal goal attainment	Rather positive
2	Internal appropriateness	Rather positive
3	External goal attainment	Rather negative
4	External appropriateness	Rather negative

7.2. Second phase

As in the first phase, each criterion will be assessed on the basis of various indicators. This period was marked by the resurgence and intensification of Taliban and Al-Qaeda activities, a substantial troop increase, and the gradual blurring of the distinction between OEF and ISAF, with the latter assuming greater authority. Compared to the first phase, a clear negative trend can be observed across the different criteria.

7.2.1. Internal goal attainment

The Taliban—already resurging by the end of the first phase—expanded their influence. Their exclusion from the Bonn Process and the preservation of regional power structures—often backed by the United States—

eroded central authority (Jalali, 2006). Beyond Kabul, effective administration and adequate security forces were absent, producing power vacuums in the south and east (Ibrahimi, 2023). Beginning negotiations only in the third phase, after the Taliban had consolidated militarily, further diminished prospects for a settlement.

The ANP lacked the capacity to mount local resistance, enabling Taliban forces to overrun villages and districts (Jones, 2008). After 2007, the movement shifted from rural control to coordinated attacks in Kabul (Chandra, 2015). A U.S. “light footprint,” Iraq’s prioritization, and blurred OEF–ISAF roles facilitated territorial gains and disruption of democratic processes. This criterion is therefore assessed as negative. Al-Qaeda, though degraded in the first phase, remained operational. Leaders regrouped in Pakistan’s borderlands and supported affiliated networks, including the Haqqani group. Despite internal fragmentation, influence persisted, prompting Obama’s “troop surge” to intensify counterterrorism. The continued presence of Osama bin Laden signaled incomplete neutralization, warranting a partial score.

The terrorist threat intensified via IEDs targeting both military and civilians (Feickert, 2006). Ahead of the 2009–2010 elections, Taliban coercion depressed turnout—especially in the east—and enabled fraud in insecure districts (Democracy International, 2010; EEAS, 2010). Akbar and Akbar (2011) link these dynamics to the underrepresentation of entire communities and a corresponding erosion of institutional legitimacy. Contemporary attacks in the UK, Spain, and India underscored the enduring global threat. Institutional development remained superficial. Earlier milestones, including the constitution, masked continued warlord dominance and new political deadlocks. Warlords became governors or police chiefs, integrating militias without genuine demobilization (Münch, 2013). Patronage distorted governance; the Bonn framework left provincial power intact (Jones, 2008). Karzai–parliament conflict stalled reform.

A unified international strategy failed to materialize; NATO divisions and U.S. attention to Iraq impeded coherence. Despite the surge, efforts remained military-centric and lacked political reform. Elections initially praised were later deemed fraudulent (EU EOM; NDI; IRI), validating Taliban claims of “false elections” and weakening legitimacy. The state, reliant on foreign protection, remained a fragile façade rather than sovereignty—thus rated negative.

Table 8: Results phase 2 Internal goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Weakening of Taliban regime	Negative	Taliban regained strength; violence in Afghanistan escalated (2006–2010); US focus remained on Iraq.
2	Defeated/weakened Al-Qaeda insurgency	Partial	Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan weakened with reduced operational capacity, but leadership fled to Pakistan and remained active regionally.
3	Reduced terrorist threat	Negative	Increased attacks and IED use, including outside Afghanistan (UK, Spain, India); rise of other jihadist groups.
4	Progress in state-building and governance	Negative	No improvement from first phase; Karzai aligned with US interests; absence of law enforcement; excessive power of local warlords; refusal to reform electoral law; NFA ineffective as opposition.

7.2.2. Internal appropriateness

As with the first criterion, negative indicators predominate. Operational objectives were not attained within an acceptable timeframe. The prolonged diversion of U.S. attention and resources to Iraq after 2001 hollowed out the Afghan effort. Only in 2009 did President Obama authorize a surge; by then the Taliban had regained momentum. The offensive produced limited, localized gains but functioned as a reactive stopgap rather than a timely strategy. Decision-making and execution were further impeded by OEF–ISAF entanglement. U.S. forces largely supported ISAF while the ANSF remained underprepared, allowing the

Taliban to consolidate. Strategic adjustments advanced slowly and yielded modest effects, warranting a negative judgment on timeliness.

Operational efficiency was uneven. From 2006 onward, overlapping chains of command (OEF under U.S. lead; ISAF under NATO) coincided with divergent strategic priorities—American offensive COIN versus European stabilization and reconstruction. This lack of consensus generated frictions, coordination failures, and delays. Ambiguities over competencies, noted by the Congressional Research Service and Gielas (2024), degraded performance. Illustratively, deploying 8,000 additional U.S. troops to sparsely populated Helmand offered limited security returns (Hassan & Hammond, 2011). Personnel who had operated under a clear OEF mandate in phase one experienced role drift, and Special Forces faced organizational constraints (Gielas, 2024). Throughout, Iraq continued to crowd out Afghanistan in manpower and funding, diverting focus from residual Al-Qaeda elements (Hassan & Hammond, 2011).

Cost-effectiveness was poor. U.S. troop levels approached 100,000 by 2010, driving heavy logistical and personnel costs (Blackwill, 2011). Predominant military spending, coupled with underinvestment in development and governance, failed to generate durable stability; significant funds were consumed by recurrent expenditures or lost to corruption. Although the operation prevented outright regime collapse, stability remained fragile and violence re-escalated. Given the imbalance between inputs and sustainable outcomes, the criterion of internal appropriateness merits a negative assessment.

Table 9: Results phase 2 internal appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Timeliness	Negative	The U.S. adapted belatedly: core shifts to COIN and the surge followed years of escalation while Iraq drew primary attention.
2	Efficiency	Negative	OEF–ISAF integration blurred mission boundaries and suffered from divided command; later centralization improved coordination but never resolved operational overlap.
3	Cost-effectiveness	Negative	Vast expenditures yielded limited, unsustained gains; a military-heavy outlay crowded out reconstruction and undercut overall effectiveness.

7.2.3. External goal attainment

During OEF’s second phase, violence escalated markedly, undermining threat-reduction objectives. The Taliban insurgency—enabled by Al-Qaeda and emergent networks—exploited early miscalculations, notably the exclusion of the Taliban from the Bonn Agreement, which, as Johnson and Mason (2007) argue, entrenched resistance and facilitated regrouping and tactical innovation, including Iraq-derived techniques. The insurgency expanded into urban centers; IEDs and suicide bombings proliferated, producing sharp increases in civilian casualties (Tariq et al., 2018; Williams, 2008).

Warlord power remained largely intact and was reinforced by narcotics rents; U.S. cooperation with such actors further degraded central authority (Ibrahimi, 2023). Security-sector development lagged and was imbalanced: the ANA was prioritized over the ANP, creating structural gaps (Cordesman, 2009). Undertraining, low pay, and pervasive illiteracy rendered the police ineffective, especially in rural districts vulnerable to Taliban infiltration. Earlier, more substantial investment in the ANP might have attenuated escalation. Accordingly, the prevention-of-escalation indicator is assessed as negative: OEF did not contain violence, which broadened in scale and scope. International responses were ambivalent. NATO engagement deepened, yet criticism, coalition frictions, and adverse public opinion intensified. Despite UNAMA backing and the London (2006) and Kabul (2010) conferences, a coherent COIN design failed to materialize; national caveats led several allies to avoid the most volatile theaters (Gallis, 2007).

Beyond intra-NATO tensions, regional dynamics compounded the problem. The NFA reportedly received assistance from Iran, India, and Russia, entangling the conflict in wider rivalries. Pakistan pursued selective counterterrorism—targeting groups threatening the state while tolerating pro-Pakistani factions such as the Haqqani network and Afghan-oriented Taliban elements; the FATA served as a logistical hub enabling cross-border infiltration from 2006 onward (Sial, 2013). Overall, regional-stability effects were negative: buffers failed, diffusion persisted, and pre-existing tensions intensified.

Table 10: Results phase 2 external goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Preventing conflict escalation	Negative	Violence intensified; 2006–2010 saw more attacks, clashes, and casualties than before; insufficient investment in the ANP.
2	International reactions	Partial	Support and expansion via ISAF; OEF remained a U.S.-led operation; however, allies criticized the U.S. approach; negative public opinion internationally.

