

## What did the Spanish Soldiers Die For?

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The death of 17 Spanish soldiers in what appears to have been an accidental helicopter crash near the city of Herat in Western Afghanistan on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August has caused understandable pain to the people of Spain. It is important that they should understand the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in which they were serving, so that they appreciate the worth of the risks they are taking and the burdens they are bearing.

I participated as a member of the UN team in the Bonn negotiations of November-December 2001 that produced the current political arrangement in Afghanistan and that also requested the UN Security Council to authorize a multinational military force to assist the authorities in Afghanistan in providing security in Kabul and, eventually, in other provinces to which ISAF would expand. This request was the product of many years of reflection on the reasons that previous attempts to reach a political settlement of the wars in Afghanistan had failed.

While Afghanistan had experienced many rounds of war and conflict since 1978, the operation leading to the current transformation started with the attacks of 9/11/2001, which transformed US views of Afghanistan from a humanitarian emergency to a security threat. Since the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 and the consequent collapse of the Soviet-installed regime in Kabul in April 1992, the US and other major donor countries provided small amounts of humanitarian aid. Starting in 1994 a UN Special Mission for Afghanistan tried to promote a dialogue among the various parties, but with few resources and little international backing. The neighboring countries motivated by their own quest for stability and security supported various armed factions whose proxy wars further destroyed the society.

After September 11, the CIA and US military came to Afghanistan to defend the security of the United States from al-Qaida by destroying that organization to the extent possible and removing from power the Taliban regime that sheltered it. The only plan available within the US government, and hence the one used, was a CIA plan to rearm and fund many of the same local commanders and warlords whom both the US and the USSR had supported in the 1980s, and whose rivalries further destroyed the country in the 1990s. In particular, their battles inside Kabul city itself had reduced much of the city to rubble and the central government of Afghanistan to an empty shell.

This intervention was endorsed by the UN Security Council as a legitimate act of self defense after the attacks of September 11, but as far as the Bush administration was concerned, its purpose was not to build peace, reconstruct the country, or promote reconciliation among Afghans. After an internal debate, the Administration reluctantly endorsed a role for the UN in achieving these goals after a US military victory, primarily based on the argument that these were necessary to create conditions for a continuing US military presence that would make that victory permanent.

The empowerment of various militias by the Coalition was required by its military strategy to defeat the Taliban, which was the necessary condition for the rest of the operation to take place. This strategy, however, in turn created other security problems. During decades in which outside powers supplied and funded armed groups, civilian state or political institutions, always weak, were undermined still further. The US strategy against the Taliban, including direct funding and arming of various groups without their

adherence to any common political platform, goal, or organization, recapitulated this pattern. Any armed group that captured territory also took control of whatever parts of the state apparatus remained there, including ministries in the capital. Under the Islamic State of Afghanistan (the mujahidin government), which ruled Kabul during 1992-1996 and still held the UN seat at the time of the US intervention, each foreign-funded armed group that formed part of the ruling coalition took control of a different ministry; various groups fought each other, destroying much of Kabul; and the strongest armed group (Ahmad Shah Massoud's Supervisory Council of the North, or Shura-yi Nazar-i Shamali) was able to dominate politically due to its military presence. Despite political pressure not to do so, the military forces of Shura-yi Nazar, led by Muhammad Qasim Fahim since the assassination of Massoud on September 9, 2001, occupied Kabul again after the flight of the Taliban in November 2001.

At the UN Talks on Afghanistan in Bonn, international actors negotiated a power sharing deal with Shura-yi Nazar. The international actors accepted for the time being that faction's control of all "security" agencies (Ministries of Defense and Interior and the intelligence agency), in return for its agreeing to measures of civilian power sharing. These included: accepting a chair of the interim administration (Hamid Karzai) who was not from the Northern Alliance and was not a military commander; sharing civilian ministerial posts with other groups, notably the Rome group led by the former king, Muhammad Zahir Shah, exiled in Rome since 1973; promising to adhere to a process of gradual broadening of the base of the government; and accepting international monitoring of all these.

Through an act of diplomatic ventriloquism by the UN team, the parties to the Bonn Agreement asked the Security Council to authorize deployment of a "United Nations mandated force to assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas." The agreement went on to note, "Such a force could, as appropriate, be progressively expanded to other urban centres and other areas." The participants in the talks also agreed "to withdraw all military units from Kabul and other urban centers or other areas in which the UN mandated force is deployed." This UN-mandated force became known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Since August 2003 it has been under the command of NATO. Neither the withdrawal of militias from Kabul city nor the expansion of ISAF to provinces began until then.

The concept of ISAF developed from analysis over the previous decade of the requirements of a peace agreement to end the civil war in Afghanistan, not from the security mission of counter-terrorism.<sup>1</sup> The Bonn Agreement noted that security was the responsibility of Afghans, and that the parties pledged "to do all within their means and influence to ensure such security, including for all United Nations and other personnel of international governmental and non-governmental organizations deployed in Afghanistan." This security mission, in which ISAF was to assist, primarily focused on protecting international civilian personnel.

