Afghanistan in Transition:
The Security Context Post-Bin Laden

Alessandro Marrone

Abstract

In 2011 NATO initiated the *Inteqal* process, i.e. the "transition" of security responsibilities from ISAF to the Afghan state and its security forces. The main pillars of this process are the build up of the Afghan Army and Police and the improvement of Afghanistan's governance system at both national and local level. Progress has been made in this respect, although challenges remain. NATO aims to complete the transition by 2014, while reducing its military presence in the country, but a substantial Allied footprint is likely to remain in Afghanistan beyond that date. The death of Bin Laden has brought about little changes to the situation on the ground, while it may have a significant impact on the US's attitude towards peace talks with the Taliban and thus influence the transition timeline and nature.

Keywords: *Afghanistan / International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) / NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A) / Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) / Al Qaeda / Osama bin Laden / US foreign policy*

Afghanistan in Transition: The Security Context Post-Bin Laden

by Alessandro Marrone[*]

1. Introduction

The first months of 2011 have marked the beginning of *Inteqal*, i.e., the "transition" of security responsibilities from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), led by NATO, to the Afghan state and its armed and police forces. This process is intertwined with the conditions in the fields of security, governance and development, as well as with the reintegration and reconciliation of insurgents. *Inteqal* presents both risks and opportunities for the stabilization of Afghanistan. The death of Bin Laden may have significant consequences on such process, particularly with regard to eventual direct peace talks between the United States and the Taliban.

This paper will first assess the main characteristics of the *Inteqal* process, including its risks and opportunities, and will then explore the potential impact of Bin Laden's death on the Afghan security context.

2. *Inteqal*: the transition of security responsibilities from ISAF to the Afghans

The international community deployed ISAF in Afghanistan at the end of 2001 under UN Security Council resolution 1386/2001. Since 2003, the mission has been led by NATO and has constantly increased in size: nowadays it includes 132,500 troops from 48 countries[1], two thirds of which coming from the US. The ISAF mandate is to assist the Afghan government in establishing its authority over the country. In order to reach this goal, in the past years the US and NATO have repeatedly changed the ISAF strategy. Since late 2009, there has been a convergence among the US administration, European allies, and senior NATO military commanders in Afghanistan, on the fact that ISAF has to carry out a counterinsurgency strategy.[2] This implies the consistent use of political, civilian and military tools in order to pursue four parallel goals: to protect Afghan civilians; to build up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), including both the army and the police; to counter the insurgency through kinetic[3] operations; and to enable the Afghan government to deliver basic services to the population. This strategy is not aimed at completely eradicating the insurgency, a goal which is

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[*] Alessandro Marrone is a Researcher in the Security and Defence Area at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

[1] NATO, *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): key facts and figures*, 6 June 2011 http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/Placemats/110606-isaf-placemat.pdf.

[2] Stanley McChrystal, *ISAF Commander's counterinsurgency guidance*, 26 August 2009 http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf.

[3] The term "kinetic" usually indicates lethal military operations targeting the enemy.

considered by ISAF as unrealistic. It rather aims at putting the Afghan government in the condition to manage a significantly weakened insurgency on its own, to maintain a sufficient level of security and stability in the country, and to enhance popular participation in Afghan politics. This is a less ambitious and more clearly defined "end state", i.e. the final result of a political-military strategy, than the ones put forward by the US and European governments so far.

