

# Afghanistan's Security Dilemmas

Lt. General (Ret.) David Barno and  
The Honorable Ali Jalali  
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*Interview by Peter Maher and Kristen Casazza*

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*Minister Ali A. Jalali, the former Interior Minister of Afghanistan (2003-2005), is currently serving as both a Distinguished Professor for the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies and as a researcher for the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. As Interior Minister, he created a trained force of 50,000 Afghan National Police and 12,000 Border Police to work in counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and criminal investigation.*

**Peter Maher:** How strong is the Taliban insurgency right now and what is the nature of the Taliban threat?

**General Barno :** My sense is that the Taliban has been able in the last 18 months or so to regenerate some fairly substantial capabilities that I did not see evidence of from 2003–2005. It's difficult to clearly ascribe the causes of that, but I do think there's at least anecdotal evidence that they've been able to rearm, have recruited fairly successfully, and expanded their ranks. Obviously they've imported, perhaps from Iraq, some much more sophisticated tactics and technology. The number of improvised explosive devices and incidents of roadside bombs has skyrocketed, some of which appear to be reminiscent of what we see in Iraq.

More notable is the dramatic expansion of the number of suicide attacks. In Afghanistan during 2003-2004, even in '05, the number of suicide attacks was in the low single digits, four or five a year. Last year I think the number

was over 140, which is a dramatic change. So they've significantly changed their capabilities.

**Professor Jalali:** I agree. When we say "Taliban," it is a general word for the insurgency in Afghanistan, so with the Taliban today there are many categories. I think four categories are very important. First, there is the old Taliban of Mullah Omar and his followers and commanders. Second, you have the new Taliban who are young, trained, educated and indoctrinated in *madrasas*. Third, there are the disenchanting tribesmen, some clans in the southeast and southern part of Afghanistan who were mistreated somehow. Then you have the opportunists who will support anybody who is powerful in that area – not out of agreeing with their ideology or political vision, but because they want to benefit from the people who are in power. These are the opportunists. So it is an odd assortment of elements today, this Taliban.

At the same time, it has connections with the transnational extremist organizations, and they have learned from that experience. General Barno said there were over 140 suicide attacks in Afghanistan this year, which is unusual for Afghans. In 2005 it was twenty. In 2004 we had seventeen. In 2003 we had five, and then in 2001 we had one which actually killed [Northern Alliance Leader] Ahmed Shah Massoud. So it is an exponential increase in the suicide attacks which is not common for Afghans but rather coming from the outside.

**Maher:** Many people attribute the increase in suicide attacks, which have become characteristic of the insurgency right now, to what the insurgents are seeing in the media from Iraq. Is the increase in suicide bombings directly attributable to Iraq? And is it just a new tactic that's been learned, or has there been a change in the mindset and world view of the Afghan insurgents?

**Barno:** My understanding is it is not a change in the commitment level of the insurgency. The insurgency in Afghanistan is hugely unpopular. There are striking differences in the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq that are not terribly well known, but one is that Afghanistan has just come through 25 years of war and they are tired of fighting. In Iraq, fighting is still a novelty, believe it or not, to put it facetiously, and there is a tiredness about further fighting in Afghanistan. The Taliban has governed in Afghanistan and the people do not want to go back to that government. They were terribly crushed by the oppression of the Taliban and there are very bitter feelings across the country towards the Taliban because of that. So there's no tendency towards the insurgency to move back in that direction.

Now as far as the suicide attacks, they do tend to look towards it as a tactic, even though it's a horrific tactic. It's been found, partly through cultural ramifications, that you can recruit and train suicide bombers, and they can create a lot of casualties. We have found that that weapon in the overall success of the terrorists in Iraq has very much moved to Afghanistan where they've used the same approach in respect to the cultural aspects of martyrdom and the huge number of casualties they produce. I don't think it's at all a reflection of commitment if that's what you're inferring.