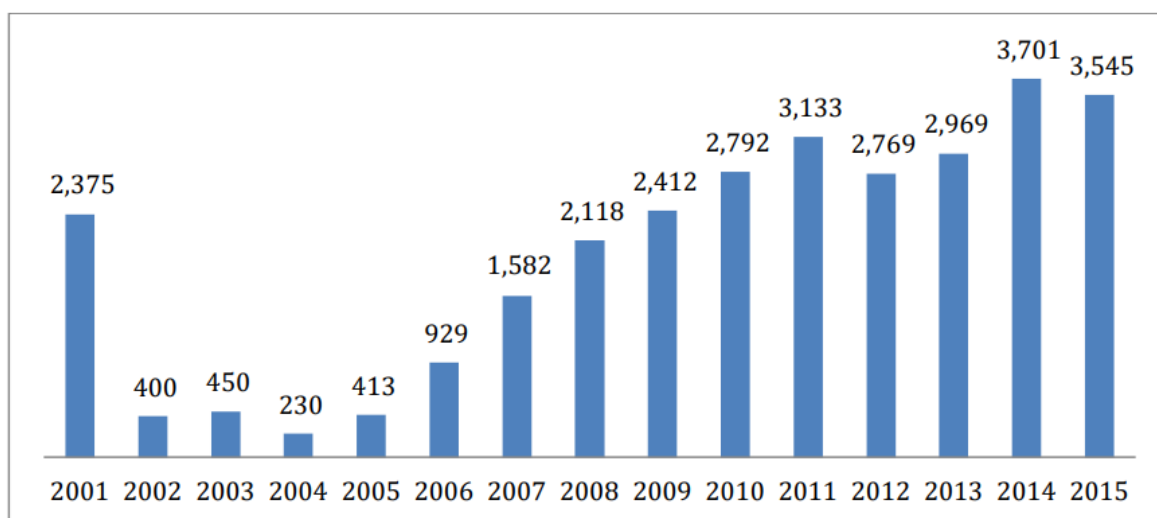
3	Effect on broader regional stability	Negative	Spillover across borders (Pakistan), destabilizing the region; the Taliban did not seize national power but retained control over large rural areas; stability within Afghanistan remained absent.
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7.2.4. External appropriateness

Due to the escalating conflict, violence reached even relatively stable provinces. The United States increased its military presence to a peak in 2010, launching large-scale offensives, including heavy bombardments and operations in Taliban strongholds. Scholars note that this violence was disproportionate to the intended objectives. In addition to direct casualties from airstrikes, civilians endured severe indirect consequences—hunger, displacement, and restricted medical access. Widespread destruction of infrastructure and agricultural land structurally undermined the proportionality of the operation. After 2006, civilian casualties rose further, partly from coalition actions and insurgent tactics such as IEDs, causing significant harm in public spaces. Elections, intended to foster protection and representation, instead deepened the gap between citizens and politicians in both presidential and Wolesi Jirga elections (Coburn & Larson, 2011). OEF failed to shield the population effectively; its own offensives also caused substantial civilian losses. The U.S. focus on kinetic operations clashed with ISAF’s more restrained approach, creating NATO tensions over COIN strategy.

Although Obama and McChrystal’s counterinsurgency doctrine aimed to win hearts and minds, civilian casualties still increased (see figure 25) (Crawford, 2016, p.3)

Figure 25: Number of Civilians Killed in Afghanistan from 2001 to through 2015.



Source: Crawford, N. C. (2016, p.3). Update on the Human Costs of War for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001 to mid-2016. Costs of War. Accessed on August 2, 2025, from https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPD%20ATE_FINAL.pdf

Incidents such as the failed airstrike during Operation Moshtarak (2010) illustrate the fragile proportionality (CBE, 2016). Taliban propaganda exploited such events to depict foreign forces as enemies of Afghans. In sum, the proportional use-of-force criterion merits a negative assessment due to large-scale violence and resulting collateral damage. The military gains did not outweigh the harm to civilians, justifying the negative score on the ‘protection of civilians’ indicator. Consequently, OEF scored negatively on respect for international humanitarian law. Reports cited prisoner mistreatment, excessive force against civilians, and a lack of effective accountability—violations of the Geneva Conventions. The absence of independent oversight (OEF operated outside UN authority and national control) enabled such abuses. While UNAMA reported human rights violations since 2002, it lacked enforcement powers and had limited access to conflict zones. U.S. reporting relied on internal military channels, undermining transparency. The absence of external checks eroded the coalition’s moral authority and Afghan trust. Structural violations of humanitarian law combined with the lack of independent oversight explain the consistently negative assessment.

Table 11: Results phase 2 external appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Proportional Use of Force	Negative	Use of heavy means (air bombardments) causing extensive destruction – disproportionate to intended objectives
2	Protection of Civilians	Negative	High civilian casualties, not only from terrorist attacks; population lived in fear; civilians felt unrepresented
3	Respect for International Humanitarian Law	Negative	Practices such as targeted killings and mistreatment of detainees violated the principles of humane warfare

7.2.5. Conclusion second phase

Phase two deteriorated relative to phase one. Intensified Taliban/Al-Qaeda insurgency, misallocated resources, delayed decisions, and an under-coordinated surge yielded negative ratings for internal goal attainment and internal appropriateness; state-building stalled amid corruption, fragile institutions, and aid dependence. Externally, OEF failed to arrest escalation—violence spread into Pakistan—and legitimacy eroded as proportionality, civilian protection, and IHL compliance remained weak. Structural deficits compounded the trend: thin rural governance, obstructed electoral reform, and insufficient police/army capacity impeded ANP/ANSF development. Overall, strategic stagnation and growing complexity prevailed: limited internal gains undermined external outcomes, and reliance on foreign forces signalled failure to generate durable security. Early Bush-era prioritisation of counterterrorism over democratisation (Lindsay, 2011) entrenched warlordism and enabled Taliban regrouping; by Obama’s tenure the environment was fragmented and the 2010 parliamentary elections symbolic. Composite verdict: internal goal attainment

(rather negative), internal appropriateness (negative), external goal attainment (rather negative), external appropriateness (negative).

Table 12: Final results phase 2

	Criterium	Result
1	Internal goal attainment	Rather negative
2	Internal appropriateness	Negative
3	External goal attainment	Rather negative
4	External appropriateness	Negative

7.3. Third phase

The third and final phase follows the same research process and concludes with findings based on the literature review. This period, marked by the U.S. troop drawdown, increased deployment of Special Operations Forces and targeted killings, and the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan authorities, presents a mixed picture. While progress was achieved in certain areas, structural problems persisted, limiting the mission's overall effectiveness and legitimacy.

7.3.1. Internal goal attainment

Following the second-phase resurgence, the Taliban were only marginally degraded. Although their regime fell in 2001 and they exercised no central authority during OEF, they persisted as a significant insurgent actor by 2011–2014. Sustained U.S. pressure imposed losses, yet territorial influence again expanded as international forces drew down; negotiations failed, and Mullah Omar's 2013 death catalysed factional competition and splinter groups (Byrne et al., 2015). Technological and numerical superiority thus did not yield decisive neutralisation (Soherwordi, 2012), which Akbar (2015) reads as an implicit admission of defeat.

By contrast, the campaign against Al-Qaeda was largely positive. The elimination of Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011 (Operation Neptune Spear) constituted a strategic and symbolic apex: it satisfied post-9/11 retributive demands and demonstrated U.S. reach deep into Pakistan. Expanded Special Operations and targeted drone strikes sustained pressure on high-value leaders, keeping them in flight. While primarily

producing short-term effects (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016), this focus helped prevent attacks on the scale of 9/11 (Jenkins, 2011). Al-Qaeda’s Afghan training infrastructure was dismantled and senior leadership attrited, even as its ideology diffused into successor networks such as ISIL (Smit-Keding, 2015). Despite legal–moral objections to high-value targeting (Bachmann, 2013), internal goal attainment vis-à-vis Al-Qaeda is assessed as positive. Leadership decapitation affected the organisations differently: bin Laden, heading a loose franchise system, was less operationally indispensable than Mullah Omar, whose religious authority underpinned Taliban cohesion. Both deaths were symbolically potent, but neither secured lasting stability—evidenced by the Taliban’s eventual reconquest in 2021.

The broader terrorist threat picture is mixed. A core U.S. interest—preventing mass-casualty attacks on the homeland—was served (Goodson, 2015). Yet the intervention fuelled regional resentment framed as Western neo-imperialism, while global terrorism persisted and in places intensified; eliminating leaders did not reduce worldwide incidence (Carson, 2017). Afghanistan remained vulnerable due to weak state structures, culminating in the 2021 reversal. Accordingly, external goal attainment is classified as partial.

State-building and governance outcomes were negative. The 2014 presidential elections, intended to crown democratisation, were marred by fraud and stalemate, resolved only through an ad hoc National Unity Government under Ghani—an indicator of institutional fragility (Byrd, 2015; Coburn, 2015). Postponing parliamentary elections to 2018 underscored the absence of structural consolidation. As Soherwordi (2012) argues, externally imposed democracy without local anchoring proved untenable.

The transfer of security responsibilities to the ANSF also faltered. Despite numerical growth, quality remained low—high illiteracy, inadequate training, and dependence on external support—while drawdown eroded morale; 65% of Afghans anticipated renewed civil war after withdrawal (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015). Obama’s exit strategy formally ended the combat mission in late 2014, yet Operation Freedom’s Sentinel under the Bilateral Security Agreement extended the U.S. presence. The transition thus achieved only a partial and unsustainable conclusion.

Table 13: Results phase 3 internal goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Weakening of the Taliban Regime	Partial	Death of Mullah Omar, yet the Taliban maintained a persistent presence; secret negotiations on limited involvement; remained an active fighting force

2	Defeated/Weakened Al-Qaeda Insurgency	Positive	Bin Laden killed—top priority—further fragmented Al-Qaeda (already dispersed), with strong symbolic value reinforcing U.S. superiority.
3	Reduced Terrorist Threat	Partial	positive impact on Al-Qaeda, but fragmentation of extremist groups increased in number and violence; though not on the scale of 9/11 against the U.S.
4	Progress in State-Building and Governance	Negative	No positive progress compared to first and second elections; electoral fraud, U.S. diplomatic intervention, and excessive power of local warlords; no electoral law reform.
5	Transfer of Security Responsibility to the ANSF & Self-Sufficiency of the Afghan State	Negative	unprepared for effective territorial control; unable to ensure credible elections
6	Completion of Exit Strategy	Partial	Formal conclusion of OEF and near-scheduled troop withdrawal, but immediately replaced by Operation Freedom Sentinel.