The timeline of this strategy has been partly set by President Barack Obama in his West Point speech in December 2009. At that time, Obama openly and unilaterally affirmed that the surge of US troops to 90,000 soldiers would have lasted until July 2011, after which the US contingent would have gradually withdrawn. Since December 2009, through intense dialogue with European allies and the Afghan government conducted, *inter alia*, during the London and Kabul conferences[4], the timeline has been refined. In November 2010, the NATO Lisbon Summit officially committed NATO combat troops to stay in Afghanistan until the end of 2014, although their number is set to gradually decrease from July 2011 onwards. This has been an important achievement reached by the Allies: it balances the need to set a deadline to address domestic public opinion's concerns over an endless commitment in Afghanistan, which prompted President Obama's West Point declaration, with the need to allow for sufficient time to prepare for transition. Beyond 2014, a long-term partnership between NATO and Afghanistan,[5] coupled with a bilateral agreement between the US and the Afghan governments currently under negotiations, is aimed at ensuring a continued and sufficient level of foreign military and economic support to the ANSF. The long term commitment is particularly important because the Afghan government and several constituencies of Afghan society, including both ethnic minorities from the north and civil societies groups, are very concerned that a rapid and complete withdrawal of NATO troops would precipitate the country into a new civil war and/or allow the Taliban to take over Afghanistan once again. In fact, Taliban insurgents continue to carry out attacks throughout the country, and ISAF is set to continue pursuing kinetic operations alongside ANSF until 2014. Beyond that date, ANSF will probably continue to militarily fight the insurgency, with ISAF's scaled down support.

In this context, the next years are particularly important insofar as they will witness a process of transition, known as *Inteqal* in the Dhari and Pashtu languages, in security responsibilities from ISAF to the Afghan state. This process will take place gradually across different areas in the country. In March, 2011, Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced the first seven areas to undergo transition after July 2011: the city of Herat in the Regional Command West, which is currently under Italian responsibility; the provinces of Kabul and Bamyan; the city of Mazar-el-Sharif and the province of Panjshir in the Regional Command North; the city of Lashkar Gah in the Helmand southern province; and the city of Mehtelam in the East.[6] Altogether, these seven areas account for 25% of the Afghan population. By the end of 2011, a second tranche of

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[4] The London conference took place on 28th, January 2010; the Kabul conference lasted from July, 20th to July 29th of the same year.
[5] NATO and the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Declaration on an enduring partnership*, 20 November 2010 http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/official-texts/Enduring%20Partnership%20NATO-GIRoA%2020%20Nov%202010.pdf.
[6] BBC, *Hamid Karzai names areas to be handed to Afghan forces*, 22 March 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12815341.

areas is expected to be announced, and it is likely to include a further 25% of the Afghan population.

The areas to undergo this transition have been selected by the Joint Afghan NATO *Inteqal* Board (JANIB), a committee which includes senior officials from the Afghan government, ISAF, PRT nations, major donor countries and (with an observer status) the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The JANIB is co-chaired by the former Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani (who now leads the Afghan Transition Coordination Commission), the ISAF Commander General David Petraeus and the NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) Amb. Simon Grass. All decisions are taken on the basis of consensus, entailing an Afghan veto power over decision-making. The JANIB recommendations are then passed to the Afghan Government for its final decision and announcement. Ultimately, the Afghan government does have a say in the process. For example, President Hamid Karzai obtained the inclusion of the Mehtelam city in the first tranche of areas, which was initially assigned by JANIB to the second tranche. The fact that the Afghan authorities have a say in the early phase of the process is an important and positive sign that the transition is taken seriously by both ISAF and the Afghans.

The fundamental criteria adopted to choose these areas include the following: the capacity of ANSF and local institutions to take the lead on security; the ability and authority of the Afghan government to provide the rule of law and manage public administration at sub-national and local levels; and the capacity of chosen areas to sustain socio-economic development[7]. Hence, despite heavy insurgency in Lashkar Gah, this area has been selected because the military and civilian branches of the Afghan state there are deemed able to autonomously manage the situation, albeit with some level of international support until the process of transition is completed. This criterion of capability is essential to ensure that *Inteqal* is irreversible, and thus that ISAF troops are not expected to return in charge irrespective of the security situation.