**Jalali:** Yes, I totally agree. Afghans long ago objected to and opposed the ideology of the Taliban. They are not going back to that situation. Even those who are helping or cooperating with the Taliban do not share their vision. But Iraq was not the first battlefield for the suicide attacks. Before that we saw attacks used as the instrument of certain policy lines. However, Iraq was a testing ground, and I think this served as an inspiration to others. You know the Afghans are not familiar with [suicide bombing]. Not even during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan did they resort to that kind of terrorism. From my own experience, in the beginning of 2004-2005 most of the suicide attackers were foreigners: Arabs or Pakistanis. Now they have started training Afghans for this. Therefore it is something that was exported from somewhere else to the Afghan battlefield. This also reflects the globalization of the *Jihadi* movement and the kind of extremist ideology that the Afghans often suffer under.

**Kristen Casazza:** Is there still a strong connection between the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? Or has the al-Qaeda element in Afghanistan been neutralized?

**Jalali:** I would say in Afghanistan there is no strong connection between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, between the ideology behind al-Qaeda and where some Taliban members are moving there are strong connections. Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the al-Qaeda network was destroyed. Since then al-Qaeda has changed into a kind of multi, or decentralized organization using different elements in different countries. In that process the Taliban learned from al-Qaeda. So there is a connection in that process of inspiration, propaganda, and also some new methods of terrorism.

**Barno:** To your point on al-Qaeda's status – they have not been neutralized. Neutralized is a misnomer. They are less active in Afghanistan, relatively

inactive in Afghanistan. The presence of Arabs in Afghanistan would send antennae quivering and draw attention to that particular area. Generally, they are not successful. However their presence in the ungoverned border area is still very much active. It's certainly not as strong as they were when they were part of the state prior to 9/11, but it has by no means been neutralized. I think it's been made much less effective in day to day operational control. As far as day to day al-Qaeda operations around the world, it's probably been driven more underground, but it also morphed and adapted in ways that make it more dangerous. So I think it's going to be difficult to stamp out.

**Casazza:** So this is the strongest the Taliban has been since the invasion following 9/11.

**Barno:** Yes, I believe it is.

**Maher:** You brought up issues about the border region. What is the nature of political consensus between the Afghan and Pakistani officials regarding border security and the handling of Taliban elements operating along the border?

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**Barno:** The tactic I take when I talk to Afghans along the border, which I do on a periodic basis coming through our programs in Washington and other places in Europe, is that both of the nations share a common threat. They share a terrorist enemy which was so disruptive inside Afghanistan during the Taliban's era and also launched assassination attempts against [Pakistan] President Musharraf. That's two faces of the same threat. And the more the two nations can look at this common enemy that really threatens both of them and use that as a focal point for acting in unison as opposed to arguing with each other, the more effective their strategy will be.

It's difficult to get there, and I think the US feels this as well: One of the things the terrorist organizations and the Taliban have become increasingly effective at is driving wedges into the seams between allies, compatriots and partners in their adversarial collection. The insurgency is very adept at driving wedges between different countries in the NATO alliance which have different rules of engagement or between nations that are fighting them with slightly different outlooks and certain common frictions among them. So to

the extent that those relatively minor disagreements and frictions become superheated by the terrorists serves the terrorists' purpose. So I think it serves the two nations to focus on the common threat.

**Jalali:** Afghanistan and Pakistan are both allies in fighting global terror, but they look at this challenge in the context of their regional interests. Pakistan is and has been very active against the al-Qaeda members; more than 600 of their operatives were arrested in Pakistan cities. But Pakistan failed to contain the Taliban to the same extent because Pakistan looked at al-Qaeda and the Taliban in different ways. Al-Qaeda, they believe, is a threat to Pakistan. The Taliban is not a threat to Pakistan. Therefore, if Pakistan was sure that Afghanistan was stabilized and normalized and that it will have staying power capabilities supported by the international community in Afghanistan, then I think it will move against the Taliban. Unless Pakistan gets convinced this is the case it is going to keep its options open.

