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## The “Real” al Qaeda

By Frederick W. Kagan

*In a recent article, AEI resident scholar Frederick W. Kagan examined one of the recurring themes in the recent congressional hearings on the situation in Iraq. General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker were repeatedly told that the size and scope of our Iraq effort were preventing the United States from prevailing in the “real fight” against al Qaeda in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. Kagan, the author of four reports on Iraq strategy, including the latest, Iraq: The Way Ahead, examines the reality of the popular claim.*

One theme that emerged clearly at the Senate hearings with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker was the need to abandon Iraq in order to deal with the real center of the war on terror in South Asia. A series of questioners put on the airs of grand strategic sophisticates to remind General Petraeus that, whereas his brief includes only Iraq, theirs covers the entire world—and from their viewpoint, the fight that matters is not the one that General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and their subordinates are winning in Iraq, but the one in the “Afghan-Pakistan border region,” as it was so often called. General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker pointed out repeatedly and accurately that al Qaeda’s leaders themselves continually refer to Iraq as the central front in their war against us, but to no avail. The real fight, they were told each time, is in the Afghan-Pakistan border region against the real al Qaeda that the intelligence community says has only grown stronger. And, the general and the ambassador were lectured, keeping too many troops in Iraq was preventing the United States from prevailing in this more important fight. Let us consider this thesis in a little more detail.

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To begin with, numerous senators spoke of the Afghan-Pakistan border area as though there were no border—forces poured into Afghanistan would somehow directly affect what was going on in Pakistan, or, alternatively, the real al Qaeda was on the Afghan side where U.S. troops could get at them. Speaking ethnographically, of course, there is no border—the Durand Line that separates Afghanistan from Pakistan cuts the Pashtun nation just about in half, and the porous border has seen decades of happy smuggling. But the border is very real both to our forces and to their enemies. Our troops know that they cannot cross into Pakistan, and the enemy knows it, too. That is why the bases of the “real” al Qaeda are not in Afghanistan—American troops in Afghanistan report very few al Qaeda fighters, and those they do come across are mostly operating out of Pakistani bases. The al Qaeda bases that harbor Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and the other al Qaeda leaders plotting the attacks against which the U.S. intelligence community warns are in Pakistan—principally Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Chitral in the North-West Frontier Province.

Pouring troops into Afghanistan does not address those problems. Even advocating an invasion of those areas (with or without Islamabad’s consent) makes little sense—al Qaeda works also

with Kashmiri separatists, who have their own terror training bases outside of these areas, and we can be certain that the Pakistani government that supports the Kashmiri fighters will not be enthusiastic about American forces taking them out. And even if they were, by this point we are pretty much occupying half of Pakistan. We could line a lot of soldiers up along the (20,000-foot) mountains along the border, but how does sealing the terrorists into their own base camps in Pakistan help? The problem is not that they go into Afghanistan, but that we have no good plan for getting them out of Pakistan. That is a problem worthy of many senatorial hearings, and it would be nice if any of the advocates of losing in Iraq to fight the real enemy in South Asia had a solution to propose. It should be a *sine qua non*, in fact, for anyone who proposes accepting defeat in Iraq first to offer a concrete plan for doing something against the supposedly “realer” al Qaeda enemy in Pakistan.

Afghanistan is extremely important in its own right, of course, and if we fail in Afghanistan, then we will indeed offer al Qaeda another potential base from which to operate. Considering how well-established it already is in Pakistan and how little Afghanistan—one of the most desperately poor countries on earth—has to offer the terrorists, it is a bit hard to see why they would relocate, but we should certainly deny them the opportunity. There are many other reasons to succeed in Afghanistan as well, moreover, including the possibility of developing a stable, democratic ally in the heart of a key region that is a producer rather than a consumer of security.

But now we must consider another set of questions: How urgently do we need to send more troops to Afghanistan? And is there really nothing else we can do? At the end of 2006, Iraq was so close to complete catastrophe that nothing short of a military surge supporting a changed military strategy had any chance of success. We were within a hair's breadth of defeat. That is not the case in Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgency has grown in strength, particularly in the south; government control remains weak; security forces are small and inadequately trained and equipped; corruption is rampant; and so on. But the situation is not deteriorating that rapidly, and relatively small additions of force—with improved approaches—have made a significant difference in important areas. NATO certainly needs to send significant additional forces to Afghanistan, and the

United States will probably have to contribute most of them. But the urgency is nothing like what it was in Iraq in December 2006 and is driven more by the need to secure Afghan elections in 2009 than by the danger that the country is about to collapse.

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To the question “Is there really nothing we can do unless we send more troops?” the answer is unequivocally that there is something we can do. Congress can do it, in fact, and very quickly. Pass the supplemental defense appropriation that would allow development money to flow reliably to our soldiers in Afghanistan as well as Iraq. The advantage of Afghanistan's poverty (for us) is that a little money goes a long way. American soldiers have increasingly been leveraging development funds to starve the insurgency of recruits in a way similar to what has worked in Iraq (but tailored appropriately to conditions in Afghanistan). They need more money. One of the problems the British face in the south of the country is that their government does not give their soldiers development money to spend. We should find ways to help them. Congress could do all of this with one roll-call vote in each house, and the aid would start flowing to Afghanistan faster than any additional brigades could arrive. American soldiers in Iraq often say that dollars are their best bullets—the same is true in Afghanistan. If the congressmen who evince so much concern about Afghanistan's well-being really had the success of our effort at heart, they would stop playing political football with the supplemental and send the aid they control to our soldiers in this key front right away. The fact that they have preferred to delay the supplemental in order to threaten to force the president to withdraw forces from Iraq—a tactic that hinders the effort in the theater they say is the most important in order to force a change of strategy in a secondary (to them) theater—speaks volumes.