7.3.2. Internal appropriateness

The third phase of OEF was defined by politically sequenced drawdown timelines. Responding to domestic opinion, President Obama accelerated withdrawal and shifted responsibilities to the ANSF. Bin Laden's killing (May 2011) enabled de-escalation; in June 2011 Obama announced reductions. Milestones—

“Afghan-led” security and OEF’s closure on 28 December 2014—were achieved; timeliness is positive, though substantive readiness remained contestable. Operational efficiency was ambivalent. Special operations and targeted killings imposed episodic costs on Taliban and Al-Qaeda, yet effects proved temporary as adversaries adapted. Without synchronized political-economic measures, tactical gains failed to cumulate; critics underscored their limited scale and legal-ethical concerns (Bachmann, 2013).

A structural resource imbalance compounded these limits: about 98% (~\$300 billion) financed military activity, while sustainable reconstruction remained marginal. Gaps in local knowledge—language, culture, political economy—reduced effectiveness; strategic overconfidence privileged kinetic solutions over social, economic, and governance requirements (Blackwill, 2011). Force generation aggravated quality shortfalls. Rapid ANSF expansion outpaced training; weak professionalization and illiteracy impaired performance. Corruption and deficient leadership further dissipated resources and discipline (Felbab-Brown, 2012). Despite growth, post-2014 institutions remained dependent on Western financing and enablers. Accordingly, this indicator is assessed as partial (see Table 14).

Cost-effectiveness is negative: exceptional outlays did not yield proportional or lasting returns. By late 2014 Afghanistan remained fragile, with core objectives unmet. Policy recalibration toward withdrawal, amid eroding domestic and international support, foreclosed stability consolidation. The phase met calendrical targets but not durable security or political legitimacy.

Table 14: Results phase 3 internal appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Timeliness	Positive	Coordinated exit strategy executed almost on schedule, without chaotic collapse during transfer of power
2	Efficiency	Partial	Shift in focus toward targeted counterterrorism operations and peace negotiations; intent to operate more efficiently, but late adjustments and no decisive turnaround

3	Cost-effectiveness	Negative	Despite repeated emphasis, investments in sustainable stability and reconstruction remained negligible; expenditures focused solely on military efforts; absence of a long-term vision
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7.3.3. External goal attainment

Despite limited tactical gains from the surge, the United States progressively forfeited strategic initiative. By 2014, Afghanistan again faced a resurgent Taliban and persistent instability. Akbar (2015) accordingly characterizes the exit strategy as a defeat, noting the absence of stability, development, and peace. The premise that the ANSF could autonomously sustain state authority proved illusory: after the full U.S. withdrawal in 2021, the Taliban reasserted control with minimal resistance. Although recruitment and training were prioritized, responsibility was transferred prematurely. Cordesman et al. (2010) and Soherwordi (2012) had already anticipated that deficits in training, experience, and operational effectiveness would erode the ANSF's capacity—a prognosis that proved prescient. Violent incidents persisted, including during the 2014 elections, which were marred by large-scale fraud and intimidation in Taliban-dominated areas. U.S. diplomatic intervention by Secretary John Kerry was indispensable to complete government formation. Absent such mediation, the process risked ethno-political escalation, underscoring state fragility and substantiating a negative assessment.

Internationally, coalition engagement endured, yet original consensus fractured under growing criticism and war-weariness. Obama's drawdown decision was broadly welcomed, though it remains uncertain whether the same course would have been pursued without the elimination of Osama bin Laden. The formal conclusion of OEF in 2014 had symbolic significance and garnered allied support as a step toward Afghan sovereignty, but it yielded few tangible benefits for the population.

Regionally, the withdrawal reinforced the Taliban's position and precipitated destabilization, notably in Pakistan, where cross-border ethnic and tribal networks were exploited by terrorist organizations. Soherwordi (2012) had warned of a recurrence of post-9/11 chaos—a prediction that materialized. Iran likewise experienced repercussions, including refugee inflows, heightened border tensions, and deepened mistrust of a sustained U.S. presence. This dynamic—already visible in phase two—generated socio-economic damage and weakened governance in both states. The regional power struggle also reignited:

neighboring countries, echoing post-1989 patterns, sought to expand influence through clients and proxies. India and Pakistan intensified competitive patronage, further eroding regional stability (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015). Lacking a robust Afghan state or effective international arbitration, Afghanistan risks again becoming an arena for rival powers.

As phase three failed to mitigate these risks, its regional impact warrants a negative evaluation. Persistent instability and pronounced spillovers indicate that external goal attainment during this period was unsuccessful.

Table 15: Results phase 3 external goal attainment

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Preventing Conflict Escalation	Negative	High numbers American soldiers and civilian casualties; OEF concluded without achieving peace.
2	International Reactions	Partial	growing international fatigue and skepticism; concerns over future stability; problem of regional powers with Western presence.
3	Effect on Broader Regional Stability	Negative	government continued to function but remained dependent on foreign support; Pakistan remained unstable; extremist groups further expanded across borders

7.3.4. External appropriateness

In the final phase of OEF, U.S. strategy shifted to a reduced operational footprint, marked by significant troop drawdowns and increased reliance on SOF and targeted killings. Large-scale offensives were replaced by precision strikes on high-value targets, under the assumption that selective force would improve proportionality compared to the mass bombardments of earlier years. Empirical work by Johnston & Sarbahi (2016) in FATA indicated short-term declines in insurgent activity after drone strikes, suggesting temporary tactical benefits.

Nevertheless, proportionality remained contentious. The focus tilted toward elimination (“kill”) over apprehension (“capture”), raising doubts about the necessity of lethal force in certain cases. Drone strikes and night raids caused collateral damage—civilian deaths, infrastructure destruction, and agricultural loss—provoking sustained moral and legal criticism (Bachmann, 2013). While operations between 2011–2014 were more precise than during the initial invasion, disproportionate incidents persisted, especially in night raids harming bystanders and destabilizing communities.

The “proportional use of force” indicator was thus assessed as partial: reduced large-scale operations and temporary suppression of insurgents were outweighed by ongoing excessive force and documented mistreatment, leading to a negative score for “Respect for International Humanitarian Law.” U.S. claims that most civilian casualties were unintentional and Taliban-induced failed to convince Afghans; in rural areas, aligning with the Taliban often became a survival strategy. Accordingly, “protection of civilians” is rated negative. Despite formal plans to transfer security duties to Afghan forces, civilian safety worsened as foreign troops withdrew and insurgent pressure rose. UNAMA data (Crawford, 2016, p. 3) (see figure 25) show a clear upward trend in civilian casualties, likely underreported. While most resulted from Taliban attacks, coalition forces failed to prevent harm to noncombatants, sustaining the negative trajectory.

Compliance with IHL and legal norms also deteriorated. Many captured Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters were labeled “unlawful combatants,” bypassing Geneva Convention protections. Transparency in adjudicating incidents remained absent; under Article 13 of the 2014 BSA, U.S. troops were under exclusive U.S. jurisdiction. Targeted killings raised further legal issues: Operation Neptune Spear, which eliminated Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, violated Pakistani sovereignty, underscoring the trade-off between strategic gain and legal legitimacy. Often, such gains proved temporary, while the damage to legitimacy from sovereignty breaches and IHL violations was lasting.

Table 16: Results phase 3 external appropriateness

	Indicator	Evaluation	Justification
1	Proportional Use of Force	Partial	reduction of troop levels and large-scale use of force; however, continuing drone strikes and raids caused disproportionate collateral damage.
2	Protection of Civilians	Negative	significant civilian casualties and violations persisted due to night raids and drone misidentifications; no sustainable solutions for the protection of civilians.
3	Respect for International Humanitarian Law	Negative	Continuation of extralegal targeted killings; OEF operated outside the UN mandate, no independent oversight

7.3.5. Conclusion phase three

The third phase showed a moderately positive internal trajectory relative to phase two, but structural constraints endured. Objectives were partially attained—most visibly the 2011 killing of bin Laden—while the Afghan state functioned largely through U.S. backing. Core aims remained unmet: the Taliban retained rural control, terrorist networks adapted, and dependence on external financing persisted. Obama’s 2014 deadline prioritized timetable over conditions.

The Bilateral Security Agreement enabled a reduced U.S. presence and formal handover yet minimally strengthened sovereignty. Costs stayed high: the army expanded as the police lagged (Hulslander & Spivey, 2012). Centralization under NATO improved coordination but narrowed the mission to counterterrorism via special operations and drones, effectively abandoning transformative state-building. Politically, the 2014 election crisis produced a U.S.-brokered National Unity Government—an archetypal limited-access order—

while delayed parliamentary polls weakened legitimacy. Pakistan’s sanctuaries sustained insurgent regeneration; prevention of transnational terrorism was only partial.

Externally, IHL concerns persisted: UNAMA lacked mandate and enforcement; civilian casualties peaked, eroding legitimacy. OEF’s termination largely rebranded the conflict under Operation Freedom’s Sentinel; insurgency resilience, fragile institutions, and external dependence remained.

Table 19: Final Results phase 3

	Criterium	Resultaat
1	Internal goal attainment	Neutral
2	Internal appropriateness	Neutral
3	External goal attainment	Rather negative
4	External appropriateness	Rather negative

8. General conclusion

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) epitomizes the structural tension between short-term military gains and durable political transformation. U.S. strategy remained predominantly coercive while civilian and developmental pillars were underpowered—an imbalance aggravated by structural undercapacity linked to the parallel Iraq war (Belasco, 2009, 2014). Although official discourse foregrounded institutional milestones—electoral management and parliamentary diversification—pervasive corruption, fragile state capacity, and dependence on external financing continued to define Afghanistan’s political order.