**Casazza:** What does success in Afghanistan mean for the global war on terror?

**Barno:** Well I think the other way to portray that is how dangerous and disastrous failure in Afghanistan would be for the international community. I don't think that given what we saw in pre-9/11 era Afghanistan that the world can accept in any way, shape, or form Afghanistan returning to that state. That's certainly the risk if the US, NATO and our other friends and partners in Afghanistan fail in this effort. So we're very much focused on trying to marshal and sustain this. Right now I think there are 26 NATO countries and 13 other countries involved in Afghanistan. The entire enterprise in Afghanistan has had tremendous international support, more so than any other undertaking in which we've been involved. In the last four years there's been over \$24 billion pledged in international aid to Afghanistan. There's been a huge outpouring of support and interest in Afghanistan to ensure this is a success story. But when you get to the actual results on the ground and the complexities of the problem on the ground and the lack of human capacity to get things done on the ground, I think that, now exacerbated by the very much empowered and emboldened Taliban, this threatens the enterprise.

I think the most dangerous part of this whole situation is the security aspect, because that is endangering all other aspects of institution building and of securing a better future for Afghanistan. So I think the international community recognizes that Afghanistan cannot be allowed to fail, but that

we are at a very dangerous point right now in terms of maintaining the momentum of the effort towards success.

**Jalali:** The cost of rebuilding Afghanistan is high. However, the cost of failure is much higher. Let me go back to a statement by a famous Asian poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [Muhammad] Iqbal praised the drive of the Afghan people for their resilience and determination to survive under any conditions. In this context he called Afghanistan “the heart of Asia.” He said “Asia will suffer when the heart is in pain.” Asia is different today. However, we witness how the problem and troubles in Afghanistan have spread like a bush fire through the region and beyond. If, God forbid, Afghanistan fails again, this time the danger of the threat will be much greater because the source of extremism has shifted from the Middle East to South Asia.

**Maher:** Along those lines, what have been some of the repercussions so far from the conflict in Afghanistan throughout Central Asia?

**Barno:** I think it’s been mixed. Part of that has to do with Ali’s point earlier about different perceptions of US staying power and the staying power of NATO and the coalition allies there. You have to look at the countries in that region that border Afghanistan – Pakistan to the east, second largest Muslim country in the world, probably two dozen nuclear weapons in

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its arsenal today. The northern corner of Afghanistan borders China. Across the northern tier you have Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – three former republics of the Soviet Union always looking north or south trying to determine where their future lies. To the west you have Iran, a major regional power, who is now trying to gain nuclear

weapons in its arsenal.

What we’re dealing with is the centerpiece of an extraordinarily important part of the world for the United States, and as you look at Afghanistan you’ve got to continually assess how the interests of the US will play out and what Afghanistan will become in the future. I personally think up until 2004-2005 there was a reasonable degree of confidence that the United States was

going to stay there. But I think we inadvertently sent some messages in mid and late 2005 when we publicly announced the decision for a NATO troop withdrawal. After that, many of the players in the region began to recalculate their interests with a misperception that the United States was disengaging once again, and so the northern tier of states there, the northern “stans,” were looking more to Russia and China who are more interested in peeling them away from US influence.

The Pakistanis, I think, began to recalculate whether they were going to have to secure a rear flank or backyard in Afghanistan. They might have had greater confidence if they believed that the United States was going to stay. The Iranians of course have their own interests that they’re playing out there. The lack of confidence in the US, the West, and the international community to stay and see Afghanistan through to success undermines security in the whole region. I think that’s the greatest risk out there today.

**Jalali:** The Central Asian countries benefited from this intervention and involvement in Afghanistan because it stopped the incursions of extremist elements into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Extremists such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan were active in invading and attacking from Afghanistan. There were also many terrorist attacks in Tashkent. This intervention was supported by the Central Asian countries because it stopped this incursion from Afghanistan into Central Asia.

However, as General Barno said, there were doubts created, or a perception of doubt created, in Central Asia that the United States and the West might not stay as long as it takes for Afghanistan to build its own capacity to stabilize the country. As a result, they are actually looking north again. And of course, Russia is also very interested to play this role in Central Asia. In regards to Iran, I think it has been playing a very positive role in the stabilization of Afghanistan. However, Iran is still in doubt as to what will happen in Afghanistan and what will happen to Iran from the West. Iran perceives a threat from this, so it is building up its sphere of influence in Afghanistan so that when the time comes it will use it as leverage in its foreign policy.