By July 2011, a conference including local and national Afghan officials alongside other relevant Afghan and international stakeholders, will determine the implementation plans for *Inteqal* in these areas. Such plans may imply for example that the local Chief of Police, under the oversight of the Provincial Council and Governor, will autonomously lead policing operations. The same would occur for the Afghan National Army (ANA). In both cases, ISAF is expected to shift from a combat to a support role in terms of logistic, intelligence, surveillance, air support, provision of quick reaction forces, and, above all, the training and mentoring of ANSF. Implementation plans will start in July 2011 and will last up to a year. The Conference will also define the roles and responsibilities of Afghan stakeholders, at the national and sub-national levels, in support to the implementation of transition in these areas.

The overall process will, of course, be influenced by conditions in fields of security, governance and development, and, in turn, will impact on each field presenting both risks and opportunities.

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[7] NATO, *Transition: backgrounder*, 20 October 2010,
http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_10/2010_10_D34F22C9AE854B7FAA0BB409A21C90D3_101014-transition-backgrounder.pdf.

3. Security: challenges in training the Afghan army and police

The build up of ANSF, including both the army and the police, has recently become one of the top ISAF priorities. Until 2009, the training of ANA was conducted by separate programmes managed on a national basis by the US and other ISAF Troop Contributing Nations, including Canada and Italy, and it was largely under-resourced. Only two years ago, the decision to establish the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A) and the commitment of substantial economic and military resources have marked a significant change in the ANA's capacity. On June, 2011, the ANA's strength amounted to 164,000 troops, compared to 95,000 in 2009.

One of the main challenges in the build-up of the ANA is maintaining an adequate balance between different ethnicities, which have to be fairly represented within this national institution in order to ensure an adequate level of trust and support among the population. Today the ethnic balance within the ANA roughly reflects that in Afghan society: 44% Pashtun, 25% Tajik, 10% Hazara, and 8% Uzbek.[8] The Ministry of Defence, Abdul Rahim Wardak, is also a Pashtun, in order to favour the participation of the Pashtuns in the ANA, considered as the most important ethnic community for the purpose of stabilizing the country.

A second challenge is to ensure that the ANA will not split along ethnic lines when ISAF will reduce its military footprint in Afghanistan. Afghan history has been marked by civil war. Hence, arming and equipping Afghan military units risk opening the ground for future conflicts. In order to mitigate this risk every ANA infantry battalion (*Kandak*), is ethnically mixed: this should prevent having substantial ANA units, such as an entire company or brigade, being dominated by one ethnic group. The key question is whether serving the ANA could foster among different ethnic groups a strong sense of national identity and loyalty. This is one of the social functions traditionally performed by the military, but its success in a society which has experienced 30 years of civil war is uncertain at best.

A third challenge in the build-up of the ANA is the high rate of illiteracy, due to the long period of civil war which has deprived almost two generations of Afghans from primary education. In 2009, on average, only 14% of ANA recruits were literate. Mandatory literacy courses have been established for recruits since 2010, but resolving this problem requires time and in the meantime the ANA's quality suffers.

The *Inteqal* process has focused both on accelerating the ANA's build up and changing its character. Attention now is paid to training Afghan officials who will be in charge of ANA operations, and to strengthening capabilities such as engineering and medical teams[9]. At the same time, mentoring activities of trained soldiers have increased by conducting almost all ISAF operations jointly with the ANA and the Afghan National Police (ANP), in order to test and improve Afghan capacities on the ground.

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[8] Ian S. Livingston, Heather L. Messera, and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, Washington, Brookings Institution, May 2011,
http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf.
[9] Michael O'Connor, "Rodriguez says Afghan transition on track", in *ISAF releases,* 17 May 2011,
http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/rodriguez-says-afghan-transition-on-track.html.