Operationally, OEF cycled through escalation and provisional stabilization without a credible exit. The absence of a coherent long-term plan and weak coalition coordination depressed strategic returns. Afghanistan demonstrates that interventions in fragile states, when not embedded in an integrated framework linking security, development, governance, and cultural sensitivity, yield transient outcomes regardless of military scale. The presidential transition was decisive: President Bush acknowledged nation-building late, after momentum and resources had shifted to Iraq; President Obama inherited a fragmented policy landscape and, under domestic and international constraints, pursued pragmatic stabilization and phased withdrawal that prioritized ISAF over OEF, trading expansive democratization for minimal stability.

Phase one (2001–2005) registered notable achievements—Taliban displacement, the Bonn Process, and a new constitution—realized with modest personnel and fiscal costs. Yet strategic limits were evident: Al-Qaeda operated as a dispersed transnational network, and the Taliban, despite early setbacks, remained a dominant Afghan actor. The assumption that a society could be reshaped to external norms replicated earlier miscalculations, including those of the Soviet occupation (Biscop, 2021, pp. 159–162).

Simultaneously, the seeds of later instability were sown. Weak provincial control, reliance on regional warlords, and the predominance of central elites created vulnerabilities enabling insurgent regeneration. Externally, legitimacy remained weak: initial Western support could not offset the absence of an explicit UN mandate, confining legality to a broad reading of post-9/11 self-defense. Findings are tempered by methodological limits—notably the lack of an official database distinguishing U.S. forces under OEF from those under ISAF. From phase two onward, operational boundaries blurred and many personnel performed dual roles; combined datasets were necessary, limiting causal attribution to any single operation.

Evidence indicates that earlier policy recommendations were largely disregarded. Effective engagement in fragile states requires a multidimensional approach in which military, political, economic, and cultural pillars are inseparable. Early marginalization of local actors and reliance on corrupt elites eroded central legitimacy and broadened the insurgency's social base. Elections intended to consolidate legitimacy exhibited structural deficiencies; despite managerial improvements within the IEC and ECC, substantive reforms failed to materialize and conditions deteriorated in subsequent phases. Applying Rodt's (2011) four-dimensional framework shows that early internal successes were insufficient to render OEF successful overall. The persistently negative external dimension—regional sanctuaries, fragile legality, and eroding legitimacy—outweighed limited internal gains.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of combined military-civilian operations under hybrid command structures such as OEF and ISAF, supported by longitudinal datasets linking troop levels, violence, and political stability. Local perceptions warrant closer study: legitimacy stems not only from legal frameworks but from whether communities experience the intervention as legitimate, relevant, and effective. Democracy cannot be externally installed when agency is constrained and Western dominance perceived as imposed; legitimacy depends on persuasion rather than coercion.

Regionally, U.S. policy should apply sustained pressure on Pakistan to halt recruitment for the Taliban, dismantle training camps, and prosecute an unconventional campaign to erode insurgent support and leadership; elements within the intelligence services and military must cease assistance—an objective achievable over time. Improving basic services and strengthening the Afghan National Police in rural areas could undercut Taliban support and reinforce the state's monopoly on legitimate force, but a viable state apparatus requires forward-looking planning, coherent economic policy, and political will.

Ultimately, OEF exemplifies the limits of Western interventions driven by strategic self-interest and ideology rather than context-specific engagement. Geopolitical overconfidence produced a strategy adept at rapid

coercion but ill-suited to lasting construction. Despite substantial expenditures and prolonged presence, Afghanistan retained many of the structural challenges the intervention sought to resolve. Afghans primarily seek safety, hope, and the prospect of a better life; after decades of war, they deserve no less.

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10. Appendices

Appendix A: Key figures within the Taliban

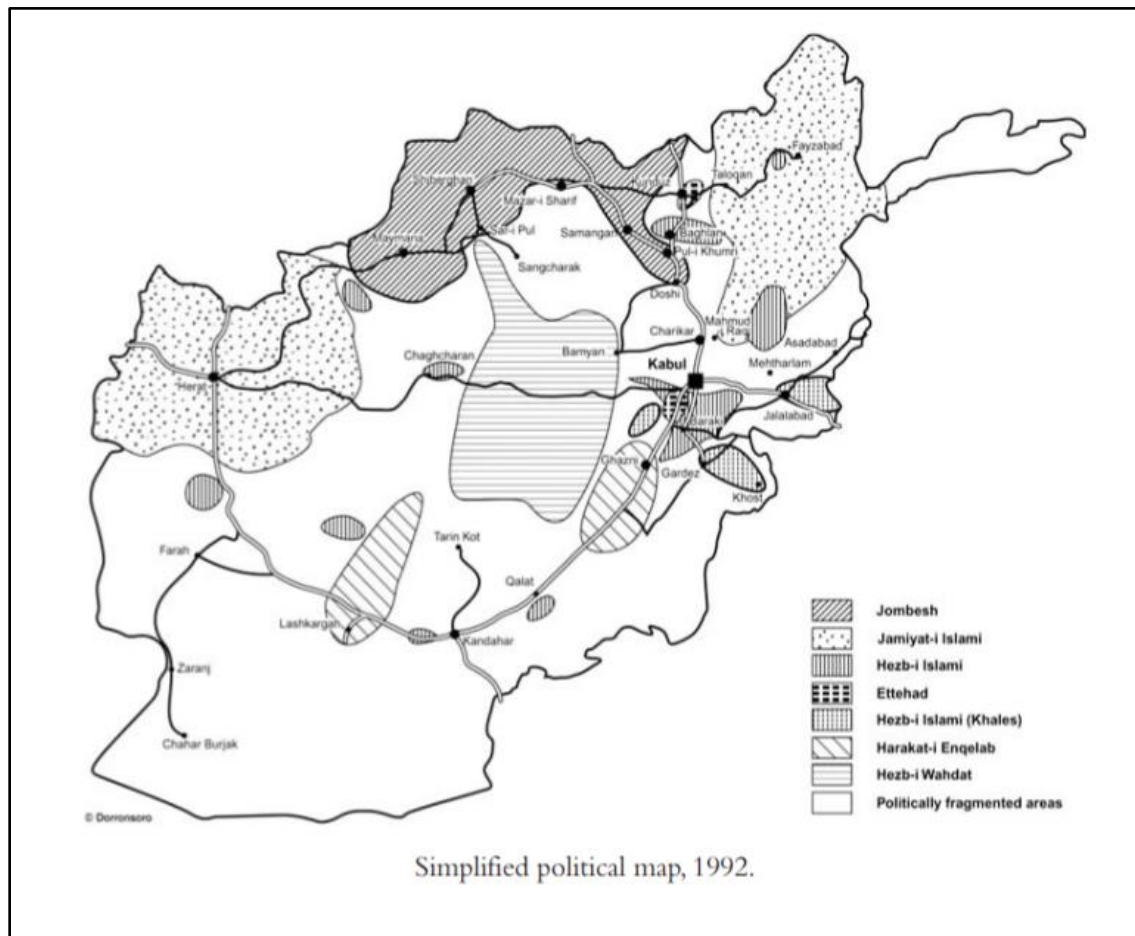
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Table 1. Senior Taliban Leaders

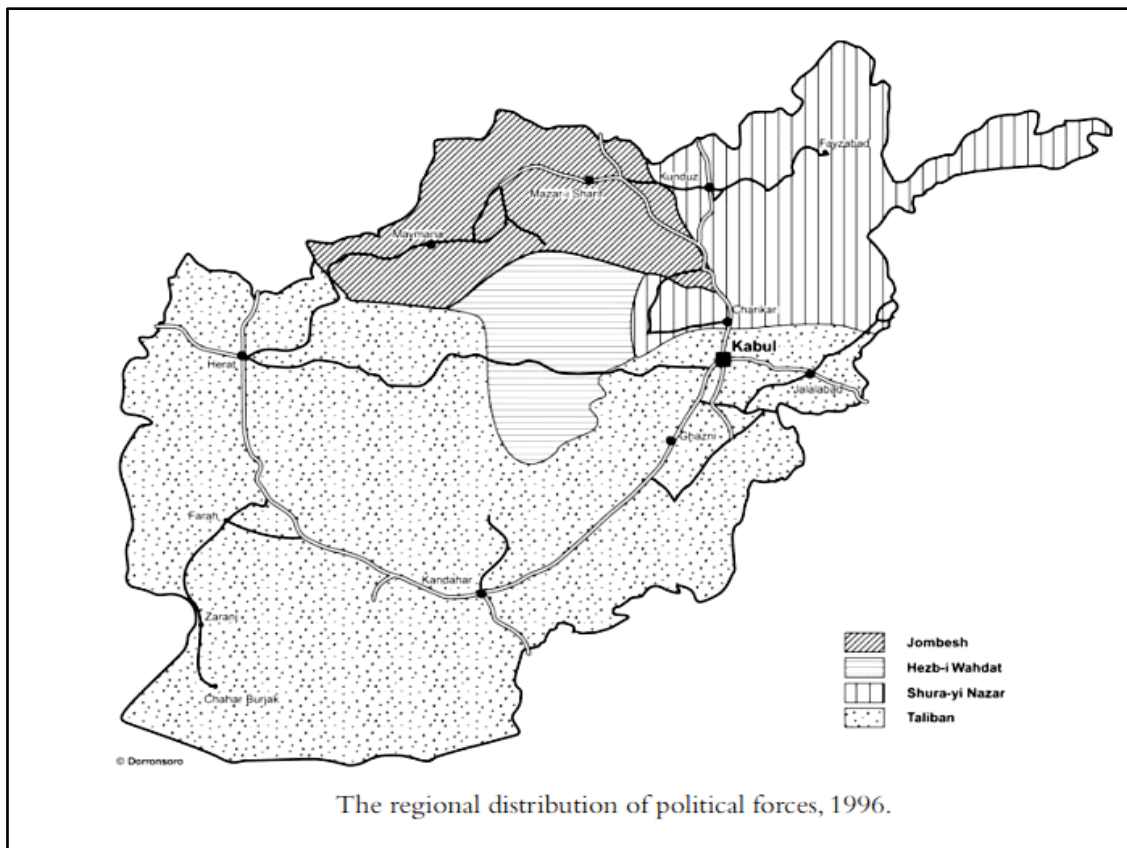
Name	Position	Tribal Affiliation
Mullah Muhammad Omar	Movement Leader	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mullah Berader	Deputy Movement Leader	Ghilzai
Mullah Dadullah Kakar	Senior Military Commander	Kakar Ghurghusht
Mullah Mohammad Hassan	Foreign Minister after 1997	Hotaki Ghilzai
Nuruddin Turabi	Minister of Justice	Hotaki Ghilzai
Alla Dad Akhund	Minister of Communications	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mohamed Essa	Minister of Water and Power	Hotaki Ghilzai
Wakil Ahmed	Personal Secretary to Mullah Omar	Kakar Ghurghusht
Sadeq Akhond	Minister of Commerce	Hotaki Ghilzai
Mohammed Rabbani	Chairman of Kabul Shura	Kakar Ghurghusht
Mullah Obaidullah	Minister of Defense	Hotaki Ghilzai