**Casazza:** What is the role of tribal politics in Afghanistan’s democratization efforts and the political process?

**Jalali:** I would say the tribes in Afghanistan are very much integrated into the nation. It is different in Pakistan. In Pakistan you have these tribes, seven FATA, they call it Federally Administered Tribal Areas. They are not integrated into the state of Pakistan. In Afghanistan you do not see the

problem with tribes. Even if you look in these areas today, the governors are not from the same areas and people accept that. And so it is not tribalism in Afghanistan, but lack of development in these areas. In Pakistan this lack of development is more prominent because the constitution of Pakistan does not extend to these tribal areas.

Therefore, while on both sides of the border we need to develop, to bring some social political and economic development, on the Afghan side it is much easier than the Pakistani side because of the seven agencies. Even today the administration of Pakistan, except for the political relationship, is not extended to this area. They are still subject to the frontier crime regulations which were established by the British Raj.

**Barno:** Tribes have been part of the nature of Afghanistan for centuries and there are strong affiliations and ties there. But Afghanistan, despite the fact of having a strong tribal structure, has always remained together as a country. There have been many opportunities for it to split up and move to Tajik, Uzbek, Pashtun, and Turkmen sections, but it has always remained together as a country. There's a very strong national identity that trumps the tribal identities even though the tribes have great power within their own regions.

Relative to Iraq: the sectarian violence that we see in Iraq between Sunni and Shiite does not play out on an equivalent scale between tribes in Afghanistan. There's nothing like the animosity that exists between Sunni and Shiite in Iraq. That is a whole different order of magnitude. I think the fact that Afghanistan has always been the nation of Afghanistan speaks well to that.

**Maher:** How important is success in Afghanistan to the future of NATO?

**Barno:** In a way it's the ultimate test of NATO in the twenty-first century. NATO has never operated outside its rough geographic boundaries of Europe. The Bosnian operation has been the largest prominent projection of NATO outside of its original Central European role, and that was done with great hoopla in the mid to late nineties. This is a completely different geography many thousands of miles from European capitals, so it is a great test of the NATO military alliance in a deployed, contingency environment of great complexity. It's crucial to NATO's success and relevance that it can sustain the will to see this conflict through to its successful completion. However, that's going to take an extended period of time.



**Casazza:** What is the effect of the poppy cultivation and drug trafficking on Afghanistan, and where do the profits go?

**Jalali:** It is a major challenge. Afghanistan does not have a long history of drug production. It started as a part of the war economy in the 1980s. Later on, with the economic decline, the decline of law and order, the break up of the state structure, and lack of control by the government across the country, drug production has increased. It's the source of many, many problems in Afghanistan. It funds terrorism and also pays for the militias of warlords. It corrupts the government officials. However, at the same time, drugs account for one third of Afghanistan's economy. Destroying one third of the economy without destabilizing the country requires time, resources, and wisdom.

With regard to the profits, I think one percent of the profit goes to Afghan farmers, five to 10 percent goes to traffickers, distributors, and corrupt officials, and 90 percent goes to outside Afghanistan, to Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. The revenue on the international market of Afghan drugs last year was estimated to be between \$40-50 billion. Of this, only \$3 billion remains in Afghanistan. So it's a demand driven thing. If you stop it in Afghanistan it will move somewhere else so long as there are networks outside Afghanistan with a huge capacity of money laundering and other things. I think this situation is going to be a major problem for the region and the world.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, dependency on the drug opium is a major factor in destroying the economy of Afghanistan. President Karzai said, 'We have to destroy the drugs or the drugs will destroy us.' That is a very relevant statement. However you deal with it, you have to have a comprehensive approach. It is not only a government problem, economic problem, security problem, not only an eradication problem – it is all. You have to address all of these fronts and mainstream it in all aspects of Afghan society – in governance, in security, in the rule of law, in development, in fighting the insurgency – because all of these elements should be addressed. I say about the drug production: the drug trade is a low risk activity in a high risk environment. In order to remove the problem you have to reverse this relationship. You have to make it a high risk activity in a low risk environment.