The build up of the ANP has proven to be a more arduous task than in the case of the ANA. An effective ANP is intended to be part of the judiciary system, including also prosecutors, judges, courts, prisons, and the whole legal and institutional framework necessary to ensure law enforcement. This framework is not yet in place in Afghanistan. Therefore, the fact the ANP has recently passed the threshold of 126,000 policemen is not, in itself, sufficient. In addition, the ANP is considered to be much more corrupt than the ANA. This situation represents a serious challenge to the *Inteqal* process, since a corrupt police coupled with an ineffective judiciary can easily lead the population to mistrust the Afghan government, and to rely on insurgents for effective law enforcement. The international community for several years has underestimated this problem, and only recently has initiated to devote sufficient resources to it. For example on June, 2011 NATO has decided to deploy a Rule of Law Field Support Mission to provide transportation and security support for civilian law officials, i.e. by organizing airlift and convoys, and to support construction and upgrade of infrastructures such as tribunal buildings.[10]

4. Governance: building capacities and going local

The process of state-building in Afghanistan had to start literally from scratch: it was not a "reconstruction" process, but a "construction" one. The high illiteracy rate and the absence of a legal and institutional framework except for the Taliban's Madrassas made this task extremely difficult. Understandably, the international community began working on this area by establishing strong central institutions, particularly the presidency with full executive power. The Afghan Constitution approved in 2004 did not envisage a separation between the head of state and the prime minister, and did not establish any form of regional governance: the national government interacts directly with the 34 provinces and 369 districts. According to the Constitution, the governors of both provinces and districts are elected. In practice, this has not been the case so far. Rather, the president has appointed, replaced and moved governors across the country.

This kind of centralized governance has revealed several limits. First, governors appointed by the central government are often accountable to it and not to local constituencies, which often feel disregarded by state authorities. Second, the state budget is overwhelmingly allocated to the central ministries in Kabul, while provincial and district authorities have no role in decision-making and receive disproportionately low level of public finances. Moreover, there is a lack of trained personnel to perform administrative tasks at the national and local levels. The Afghan government and the international community have become aware that this situation jeopardizes the population's support for the legitimate authorities, and increases sympathy for insurgents who are perceived as able to address better local interests and constituencies. In response, efforts have been recently made to empower provincial and district levels of governance. This does not mean a change in the Constitution's

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[10] NATO, *Rule of law field support mission: backgrounder,* 9 June 2011
http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_06/20110609-Backgrounder-Rule_of_Law-en.pdf.

balance, but rather a reform of the administrative machinery and a political engagement with local communities.

The Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG), established in 2007 within the Afghan government, is tasked to improve sub-national governance and clarify the functions of local authorities. Through the National Stabilization Programme, funded by the international community, in the last three years the IDLG has hired 6,290 employees at local level to fill the *Tashkil*, i.e. the local government's staff ceiling. Specifically, the District Delivery Programme has focused resources on the most populated districts, by filling the Tashkil of 101 districts by March 2011. The IDLG has also provided infrastructures, such as buildings, vehicles, IT capabilities, etc. to 179 district offices out of 369. With regard to budget execution, a pilot project jointly coordinated by the Ministry of Finance and the IDLG has involved all Afghan provinces in drafting a Provincial Development Plan, the equivalent of a provincial budget for service delivery, which is sent to the ministries in Kabul to develop their national budgets. Despite these recent efforts to improve governance, particularly at the local level, this state-building process will require many years to deliver visible results. Therefore, it is unlikely to affect the ongoing *Inteqal* process to be completed by 2014. However, it is crucial to develop a modicum of governance necessary to sustain the transition. And it is vital to ensure the functioning and sustainability of the Afghan state machinery in the medium and long terms.

Alongside this process, both the Afghan government and ISAF are making political efforts to engage and empower local communities, by including the traditional *shura* in the overall Afghan governance. Shura councils are not elected through Western-style electoral systems. They rather represent families, tribes, constituencies and power-brokers at village, district and provincial levels, through the inclusion of communities' most prominent personalities in a consensus building forum. The *shura* were either dismantled or dominated by the Taliban in the 1990s, and after 2001, they have been largely ignored by the international community. Nowadays, *shura* are encouraged to reconstitute and act within and/or in liason with formal Afghan institutions, and it is a common habit for ISAF mid-level officials, diplomats or aid-workers, to participate in these local meetings. The impact of this engagement is neither immediate nor automatic. But in several provinces, over the months, there has been an improvement in the relations between locals and both the Afghan government and ISAF, thus reducing the support for and the room for manoeuvre of the insurgents. The role of the *shura* is going to increase with the *Inteqal* process. The more provincial authorities take charge of security, and the more communities' involvement in local governance will be required both by the locals and by the Afghan government. The political engagement with local communities can deliver better and more rapid results than the administrative reforms, as it is more in line with Afghan traditions and habits. However the two processes need to go hand in hand in order to create the conditions for stability when NATO's engagement in Afghanistan will inevitably decrease.