Document: Johnson, T. H., & Mason, M. C. (2007). Understanding the Taliban and insurgency in Afghanistan. *Orbis*, 51(1), 71-89.

Appendix B: territorial conquest by the Taliban (1992 & 1996)



Source: Dorronsoro, G., & King, J. (2005), pp.247. *Revolution unending : Afghanistan: 1979 to the present*. London: Hurst.



Source: Dorronsoro, G., & King, J. (2005), pp.248. *Revolution unending : Afghanistan: 1979 to the present*. London: Hurst.

Appendix C: Composition of the Afghan interim Administration (AIA) 2001-2002

**Table 1.1: Composition of the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA)
(December 22, 2001-June 2002)**

Position in AIA	Name	Ethnicity/Affiliation
Chairman	Hamid Karzai	Pashtun/Rome Group
Vice Chair & Defence Minister	Mohammad Qasim Fahim	Tajik/NA
Vice Chair & Women's Affairs Minister	Sima Samar	Hazara/Rome Group
Vice Chair & Planning Minister	Mohammad Mohaqiq	Hazara/NA
Vice Chair and Water & Power Minister	Mohammad Shakar Kargar	Uzbek/NA
Vice Chair & Finance	Hedayat Amin Arsala	Pashtun/Rome Group
Foreign Affairs Minister	Abdullah Abdullah	Tajik/NA
Interior Minister	Mohammad Yunus Qanuni	Tajik/NA
Commerce Minister	Syed Mustafa Kazemi	Hazara/NA
Mines & Industries Minister	Mohammad Alem Razm	Uzbek/NA
Small Industries Minister	Aref Noorzai	Pashtun/NA
Information & Culture Minister	Sayed Makhdoom Raheen	Tajik/Rome Group
Communications Minister	Abdul Rahim	Tajik/NA
Labour & Social Welfare Minister	Mirwais Sadeq	Tajik/NA
Haj & Islamic Affairs Minister	Mohammad Hanif Balkhi	Tajik/Independent
Martyrs & Disabled Minister	Abdullah Wardak	Pashtun/NA
Education Minister	Abdul Rassoul Amin	Pashtun/Rome Group
Higher Education Minister	Sharif Faez	Tajik/NA
Public Health Minister	Suhaila Seddiqi	Pashtun/Independent
Public Works Minister	Abdul Khaliq Fazal	Pashtun/Rome Group
Rural Development Minister	Abdul Malik Anwar	Tajik/NA
Urban Development Minister	Abdul Qadir	Pashtun/NA

(Contd.)

Position in AIA	Name	Ethnicity/Affiliation
Reconstruction Minister	Mohammad Amin Farhang	Pashtun/Rome group
Transport Minister	Sultan Hamid Sultan	Hazara/NA
Refugees Minister	Enayatullah Nazeri	Tajik/NA
Agriculture Minister	Syed Hussain Anwari	Hazara/NA
Irrigation Minister	Mangal Hussain	Pashtun/Peshawar Group
Justice Minister	Abdul Rahim Karimi	Uzbek/NA
Civil Aviation & Tourism Minister	Abdul Rahman (killed in February 2002; succeeded by Zalmay Rassoul in March 2002)	Tajik/Rome Group
Border Affairs Minister	Amanullah Khan Zadran	Pashtun/Rome Group

Source: Chandra, V. (2015). pp. 19-20 The unfinished war in Afghanistan: 2001-2014. Pentagon Press and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Appendix D Composition of the Transitional Government 2002–2004

Table 1.2: Composition of the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA)
(June 2002–October 2004)

Position in ATA	Name	Ethnicity/Affiliation	Change from Interim Administration
President	Hamid Karzai	Pashtun/Rome Group	Same
Vice President & Defence Minister	Mohammad Qasim Fahim	Tajik/NA	Same
Vice President	Hedayat Amin Arsala	Pashtun/Rome Group	Same; earlier also headed the Finance Ministry
Vice President	Karim Khalili	Hazara/NA	New Member
Vice President	Abdul Qadir	Pashtun/NA (killed on July 06, 2002)	Earlier, was Urban Development Minister
Vice President & Chairman of Constitution Commission	Neamatullah Shahrani	Uzbek/Independent	New Member; Appointed later through a presidential decree & not during the <i>Emergency Loya Jirga</i>
Special Advisor on Security Affairs	Yunus Qanuni	Tajik/NA	New Position; earlier Interior Minister
Foreign Minister	Abdullah Abdullah	Tajik/NA	Same
Finance Minister	Ashraf Ghani	Pashtun/Independent	New Member
Interior Minister	Taj Mohammad Wardak	Pashtun	New Member/Later, Vice Presidential Nominee of Yunus Qanuni in 2004 Presidential Election
	Ali Ahmed Jalali replaced Wardak in January 2003	Pashtun	New Member
Planning Minister	Mohammad Mohaqiq	Hazara/NA	Same; was earlier Vice Chair as well
Communications Minister	Masoom Stanekzai	Pashtun	New Member
Border Affairs Minister	Aref Noorzai	Pashtun/NA	Earlier, Small Industries Minister
Refugees Minister	Enayatullah Nazeri	Tajik/NA	Same

Position in ATA	Name	Ethnicity/Affiliation	Change from Interim Administration
Mines Minister	Juma M. Muhammadi	Pashtun	New Member
Light Industries Minister	Mohammad Alem Razm	Uzbek/NA	Earlier, Mines & Industries Minister
Public Health Minister	Suhaila Seddiqi	Pashtun	Same
Commerce Minister	Syed Mustafa Kazemi	Hazara	Same
Agriculture Minister	Syed Hussain Anwari	Hazara/NA	Same
Justice Minister	Abdul Rahim Karimi	Uzbek/NA	Same
Information & Culture Minister	Sayed Makhdoom Raheen	Tajik/Rome Group	Same
Reconstruction Minister	Mohammad Amin Farhang	Pashtun/Rome Group	Same
Haj & Islamic Affairs Minister	Mohammad Amin Naziryar	Pashtun	New Member
Urban Affairs Minister	Yousef Pashtun (Gul Agha Sherzai took over from August 16, 2003)	Pashtun/Royalist Pashtun/Royalist	Both were new members Yousef was appointed Governor of Kandahar Province)
Public Works Minister	Abdul Qadir (killed on July 06, 2002; succeeded by Abdul Ali)	Pashtun/NA Pashtun	Earlier, Urban Development Minister New Member
Labour & Social Affairs Minister	Noor Mohammad Qarqin	Turkmen	New Member
Water & Power Minister	Mohammad Shakar Kargar	Uzbek/NA	Same; was earlier one of the five Vice Chair as well
Irrigation & Environment Minister	Ahmed Yusuf Nuristani	Pashtun	New Member; Environment added to the Ministry
Martyrs & Disabled Minister	Abdullah Wardak	Pashtun/NA	Same
Higher Education Minister	Sharif Faez	Tajik/NA	Same
Civil Aviation & Tourism Minister	Mirwais Sadeq	Tajik/NA	Earlier, Labour & Social Welfare Minister
Transport Minister	Saeed Mohammed Ali Jawad	—	New Member

Position in ATA	Name	Ethnicity/Affiliation	Change from Interim Administration
Education Minister	Mohammad Yunus Qanuni	Tajik/NA	Earlier, Interior Minister
Rural Development Minister	Mohammad Hanif Atmar	Pashtun	New Member
Women's Affair Minister	Habiba Sarobi	Hazara	New Member

Other Key Appointments

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court	Fazl Hadi Shinwari	Pashtun/Peshawar Group	Newly Appointed
National Security Advisor	Zalmay Rassoul	Pashtun/Rome Group	Earlier, Civil Aviation Minister in Interim Administration appointed after the killing of Abdul Rehman in February 2002
Governor, Afghan Central Bank	Anwar-ul Haq Ahadi	Pashtun/Technocrat	Newly Appointed
Minister of State & Advisor on Women's Affair	Mahboba Hoqoqmal	Hazara	Newly Appointed
Permanent Representative to the UN	Ravan A.G. Farhadi (January 2002-2006)	Tajik/NA	Re-appointment Earlier, Afghan Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the UN under Rabbani Government (since April 1993) Prime Minister of NA (August 21, 1997-November 13, 2001) Prime Minister of Afghanistan (November 13-December 22, 2001)