**Barno:** I would only add to the second notion that there has to be a comprehensive solution to this and not a narrowly focused solution only targeting drugs. Drugs are part of the fabric of the nation. Afghanistan is a country where 80 percent of the people are involved in agriculture. Agriculture

is extremely difficult in Afghanistan and the only agricultural system that is fully resourced and well supported and functions at a very high level is the poppy system. Until farmers can have the same support for growing legitimate crops, everything from seed to irrigation to advice on growing to transport, market, preservation, storage, and prices for their crops – things they can only get now in the drug economy – you're never going to have a functioning state that relies on legitimate agriculture. We have to focus not simply on

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how we eradicate the drugs but also on how we regenerate a legitimate Afghan agricultural sector that can sustain a primarily agricultural country. We have not done that yet. Quite frankly we've failed at that so far.

**Maheer:** Do you have any remarks concerning the general security situation in Afghanistan, perhaps something we do not hear about in the US?

**Barno:** On the one side, I am encouraged by what I think is recurrent US interest and support for the effort in Afghanistan. In the last several months, clearly on both sides of the aisle in Congress and in the administration, there's without question a degree of momentum that is overdue and is going to pay significant dividends if it is managed effectively on the ground in Afghanistan. So that, on the one hand, is encouraging. On the other side of the coin, events in Afghanistan are at a crisis point in some respects, particularly in regard to the security situation and what it portends as we enter the calendar year 2007. We hope that the additional aid, attention, and focus we sense in Washington right now translates into positive outcomes on the ground. But we're in a race, if you will, for the outcome in Afghanistan against the Taliban who are trying to increase their reach and dissuade foreign forces from remaining in the country by inflicting casualties and driving wedges in between them. There's going to be a footrace over the next 12-24 months, and I think it's a critical time for the international community to pull together and be successful or ultimately fail. So we have the period of time within the next two years.

**Jalali:** I hope this commitment will be a long term commitment. Unfortunately, over the past 50 years in Afghanistan we see that the United States will always get interested in Afghanistan when it faces a major crisis. In

the early 1950s, Afghanistan tried to get the US involved so that it would save us from the threats of communism during the Cold War. The US refused to help Afghanistan and then the communists made inroads in the society and created spheres of influence. The consequence was the communist takeover and the Soviet invasion. Then the US got involved, enabled the Afghans to defeat the Soviet Union, and then the United State left again and walked away from Afghanistan. The US walked away until the crisis of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and then again reengaged. However this engagement was not a large foot print engagement and now after five yeas we see the consequences of this light foot engagement facing Afghanistan with a security crisis in the form of an insurgency. Now we see that there's a new commitment and attention in Afghanistan, and I hope that this time it will be a lasting one.

**Casazza:** Do you have a general gauge on Afghan public opinion towards the United States?

**Jalali:** I think Afghanistan is probably unique in all of this. Afghanistan is the only Islamic country I would say that is always receptive to assistance from the United States. The concern in Afghanistan is not the presence of the United States, but that the US will leave us again.

**Barno:** I hear regularly, and I'm sure Ali does as well, "You Americans are not going to abandon us again, are you?" The perception is that it was abandonment by the US following the war with the Soviets that caused the country to fall into chaos for so many years. They are much more concerned about the Americans leaving them in a lurch than staying, and that is the same throughout the international community as well. That's atypical in Afghan history but it is something I felt very clearly. Part of that is the inoculation factor from having lived under the Taliban and knowing what the alternative is like. There is absolutely no prospect for Taliban support to suddenly catch fire with a surge of support for the insurgency. Afghans want nothing to do with a Taliban government. But at the same time the West can fail by being ineffective, incapable, and inept. It's going to take a tremendous amount of human capital and investment – not just military power, but management expertise – to make the enterprise successful. It is going to take another full ten years of work to do that.