5. Development: lagging behind despite progress

Afghan figures on socio-economic development can be assessed from two angles. In comparison with 2001, dramatic improvements have been achieved in almost every

field. For example, with regards to infrastructure, in 2011 it took two days drive from Kabul to Kandahar, while it now takes 5 hours. Three international airports have been opened across the country, plus one in Kabul. The number of students enrolled in schools has increased from 2 million in 2002 to 8 million in 2011,[11] in major cities such as Herat, Kandahar or Mazar-el-Sharif, between 70% and 100% of the population has regular daily access to electricity, and the Afghan GDP in 2010 is four times that in 2002.[12] In contrast, with respect to the plans made by the international community and the Afghan government, as well as the expectations of the population, development is lagging behind security. For instance, neither the restoration of the Ring Road which connects the largest Afghan cities, nor the national railway system have been completed. Agriculture has not made significant progress, also because of the poor irrigation systems, and the economy is still largely based on poppy cultivation and on international aid.

The development situation varies across the country. While Herat and Mazar-el-Sharif are considered as the economic engines of Afghanistan, the southern and eastern provinces are significantly poorer. The conditions may considerably differ also within the same region: the Kunduz province close to Mazar-el-Sharif is very poor, while the Dand district near Kandahar prides a well-developed agriculture sector. Kabul has experienced an economic boom, which has increased its population from half a million to four million inhabitants, but the city infrastructure has not kept the pace of this new demographic reality.

The development field is the most loosely linked to ISAF's activities, as a number of other actors are engaged in this field, ranging from UN institutions to donor countries' development agencies such as USAID, the EU Commission, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Agha Khan foundation, alongside a considerable number of NGOs operating in the field. These players do not adequately coordinate among each other, with the Afghan government and with ISAF. The UNAMA head co-chairs together with the Afghan finance Minister, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Boards (JCMB), which includes representatives of ISAF countries, UN agencies and Afghan government. However, this board does not include all the main development actors in Afghanistan and does not have the authority to commit its members to a coordinated strategy. ISAF alone deploys Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in 28 Afghan provinces. The PRTs are composed of military and civilian personnel tasked to help Afghan authorities improve local infrastructure. Their results are mixed, varying from province to province according to local conditions and a number of other variables, such as the resources committed, the level of coordination with Afghan authorities, the personality of PRT leaders, etc.

President Karzai speaking at Munich Security Conference has criticized the PRTs as "parallel structures" utilizing development funds which should rather be channelled through the Afghan government[13]. There are Afghan institutions already deemed

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[11] Ian S. Livingston, Heather L. Messera, and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, cit.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] TOLO News, *PRT disbandment call sparks concerns*, 8 February 2011, http://www.tolonews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1813%3Aprt-disbandment-call-sparks-concerns-&catid=33%3Akankash&Itemid=175&lang=en.

capable of delivering services and spend donors fund to sustain socio-economic development in the country. For example the Minister for rural development and rehabilitation, through the National Solidarity Programme, has been able to channel funds to agricultural development plans in 25 provinces since 2008. However, the Afghan government as a whole still lacks the technical capacities, and particularly the human resources, to adequately provide basic services such as health, education, and drinking water. In 2010 only one third of the state budget was spent, while the remaining funds were not because of the state's inability to plan and implement its investments.