Source: Chandra, V. (2015). pp. 22-24 The unfinished war in Afghanistan: 2001-2014. Pentagon Press and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Appendix E: Composition of first elected Government of Afghanistan 2004-2009

Table 2.1: Composition of First Elected Government of Afghanistan
(December 2004 to October 2009)

Cabinet Position	Name	Change from Transitional Administration	Notable Points
President	Hamid Karzai	Same Position	Pashtun/Rome Group Headed Post-Taliban Interim and Transitional Authorities earlier (December 2001-2004)
First Vice President	Ahmad Zia Masoud	New Member	Tajik/NA Brother of Ahmad Shah Masoud; former ambassador to Russia (2001-04)
Second Vice President	Karim Khalili	Same as in ATA	Hazara/Hezb-e Wahadat/NA
Senior Minister	Hedayat Amin Arsala	Vice Chair & Finance Minister in AIA & Vice President in ATA	Pashtun/Rome Group
Foreign Minister	Abdullah Abdullah Rangin Dadfar Spanta	Same as in AIA & ATA New Member; appointed in April 2006 after cabinet reshuffle	Tajik/NA Tajik Previously Senior Advisor on International Affairs to President Hamid Karzai
Defence Minister	Abdul Rahim Wardak	Deputy Defence Minister under Mohammad Qasim Fahim in ATA	Pashtun/Pro-Royalist Peshawar Group Mahaz-eMilli Islami-e Afghanistan of Pir Sayyed Ahmad Gailani
Interior Minister	Ali Ahmed Jalali (resigned in September 2005) Zarar Ahmad Moqbil (September 2005-October 2008) Mohammad Hanif Atmar (October 2008-June 2010)	Same as in ATA New Member Rural Development Minister in ATA	Pashtun Former Colonel in the Afghan Army Tajik/NA Previously Deputy Interior Minister Pashtun

Finance Minister	Anwar-ul Haq Ahadi Omar Zakhliwal (appointed in February 2009)	Previously Governor of Central Bank in AIA New Member	Pashtun/Technocrat Pashtun Previously appointed as Acting Minister of Transport & Civil Aviation in November 2008
Economy Minister	Mohammad Amin Farhang (till march 2006) Mohammad Jalil Shams	Reconstruction Minister in AIA & ATA New Member Previously, Deputy Minister of Water & Energy	Pashtun/Rome Group Tajik
Justice Minister	Sarwar Danish	New Member	Hazara/Hezb-e Wahdat First Governor of newly created province of Daykundi
Education Minister	Noor Mohammad Qarqin Mohammad Hanif Atmar (May 2006 – October 2008) Ghulam Farooq Wardak	Labour & Social Affairs Minister in ATA; Karzai's election campaign manager Rural Development Minister in ATA New Member	Turkmen In 2006, Qarqeen switched to Ministry of Social Affairs. Pashtun Between 2006 and 2008, Atmar was the Education Minister before he switched to Interior Ministry in 2008. Wardak succeeded Atmar in October 2008. Pashtun/Hezb-e Islami
Higher Education Minister	Amir Shah Hasanyar (December 2004-March 2006) Mohammad Azam Dadfar (March 2006-January 2010)	New member New Member	Hazara Uzbek

(Contd.)

Cabinet Position	Name	Change from Transitional Administration	Notable Points
Commerce Minister	Hedayat Amin Arsala (also Senior Minister in the Cabinet)	Vice Chair & Finance Minister in AIA/Vice President in ATA	Pashtun/Rome Group
Commerce & Industry Minister (<i>Industry was merged into Commerce Ministry after March 2006</i>)	Mohammad Haidar Reza (candidature not approved by Wolesi Jirga in 2006) Mohammad Amin Farhang (removed in late 2008) Wahidullah Shahrani	New Member Appointed after March 2006 cabinet reshuffle Reconstruction Minister in AIA & ATA New Member	Previously, Deputy Foreign Minister for Administrative Affairs since 2002 Pashtun/Rome Group Uzbek Son of Haj Minister Neamatullah Shahrani; previously, Deputy Minister of Finance & First Deputy Governor of Central Bank
Water & Energy Minister Newly Created Ministry	Ismail Khan	New Member	Tajik/NA Former Governor of Herat
Transport & Civil Aviation Minister	Enayatullah Qasemi Gul Hussain Ahmedi (appointment disapproved by Wolesi Jirga) Neamatullah Ehsan Jawed (removed due to mismanagement of national carrier) Hamidullah Qaderi (removed due to corruption charges) Omar Zakhliwal (acting minister) Hamidullah Farooqi	New Member (December 2004-March 2006) New Member (March 2006 - August 2006) New Member (August 2006-March 2008) New Member (March 2008 - November 2008) New Member (November 2008-February 2009) New Member (February 2009-January 2010)	Hazara Former Director of Department of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pashtun Pashtun Pashtun

Women's Affair Minister	Masooda Jalal (till July 2006)	New Member	Tajik
	Suraya Raheem Sabarang Candidature rejected by <i>Wolesi Jirga</i>	New Member	Tajik
	Husn Bano Ghazanfar (since August 2006)	New Member	Uzbek/Independent
Youth Affairs Minister	Amina Afzali (December 2004-06)	New Member A Newly Created Ministry	Tajik/NA
Youth & Culture Affairs Minister	Sayed Makhdoom Raheen (disapproved by <i>Wolesi Jirga</i>)	Same as in AIA & ATA	Tajik/Rome group
	Abdul Karim Khorram (since August 2006)	New member	Pashtun/Hezb-e Islami (Hekmatyar)
Haj & Islamic Affairs Minister	Neamatullah Shahrani	Vice President in ATA/Head of the Constitution Commission	Uzbek
Public Works Minister	Sohrab Ali Saffari	New Member	Hazara
Public Health Minister	Mohammad Amin Fatemi	New Member	Tajik Same position in the Rabbani Government during 1993-95.
Agriculture Minister	Obaidullah Ramin (till October 2008)	New Member	Tajik
	Mohammad Asef Rahimi	New Member	Pashtun
Mines & Industry Minister <i>The Ministry was bifurcated and Industry went with Com- merce Ministry after March 2006</i>	Mir Mohammad Sediq (December 2004-March 2006)	New Member	
	Ibrahim Adel (Mines Minister only)	New Member	Tajik Previously, Deputy Mines & Industries Minister since 2005

(Contd.)

Cabinet Position	Name	Change from Transitional Administration	Notable Points
Communications Minister	Amirzai Sangeen	New Member	Pashtun/Technocrat
Rural Rehabilitation & Development Minister	Mohammad Hanif Atmar (December 2004-March 2006)	Same as in ATA	Pashtun
	Mohammad Ehsan Zia (since May 2006)	New Member	Pashtun
Labour & Social Affairs Minister	Syed Ekramuddin Masoomi (till March 2006)	New Member	Tajik
<i>Martyrs & Disabled/Labour & Social Ministry merged in March 2006</i>	Noor Mohammad Qarqin (succeeded Masoomi in March 2006)	Same as in ATA Previously, the Education Minister in this cabinet	Turkmen
Border & Tribal Affairs Minister	Abdul Karim Brahui (January 2005-February 2009)	New Member	Brahui Previously, Governor of Nimroz Province
	Asadullah Khalid	New Member	Pashtun/NA Previously, Governor of Kandahar & Ghazni Province
Urban Development Minister	Yusef Pashtun	Same as in ATA	Pashtun/Royalist
Counter Narcotics Minister	Habibullah Qaderi (January 2004-July 2007)	New Member Ministry was created in December 2003	Pashtun
	Gen. Khodaiddad (March 2008-June 2010)	New Member	Hazara/Ex-Army Officer Previously, Deputy Minister of Counter-narcotics
Refugees & Repatriation Minister	Azam Dadfar (December 2004-March 2006)	New Member	Uzbek
	Mohammad Akbar Akbar	New Member	Pashtun
	Abdul Karim Brahui (February 2009 -August 2010)	Previously Border & Tribal Affairs Minister	Brahui

Martyrs and Disabled Minister	Sediqa Balkhi (till March 2006) <i>In March 2006 cabinet reshuffle, this ministry was merged into Labour & Social Affairs Ministry under Noor Mohammad Qarqin as listed before.</i>	New Member	Hazara
Other Key Positions			
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court	Fazl Hadi Shinwari (till 2006)	Same as in ATA	Pashtun/Peshawar Group
National Security Advisor	Zalmay Rassoul	Same as in ATA	Pashtun/Rome Group
Governor of the Central Bank	Noorullah Delawari (2005-07)	New Appointment (replaced Anwar ul Haq Ahadi in 2004)	Tajik/Technocrat
	Abdul Qadir Fitrat (September 2007-11)	New Appointment	Tajik/Technocrat
Permanent Representative to the UN	Ravan A.G. Farhadi (January 2002-06)	Same as in ATA	Tajik/NA
	Zaher Tanin (since December 2006)	New Appointment	Tajik