While the agreement could not state this, however, the main mission of ISAF in the view of the drafters and even some of the faction leaders who did not want to repeat past mistakes was to prevent a recurrence of the factional fighting that had destroyed so much of Kabul and undermined the government in 1992-1996.<sup>2</sup> ISAF was also to make possible and credible the political process of broadening and legitimating the government, by providing it and the Afghan administration with a degree of security from coercion and threats by armed groups. Its transitional security presence would help create the political space to build the government's legitimacy and capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, Ashraf Ghani, William Maley, Ahmed Rashid, and Olivier Roy, "Afghanistan: Reconstruction and Peacebuilding in a Regional Framework," KOFF Peacebuilding Reports 1/2001, Swiss Peace Foundation, Berne, 2001, pp. 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Ashraf Ghani, "Rebuilding Afghanistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2001.

Thanks in large measure to the role of ISAF in Kabul, the government has remained relatively stable, and the political process has advanced and become more inclusive. While crime remains a serious threat, and terrorist acts occur occasionally, there has been no mass political violence in Kabul that threatens the stability of the government, the lives of the people, or the international presence.

The U.S. military commanders on the ground, however, concluded as early as the summer of 2002 that only reconstruction and political consolidation outside of Kabul would make victory possible. After another internal debate, the US also concluded that it could not keep the country divided between Kabul, where security meant protecting the government and people from militias, and the rest of the country, where security meant mobilizing and arming militias to fight the Taliban and al-Qaida, regardless of the effect on the government and people. As the Afghan National Army developed under US sponsorship, with aid from France and the UK as well, the US military was gaining a better partner than warlord militias.

The US military therefore developed the proposal that became the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which aimed, as one US official said, to produce an "ISAF effect without ISAF." By mid-2003 the US also endorsed NATO command of ISAF and the expansion of ISAF to provinces where there was no active war fighting, mainly by establishing PRTs. Among these PRTs was Herat, where the US military gave way to Spain under NATO command. The terms of reference of PRTs now requires them to establish a secure and safe environment for building the Afghan state and reconstructing the economy. The TORs particularly emphasize that the PRTs are to provide support to reform of the security sectors, notably police.

The Spanish soldiers in Herat were deployed to the richest (more accurately – least destitute) province of Afghanistan outside Kabul, on a strategic location on the Iranian border. The majority of Afghanistan's imports transit this province, which is also a major conduit for smuggling and drug trafficking. The province is the largest source of Afghanistan's customs duties, which form most of the government's domestic revenue. Within the last eighteen months, the central government had removed a powerful governor who had resisted the authority of Kabul and faced a security crisis when militias who had been mobilized to help remove him seized control of a major district. I visited Herat in December 2004 and visited the installations on the Iranian border with the deputy minister of finance, who was trying to assure government control over the customs revenue. He was also trying to gain control over the oil smuggling from Iran, through which powerful commanders had flooded the Afghan market with dangerous sub-quality fuel.

At the end of the day, he drew up a list of his requirements and told me he would ask for assistance from the PRT. At that time the PRT in Herat was organized by the US, but now Spain has taken over that duty. The people are by and large greatly relieved to have these forces in their area. President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has said repeatedly that delegations from all over the country had asked him to send ISAF teams to their area to promote security and strengthen the control of the national government over areas dominated by armed commanders. In Herat the PRT plays a particularly important role, as tensions rise between Iran, an important neighbor for Afghanistan, and the US, whose support remains crucial. By helping the government gain control of the customs posts and state banks, the PRT can help the government take back control of its revenues and expenditures from armed groups that have looted them. By supporting the new governor and helping to train police, it can help bring security to one of Afghanistan's most important economic centers. And by serving as more trusted interlocutors with Iran, they can help to stabilize one of Afghanistan's most important borders.

This important role benefits not only the Afghans, but also Europe. When Afghanistan was weak and torn apart by war, extremist groups used its territory to arm and train. Many of those involved in the bombings in Madrid and elsewhere in London were linked to groups based either in Afghanistan or nearby areas of Pakistan, and many had at one

time trained in this area. While the new Afghanistan still faces a threat from Taliban forces with safe refuges in Pakistan, it has virtually eliminated al-Qaida from its territory and no longer poses a security threat of the same magnitude. Securing this entire region from further collapse and turmoil is vital for global security, as well as for building a government that can lead Afghans in the struggle against poverty, hunger, and illiteracy. This is the noble goal for which those Spanish soldiers died.

**Additional Resources:**

- The Afghanistan Reconstruction Project of CIC ([http://www.cic.nyu.edu/conflict/conflict\\_project4.html](http://www.cic.nyu.edu/conflict/conflict_project4.html))
- Institute for war and peace reporting ([http://www.iwpr.net/afghan\\_index1.html](http://www.iwpr.net/afghan_index1.html))

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