Transition will not depend on the socio-economic situation in a certain area: a poor province may be transitioned because of the security conditions and the strength of local governance, despite of its low economic development. It will rather fuel a re-thinking of the PRTs role, accelerating the transfer of development responsibilities to the Afghan state with the support of international organizations other than NATO, such as the UN. Ultimately, PRTs too are intended to be fully integrated within the *Inteqal* framework, so that that they can gradually shift their *modus operandi* from one based on direct services-delivery to one based on support to the development of Afghan capacity. At the July 2010 Kabul Conference donors pledged to channel 50% of their aid through the Afghan core budget, and to align 80% of their development assistance with Afghan national priority programs, by 2012.

6. Reintegration and reconciliation: reaching out to insurgents

Both counterinsurgency and *Inteqal* lay the ground for a process aimed at including part of those insurgents ready for compromise in the Afghan official political arena. The two strategies are complementary.

Counterinsurgency is aimed, among other things, at altering the strategic calculus of those insurgents which are not religious fundamentalists, inducing them to opt to pursue their political interests within rather than against the Afghan institutional framework. With this aim in mind, the reintegration and reconciliation processes were launched in 2011. Both have been institutionalized through the framework of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) which was unveiled at the June 2010 Peace Jirga and endorsed at the Kabul Conference the following month. Reintegration is aimed at reaching out to foot-soldiers in the insurgency who fight mainly for the salary provided by their leaders. They can approach or be approached through local communities. The idea is to co-opt them by providing, through local communities, a temporary salary and job training in order to give them an economic alternative to fighting in the insurgency, and eventually relocating them to another village protecting them from retaliation. In exchange, the reintegrated insurgents lay down heavy arms, and go through a vetting process including biometrics data gathering to be monitored by Afghan authorities.

This process is led by Afghans through the Provincial Peace Councils, which are coordinated at national level by the High Peace Council. To date, 33 Provincial Peace Councils have been established out of 34 Afghan provinces. The reintegration process has involved a few thousands of insurgents in six months. So far, more than 1,770

former insurgents are formally registered in the programme. Considering that the insurgency is estimated to include approximately 20,000/25,000 fighters, and that only 10% of them are deemed to be religiously motivated, the reintegration process could considerably reduce insurgent manpower over time. However, it presents the risk that insurgents lay down their arms only for a short period of time in order to get money, while continuing to support the insurgency in hidden ways. In order to mitigate this risk, local communities are involved in the reintegration process in order to control the reintegrated insurgents' behaviour, in exchange for ISAF and government investments on local development.

The High Peace Council is also in charge of the reconciliation process. Unlike reintegration, reconciliation is focused on insurgency leaders and commanders at mid and high levels, and revolves around political dialogue and compromises rather than cooption through economic incentives. UNAMA provides the High Peace Council with advice as well as technical and logistical support.[14] Progress on reconciliation has yet to occur, also because of the difficulties in identifying credible high-level interlocutors within the insurgency. Insurgents do not have a vertically defined hierarchy. They are rather structured as an horizontal network of diverse groups: the Haqqani network based on the Pakistani border; the Taliban movement partly led by the Qetta Shura; the followers of Mullah Omar Taliban; insurgents with close links to Al Qaeda; and a broad range of local tribes, clans, groups, and power brokers that act and pursue their interests autonomously. As a result, even a compromise made with prominent insurgent leaders such as Mullah Omar does not guarantee that all major insurgents groups will comply with the terms of the deal and lay down their arms. In addition, foreign powers such as Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia exert influence over certain insurgent groups, adding complexity to the already complex picture of the insurgency. In this context, fake emissaries of insurgents have at times received money from Western countries in order to facilitate peace talks, which then never occurred.