Appendix G: differences between various missions

Dimension	Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)	International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)
Time Frame (Afghanistan)	Oct 2001 – Dec 2014 (combat mission). Ended with transition to “Freedom’s Sentinel” (2015).	Dec 2001 – Dec 2014. NATO-led mission ended Dec 31, 2014, succeeded by “Resolute Support” (2015).	Mar 2002 – Present (ongoing). For this comparison, focusing on 2002–2014. Continues post-2014 under renewed mandates.
Lead & Control	U.S.-led Coalition (“Coalition of the Willing”). Commanded by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) via CJTF/CFC-A and later USFOR-A. Participating nations operated under U.S. command, outside UN or NATO structures.	NATO-led Multinational Force. Initially led by ad-hoc lead nations (2002–2003), NATO command from Aug 2003 onwards. Political guidance by North Atlantic Council; operational command by COMISAF (NATO General) with integrated NATO/allied staff. Authorized by UN, but run by NATO. NATO’s North Atlantic Council provides political direction for the mission. NATO’s Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE), is based in Mons, Belgium, and provides strategic command and control.	United Nations political mission. Led by Special Representative of the UNSG. Part of UN Secretariat (Department of Political Affairs). Reports to UN Security Council for mandate; works in consent with Afghan government. No military forces under command – coordinates with NATO/coalition and Afghan authorities.
Founding Mandate	Response to 9/11 attacks – destroy Al-Qaeda network and remove Taliban	UNSC Resolution 1386 (2001) authorized ISAF to assist Afghan	UNSC Resolution 1401 (2002) created UNAMA to support the Bonn

	regime sheltering it. Basis in self-defense (UN Charter Art.51) and request of Afghan interim govt for help against terrorists. No specific UNSC mandate for OEF itself, but broadly supported by UNSC resolutions condemning terrorism. Later evolved to broader counter-insurgency to deny terrorists a safe haven.	Interim Authority in maintaining security in Kabul. Mandate evolved via UNSC 1510 (2003) to cover entire country with mission “to assist the Afghan government in the maintenance of security” and protect reconstruction efforts. Always Chapter VII (peace enforcement) authority. ISAF’s mandate included supporting the growth of Afghan security forces and ensuring Afghanistan not again a terrorist sanctuary.	Agreement process. Mandate: promote national reconciliation, help establish representative governance, coordinate humanitarian and development activities. Over time, expanded to support election delivery, regional cooperation, human rights, and facilitation of the peace process. It is a Chapter VI-type political mission (consent-based, non-coercive).
Primary Role/ Focus	Counterterrorism & Counterinsurgency War: Conduct offensive military operations against Taliban and Al-Qaeda; later, support training of Afghan special forces and army. Key focus on high-value targets, night raids, air strikes, and dismantling terror cells. Also ran Provincial Reconstruction Teams early on to link security with aid, but combat dominated.	Security, Stabilization, & Capacity-Building: Provide area security and fight insurgents to extend Afghan government authority. Protect civilians and critical infrastructure, enable reconstruction projects. Train and mentor Afghan National Army (and police after 2007) to gradually take over security. Operated dozens of PRTs focusing on security and development at provincial level. Essentially a peacekeeping-to-counterinsurgency hybrid mission under NATO.	Political Guidance & Coordination: Support formation of government institutions (executive, legislative, judiciary) and democratic processes (elections). Mediate political disputes and promote inclusive governance (ethnic balance, women’s participation). Coordinate delivery of humanitarian aid and development assistance among UN agencies and donors. Monitor and advocate for human rights (e.g. report on civilian casualties, aid justice sector reform). Facilitate dialogue for peace (acting as a channel between Afghan authorities, regional countries, and at times signaling willingness to talk with insurgents under UN auspices).

Legal Basis	U.S. Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001) provided domestic legal authority. Internationally, justified by Article 51 self-defense (terror attacks of 9/11) recognized in UNSC 1368. After Taliban regime fell, OEF forces operated with consent of the new Afghan authorities (e.g. President Karzai welcomed international forces). No explicit UNSC mandate; often termed a “coalition operation.” Rules of Engagement (ROE) set by U.S./coalition, allowed robust lethal force against identified terrorist threats.	UNSC Mandate (binding Chapter VII resolutions) provided international legal legitimacy. Afghan government’s invitation and status-of-forces agreements gave domestic legal authority for troop presence. Operated under NATO’s agreed Rules of Engagement and UN-endorsed mission scope, subject to international humanitarian law. Contributing nations also had to abide by their own legal frameworks (leading to some national caveats). Overall, ISAF had clear UN Security Council sanction for its presence and actions.	UNSC Mandate under Chapter VI (consent-based political mission) – legal basis in UNSCR 1401 and subsequent renewals. Agreement with Afghan government (exchange of letters) provided in-country legal framework, granting UN privileges and immunities. As a civilian mission, UNAMA had no enforcement powers; it relied on the moral authority of the UN Charter and diplomatic persuasion. Its staff operated under UN code of conduct and international civil service law, advocating adherence to international legal standards by Afghan and international actors (but not enforcing them).
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Size & Composition	Varied over time: from ~1,300 U.S. troops in late 2001 to ~20,000 by 2006, peaking at ~100,000 U.S. troops in 2010–11 during the surge (plus several thousand special forces of other nations in earlier years, and small coalition detachments later). Primarily U.S. Army, Marines, Air Force, Navy SEALs, CIA paramilitary; key allies included UK, Canada, Australia, etc., mostly in special ops or in early invasion phase. By 2013, OEF-designated forces had shrunk (as many U.S. units were under ISAF); roughly 10–20,000 U.S. troops remained outside NATO command for counterterror duties.	Grew from initial ~5,000 (from UK, Turkey, Germany, France, etc. in Kabul) to ~50,000 by 2007, and ultimately ~130,000 at peak in 2011 (of which ~100k U.S., ~30k from 50 other nations). All 30 NATO member states contributed troops, as well as ~22 non-NATO partners by the end. Composition ranged from heavy combat forces (e.g. US, UK, Canada in south; Netherlands until 2010; France in east; Germany, Italy in north/west) to training teams and support units from dozens of countries. ISAF also integrated Afghan liaison officers at HQ. After 2011, numbers declined (51,000 total by 2013; 13,000 by Dec 2014 as drawdown completed).	UNAMA operated with several hundred international staff (e.g., political, humanitarian, and development experts) and a few thousand local staff. It had offices in about 20 provinces, each with 5–15 internationals and additional Afghan personnel. Unlike military missions, its presence was defined by field offices and program coordination, not troop numbers. It led the UN's efforts in Afghanistan, coordinating thousands of aid workers from agencies like UNDP, UNICEF, and WFP. Leadership included the SRSG, two deputies, and section chiefs. Compared to ISAF, UNAMA had a much smaller budget and staff.
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Relation with Afghan Government	Initially somewhat arm's-length – OEF commanders dealt directly with U.S. allies and friendly Afghan militias. Over time, built close bilateral ties: OEF created training programs for Afghan forces (e.g. embedded training teams), and U.S. officials advised Afghan ministries of defense and interior outside the NATO framework until those merged. However, Afghan officials had little operational control over OEF missions; this sometimes caused political friction (Karzai often protested U.S. night raids or detentions done without Afghan approval). By 2013–14, OEF lethal operations required at least tacit coordination with Afghan authorities due to political agreements, but the U.S. retained freedom to act against top-tier targets.	Very close integration – ISAF's <i>raison d'être</i> was to bolster the Afghan government's authority. ISAF was formally "in support of" the Afghan government. It partnered unit-by-unit with Afghan National Army and Police, eventually operating almost always jointly. ISAF command sat in on Afghan security coordination meetings; in later years, Afghan generals led operations with ISAF in advising roles. Politically, ISAF Commanders maintained constant communication with the Afghan President and ministers. There were tensions at times (e.g. Karzai's criticism of ISAF for civilian casualties or arrests), but NATO adjusted practices in response (signing a 2013 agreement to cease unilateral raids on Afghan homes, for instance). ISAF also deferred to Afghan sovereignty by 2014 – any continued presence was under a Kabul-approved legal agreement. Five phases: 1) "assessment and preparation", including initial operations only in Kabul. 2) ISAF's geographic expansion throughout Afghanistan completed in 2006. 3) "stabilization"	UNAMA's mandate was to support the Afghan government, so it worked by, with, and through Afghan institutions. The SRSG acted as a key advisor to the President and cabinet on political issues, often behind the scenes. UNAMA helped convene donor coordination meetings co-chaired with Afghan ministers, and supported governance initiatives at the request of Afghan authorities. However, UNAMA also represented the international community's commitments (e.g., it was tasked to monitor if the Afghan government fulfilled reforms promised at international conferences). This could put it in a semi-monitoring role – for example, reporting frankly to the Security Council on Afghan election preparations or corruption challenges, which sometimes irritated Afghan officials. Generally, though, Afghan governments saw UNAMA as an ally and a source of expertise. Unlike a military force, UNAMA had to negotiate its access and influence – it could not command Afghan units or budgets, but it could persuade and cajole. Notably, UNAMA kept lines open to all Afghan political factions (it wasn't tied to one regime or party), and even attempted outreach to
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		4) “transition” of lead security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). 5) Redeployment	reconcile Taliban elements (within UN sanctions constraints).
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Appendix H: Data Management and Ethics form

FOR STUDENT RESEARCH AT THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES OF GHENT UNIVERSITY

Title of the research project and date¹

Title	OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM: MILITARY POWER AND POLITICAL LIMITS
Date of first version DMP	August 14, 2025
Date of last update (if applicable), please specify changes made	August 14, 2025

Name of the researcher(s)

Name researcher(s):	Emile Bourgoignie
Name supervisor (s):	Prof. Dr. Tim Haesebrouck

¹ Dit document wordt ingevuld in dezelfde taal als die van de onderzoekspaper. Nederlands bij een Nederlandstalige onderzoekspaper is dus ook toegestaan.