In view of these difficulties, the High Peace Council today is not tasked to negotiate an overall peace settlement with the insurgency. It is rather focused on pursuing talks with local and identifiable insurgent groups, clans and power brokers, on peaceful ways to settle divergent interests, for example in terms of power sharing within the Afghan state at district, provincial or national level. Both reintegration and reconciliation initiatives are built on the positive experience of the US under Petraeus' leadership in Iraq, where, after 2007, the efforts to reach out to insurgents fighting for non-ideological reasons contributed to the stabilization of the Sunni areas of the country. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same approach could succeed in Afghanistan too, provided that ISAF and the Afghan government offer appealing economic incentives to insurgent foot soldiers and a satisfactory place in Afghan society for their commanders.

Inteqal is expected to foster both reintegration and reconciliation. First, it will reduce the visible presence of foreign troops, which is one of the main causes of resentment among certain insurgents. Second, by strengthening local governance, *Inteqal* provides room for manoeuvre to include insurgent representatives in local institutions such as the Shura and Provincial Councils, where they can continue to pursue their interests

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[14] Alessandro Marrone, "Il cammino impervio della transizione in Afghanistan", in *AffarInternazionali,* 21 April 2011 http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1736.

through institutionalized politics rather than through violence. However, *Inteqal* does not depend on reconciliation or reintegration, both of which are long term processes, led by Afghan to reach out other Afghans, and which are likely to continue with mixed results for several years. By contrast, *Inteqal* is structurally based on a defined time horizon.

7. *Inteqal* after Bin Laden

It is difficult to assess the effects of Bin Laden's death on *Inteqal*, and, more broadly, on the Afghan security context. But the analysis above opens a number of avenues to explore this complex question.

On a whole the death of Bin Laden is unlikely to affect significantly and directly ISAF's day-to-day work and the prospects for *Inteqal*. The death of Bin Laden may have an impact on the behaviour of the religiously motivated insurgents, particularly on those with close links to Al Qaeda. They may either reconsider their commitment to the insurgency after the blow received by Al Qaeda, or, alternatively, prepare more deadly attacks to vindicate Bin Laden martyrdom. This, in turn, would influence ISAF and ANSF counterinsurgency operations, including kinetic ones. However, counter-terrorist operations to capture or kill Al Qaeda members are carried out by Operation Enduring Freedom and not through ISAF. As such, Bin Laden's death is more important for the former than for the latter. In any case, it is unlikely to put an end to Al Qaeda activities or the Taliban insurgency, as the former is structured as network of terrorist autonomous cells, and the latter is driven by different groups with different interests. From the Afghan government's point of view, the death of Bin Laden makes little difference with regards to priorities such state expenditure, capacity building, improving governance and other issues, which have no direct link with Al Qaeda. From ISAF's point of view, the main goal to build ANSF's capability is not closely related to Bin Laden, although his death may imply a momentary upsurge in violence to be tackled. The Afghans as a whole have given to the Abbottabad events less attention than the Pakistanis. For example, unlike in Pakistan, there have not been significant street demonstrations in Afghanistan to commemorate Bin Laden or to blame the US. Instead, thousands of Afghans rallied in several cities just one month before his killing because of the burning of a Coran in an American church, demonstrating that Afghans do take to the streets when an issue is close to their hearts.

By contrast, the death of Bin Laden is likely to have a significant impact on US policy towards Afghanistan, and this, in turn, may change NATO's strategy and ISAF's role, with cascade effects on *Inteqal* and the Afghan security context. Bin Laden's death has increased President Obama's credentials as US Commander in Chief, and the credibility of his foreign and defence policies, among American public opinion. This has given the president more room for manoeuvre in managing the US commitment in Afghanistan, regardless the direction of such commitment in future. Bin Laden's death may have also created the political conditions for an acceleration of the US withdrawal

from Afghanistan, through direct peace talks with the Taliban. These have, in fact, been more actively pursued in May 2011.[15]

Alongside the aforementioned difficulties of talks with the Taliban, direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban entail additional risks. First, the Taliban may exploit the US's perceived urgency to leave Afghanistan to obtain the weakening of those elements of the counterinsurgency which harm them most, such as the build up of ANSF, by promising temporary ceasefires doomed to end if the balance on the ground turns in their favour. Second, an acceleration of the US withdrawal before the ANSF becomes ready to manage national security could cause the collapse of the Afghan government and precipitate Afghanistan into a civil war once again. Finally, *Inteqal* is complemented and enhanced by the ISAF commitment to military support the Afghan government beyond 2014, while the Taliban's main goal is a withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. If this request is negotiated between the US and the Taliban, the most likely and immediate outcome will be to induce part of the Afghan population to defect in favour of the insurgents, on the assumption that they will hold the keys of power post 2014. In fact, many Afghans think that the Taliban will return to power if the US will completely withdraw from Afghanistan, as happened when the Soviets left in the 1990s. As such, they are induced to side with the perceived future winners of Afghan politics in order to avoid retaliation. Were this to happen, the prospects for *Inteqal*'s success would be seriously curtailed. It is no coincidence that the recent news of possible US-Taliban talks has immediately prompted street demonstrations in Kabul by Afghan women, human rights activists, emerging civil society groups, and ethnic minorities, who fear a renewed oppression by a Taliban-style regime.

8. Conclusions

Whether *Inteqal* will succeed in fulfilling its goal of an Afghan state able to deny a safe haven to Al Qaeda, to prevent the Taliban from taking over the country again, and to manage independently security, governance and development problems with some persisting support from NATO and the international community remains an open question. Yet it is too early to say that this strategy is doomed to fail.[16] Some progress has been achieved in the last two years, but it is "fragile and reversible".[17] Notwithstanding, this strategy presents four main advantages, which should not be underestimated. First, it has reduced the huge gap between ambitions and resources experienced by the international community in Afghanistan since 2001, by lowering the former and increasing the latter. For example, assumption on breakthrough on narcotics and corruption have been abandoned, while there has been a surge of both military and civilian personnel to help governance and economic development. Second, it has won consensus among and commitment of both ISAF countries and the Afghan

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[15] Karen DeYoung, "U.S. speeds up direct talks with Taliban", in *The Washignton Post*, 16 May 2011, p. 3, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-speeds-up-direct-talks-with-taliban/2011/05/16/AFh1AE5G_story.html.

[16] Hew Stratchan, "It is far too early to claim the war in Afghanistan has failed", in *The Guardian*, 21 April 2011, p. 8 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/21/too-early-predict-outcome-war-afghanistan.

[17] David Petraeus, *Statement before the House Armed Services committee*, 16 March 2011 http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=1bbe2277-0e46-43ab-9ae5-24dd8afad749.

government, a necessary although insufficient condition for success which has often eluded in recent years. Third, it has shaped clear guidelines for ISAF's military operations according to a defined political strategy, that is win consensus among population and alter the insurgents' calculus to encourage them to reintegrate or reconcile, finally recognizing the political dimension of the war. Fourth, it has set a timeline which tries to balance the long term efforts required by the situation on the ground with the increasing pressure from domestic public opinion to bring NATO troops back home as soon as possible.

Against this background, another change of American and thus of NATO's strategy in favour of direct US-Taliban talks presents several difficulties and implies many risks. The major risk is to derail the *Inteqal* process without providing an alternative way forward to reach the aforementioned "end state". In contrast, to stay the course and continue to support both *Inteqal* and the overall counterinsurgency strategy presents the above mentioned advantages, and allows the international community and the Afghan government to explore the opportunities of a political settlement with insurgents from a position of strength. This is not to suggest that peace talks should be ruled out, but rather to put some caveats to these talks: they should not undermine *Inteqal*, neither accelerate its timeline; they should not question the long term partnership between NATO and Afghanistan; and they should be framed within the broader reconciliation process.

The death of Bin Laden neither means that the Al Qaeda threat has vanished, nor that the Taliban have been weakened to the point of not being able to re-conquer the country. Therefore, the success of *Inteqal* and NATO's long-term support for the Afghan state remains the best available option to protect the Allies' security interests, and to safeguard the hard-won achievements made in Afghanistan over the last decade.

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