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Data management PLAN

What

A Data Management Plan (DMP) entails all actions needed to ensure that data are secure, easy to find, understand, and (re)use; not only during a research project, but also in the longer term. In all cases, it is an excellent tool to manage your research project.

WHY

Research data constitute the evidence needed to verify and validate published claims.

All researchers, including Bachelor and Master students, carefully need to think through how data are organised, managed properly not only **before** but also **during** the research project and **after** the project has finished. This is done in a DMP.

A DMP shows that researchers adhere to the **principles of responsible research**. It will enable:

- Your data to be re-used for **follow-up or new research**
- Research findings to be **reproducible** (a fundamental principle of good research)
- The researcher(s) to **safely store** and **find** his/her data (a DMP will make you think about how to avoid the consequences of unexpected events, such as a stolen laptop or corrupted files)
- Compliance with **legal** and **ethical guidelines** (for this reason, most organisations and virtually all funding agencies require a DMP prior to approval or funding)

In other words, a DMP will help you to think carefully about your data management. For this reason, writing a DMP is a **good practice**. This document helps you to think through the data management process. You are asked to fill out the text boxes. Expand the boxes if needed.

Personal data or not

Please first indicate the type of data you will collect or create:

- ☒ No personal data (i.e., no information about an identified or identifiable natural person)
- ☐ Personal data (i.e., any information about an identified or identifiable natural person)

Please note: A natural person is considered to be identifiable if he or she can be identified directly or indirectly using the collected data. Information that at first sight doesn't appear to be traceable to a person can therefore still be personal data. This may be the case if the person in question can be identified by combining the collected data with additional information (cf. GDPR).

If you will collect or create personal data, please indicate **what** personal data you will collect (several options may apply)

- ☐ identifying information (e.g., name, address, email address, IP address, etc.)
- ☐ information revealing gender identity, ethnic origins, political views, or religious beliefs/practices
- ☐ information on a person's sexual behaviour or sexual orientation
- ☐ information related to criminal convictions and/or offences (e.g., forensic information or self-reported crime)
- ☐ genetic, biometric or health information

Data formats, contents, and modes of collection

What data will be collected and how? Describe:

- the contents (e.g., attitudes towards migrants, voting preferences, mental health, etc.)
- the types (e.g., numerical, textual, audio-visual, multimedia, etc.)
- the format (e.g., spreadsheets, databases, images, audio files, (un)structured texts, etc.)
- the mode(s) of data collection (e.g., surveys, interviews, experiments, derived/compiled from other sources, etc.)

- **Content:** All data consist of official policy documents, scholarly articles, international treaties, and/or books. These texts are employed to map the dynamics of Operation Enduring Freedom. The dataset encompasses academic and policy information on: the objectives and implementation of OEF; institutional reforms in Afghanistan (elections, constitution, state-building); security developments; and the roles of key actors such as the United States, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the international community.
- **Type:** The data consist exclusively of numerical and textual sources in the public domain. Examples include peer-reviewed articles, policy reports (e.g., Congressional Research Service, UN documents), and datasets presented in report form.
- **Format:** The materials used include PDF documents, images, online sources, and databases.
- **Mode of data collection.** The texts are consulted online and recorded in a reference list. The data are derived from and compiled out of existing sources through: systematic literature review; document analysis of primary and secondary materials; and manual extraction and selection of relevant content based on predefined evaluation criteria.

How will the data be documented?

- Describe how you will ensure that the data remain understandable or interpretable (after data collection), how the data are prepared – if relevant – for reuse, and how you will make the results from your research independently reproducible for others.
- Explain who will be responsible for the data documentation.

- The data in this study are derived primarily from secondary sources such as academic publications, policy reports, official documents from governments and international organizations, and peer-reviewed articles. These materials are publicly accessible. Data processing is transparent: relevant literature has been systematically inventoried, analyzed, and synthesized according to a pre-specified research design (qualitative document analysis and theory evaluation). As a result, the findings are reproducible, provided access to the same sources. The indicators and evaluation criteria used are clearly defined in the theoretical section, enabling reuse and replication by other researchers.
- Responsibility for documenting the data rests with the student-researcher (Emile Bourgoignie), within the framework of the research paper at Ghent University. This entails that all sources have been properly verified, documented, and processed in accordance with academic standards and the guidelines of the Political Science program. The supervisor of the research, Prof. Dr. Tim Haesebrouck, acted as content advisor; however, full responsibility for accurate citation, archiving, and accessibility of the data used lies with the author of the paper.
- The researcher will personally handle all aspects of documenting the processed data.

Explain how and where data will be safely stored and backed up

Describe how you will make sure that access to the data will be restricted for third parties (e.g., via passwords on documents, ...) and how you aim to avoid accidental loss of data (e.g., by making back-ups and by storing (electronic) documents in different places). Identify who or what parties will have access to the data (i.e., name and function/position).

- Due to the nature of the raw data, specific security measures or backups are, in principle, not necessary. Nevertheless, a backup will be made of all documents to be analyzed. In addition, it is, of course, not possible (nor desirable) to impose restrictions on data access.
- The “processed data” (NVivo and Word files) contain no personal data; therefore, password protection vis-à-vis third parties is not applicable.
- Backups of each version of the processed data will be created and stored in a different (e-)location, namely on the personalized home drive (H:) provided by Ghent University. This is done to prevent accidental loss (e.g., a stolen laptop). The supervisor may, upon simple request during the course of the research, obtain access to the processed data. In that case, the researcher will share the data with the supervisor by email (e.g., via OneDrive or SP).

Plans for sharing or providing access to data

In most cases, data are to be destroyed after the research project has finished and has been assessed. There may, however, be reasons to preserve the data for a longer period. If so, what are the plans for sharing or providing long-term access to the data? Will the whole dataset be preserved, and in what form?

Which data should be preserved? **Why** and for **how long**? Pay explicit attention to the preservation of non-anonymous data. Who will be responsible for data management and preservation in the future?

- This study primarily uses secondary data in the form of scholarly literature, policy reports, and government documents. The data comprise original documents and publications (e.g., Congressional Research Service reports, UN resolutions, academic articles) that are publicly available and therefore do not need to be stored and secured on an external computer.
- Because this study relies exclusively on publicly accessible data, no confidential data are involved. All sources used are publicly available through university libraries, databases, or open-access platforms.
- There is no need to retain raw, personal, or sensitive data, as such data are not collected or processed in this study.
- The final version of the research paper and accompanying materials will be transferred to Ghent University via official submission in Plato, in accordance with the requirements of the faculty regulations for the master thesis – Master of Science in Political Science (international politics)

Ethical and legal issues

WHY

Research must comply with the highest ethical principles. Thus, the rights, dignity, and welfare of anyone involved must be protected, and the research must be conducted in a transparent and independent manner. Researchers play an active role in assuring participants (and broader society) that research is conducted in a responsible manner. Note that ethical issues relate to both issues of **legal protection** (e.g., anonymity, data storage and use) and issues related to a **professional attitude** (e.g., clearly explaining your research intentions to participants, considering how the research may potentially affect participants, etc.)

This implies that researchers, including Bachelor and Master students, carefully need to explain to anyone involved what the research objectives are, how the research is carried out, how research participants are protected, and what happens to the data.

If you are **not** working with **personal data**, ethical issues boil down to a thorough explanation of how you conducted the research in a transparent and independent manner.

1. Consent form (required when you work with personal data)

If you work with personal data², it is likely that you will use an informed consent form when carrying out a survey, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, etc.

In this form it is necessary to³:

² If you conduct research on participants that lack the legal age to make informed decisions, you need consent from parent(s) or guardian(s).

³ Please note that this is a non-exhaustive list of elements of an informed consent form. Feel free to add issues to the form.

- Explain the objectives of your research in a language understood by the participants (i.e., avoid academic jargon)
- Explain what you expect the participant to do and explain that they have the right to withdraw from the research project at any stage (e.g., even during or after an interview) without any formal explanation on their behalf
- Explain what you will do with the data
- Explain how personal information and details are protected (anonymisation, pseudonymisation)
- Explain – if applicable – whether participation may imply risks (discomfort, anxiety) and benefits (compensation for participation). If there are risks, provide the participant with contact details where they can ask for support
- Explain how data will be stored, for how long, and who is responsible for data storage
- Include your name and contact details

Please indicate whether you will use a consent form:

- ☐ I do make use of an informed consent form (please attach that form to this document).
- ☒ I do not make use of an informed consent form. Explain **why** you do not use an informed consent form.

Not applicable, as no personal data are involved.

Other issues

This study does not employ primary data collection such as interviews, surveys, or observations. Consequently, risks of deception, manipulation, or endangering participants are excluded.

However, two ethical considerations may apply in a broader sense:

1) Assessment of military operations and human rights violations

In analyzing Operation Enduring Freedom, the study addresses topics such as civilian casualties, human-rights violations, and disproportionate use of force. Although these elements are examined critically, the discussion is consistently grounded in objective, well-substantiated sources. Sensitive information is handled with care, and unsubstantiated allegations are avoided. The analysis aims to remain critical yet respectful toward the actors involved and to avoid political or ideological bias.

2) Responsibility in the interpretation of sources

Because the research relies on secondary sources, there is a risk of reproducing outdated or biased information. To avoid this ethical pitfall, multiple and diverse sources (academic, international, and policy) have been used, ensuring that the analysis remains transparent, balanced, and reproducible. All interpretations are referenced, and, where possible, differences in perspective are identified.