

Steve Brooking

Early ISAF

'The Good Old Days'

Were the early days of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as good as they are remembered or were they in fact a missed opportunity? While 20-20 hindsight always provides perspective, what was actually happening at the time?

The Bonn Agreement of 2001,¹ between members of the international community and various Afghan factions, included an annex that called for the agreement of the UN Security Council to deploy an International Security Force to assist in maintaining security for Kabul, with the possibility of further extension as required.² This call was taken up and UN Security Council Resolution 1386 was passed on 20 December 2001, establishing the first ISAF for an initial period of six months. The UK indicated it was willing to lead for three months and prepared to deploy a number of assets, including the command elements of its 3rd Mechanised

Division under Major General John McColl, who flew to Kabul to negotiate a Military Technical Agreement (MTA) with the then Afghan Interior Minister Younis Qanuni. Negotiations were quickly concluded in a generally positive atmosphere (there were one or two disagreements on the locations of ISAF bases within Kabul), and the agreement was signed on 4 January 2002.³ This MTA remains the key agreement between the succeeding governments of Afghanistan and the ISAF/NATO (although the US Department of Defence and the Afghan Ministry of Defence have a separate agreement).

Interestingly the MTA did not include the Bonn Agreement stipulation that the Afghans should 'withdraw all military units from Kabul',⁴ but instead stated that the current military (non-police) units should be confined to barracks. Not until 2004, under the ISAF command of Canadian General Rick Hillier, did the removal and cantonment of heavy weapons take place as part of the wider Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process (as a foretaste of non-anti-corruption initiatives to come, Hillier was less successful in his attempts to persuade the president to allow the ISAF to arrest the major

¹ The Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions.

² 'Conscious that some time may be required for the new Afghan security and armed forces to be fully constituted and functioning, the participants . . . request the UNSC to consider the early deployment . . . of a UN-mandated force. This force will assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas. Such a force could, as appropriate, be progressively expanded to other urban centres and other areas.' Annex 1 to the Bonn agreement, see www.undemocracy.com/S-2001-1154/page_9. The Bonn agreement did not realise that the time required would take until at least 2014 for the 'transition' to Afghan-led security.

³ For the text of the Military Technical Agreement see <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.operations.mod.uk/isafmta.pdf>.

⁴ 'The participants . . . pledge to withdraw all military units from Kabul and other urban centres or other areas in which the UN-mandated force is deployed.' Annex 1 to the Bonn agreement.

criminals causing instability in Kabul). In the meantime, the continued presence of Afghan Militia Forces seen as predominantly loyal to the Northern Alliance was a source of concern to some Pashtuns and Hazaras.

The area covered by the first ISAF mission was delineated in a map that was annexed to the MTA. It encompassed Kabul and its immediate environs with an extension to include Bagram Airbase. Although the MTA allowed full freedom of movement for ISAF within Afghanistan, Major General McColl had to seek permission from his own authorities to go outside this area of responsibility (for instance, to pay a visit to the Panjshir Valley).

Many countries wished to contribute to ISAF, but the problem was finding the correct balance of forces and the appropriate forms of control: some favoured a few contributing nations in strength; others thought the force should comprise as many nations as possible provided they could pay their way with troops and equipment. In the end, the first ISAF mission included 19 nations,⁵ more than some wanted for ease of command, less than others wanted to show mass international support.

With the exception of some minor stone-throwing incidents at ISAF convoys in the first few days, the force was well-received and quickly started joint foot patrols with the Afghan Police. One benefit of ISAF's arrival was the gradual easing of the night-time curfew in Kabul, which many citizens saw as allowing criminal police groups to move around robbing houses. However, it was not finally lifted until November 2002 after some 24 years in existence. As mandated by the Bonn Agreement,⁶ the ISAF also worked on some 200 humanitarian projects (thereby accidentally contributing to the debate as to whether the line was becoming blurred between military and humanitarian assistance), destroyed more than two million anti-personnel mines, and trained the 1st Battalion of the Afghan National Guard (1BANG, which became the fledgling Afghan National Army), which went on to provide the Afghan face of security for the Emergency Loya Jirga.⁷ McColl also established himself as a trusted interlocutor with Interim President Hamid Karzai, to such an extent that the UK government later

appointed him as their Special Representative for Afghanistan.

It is worth noting that, in addition to the ISAF in Kabul, there was the parallel commitment of international military forces to the 'Coalition' effort of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) led by the US Central Command (CENTCOM). In late November 2001, after the capture of Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif, a number of countries contributed ground forces to OEF to drive the Taliban and al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Thus there were patrol bases and small units of international military present in other cities and areas of the country even before ISAF came into existence. It was from some of these forces that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) developed, with the first non-US PRT being the British one deployed to Mazar-e Sharif on 10 July 2003. The UK government agreed in a letter to the UN Security Council, before UNSCR 1386 was passed to establish the force, that ISAF would be subordinate to the needs of CENTCOM and OEF.

With a number of countries committed to OEF and with others concerned about the over-arching official control of CENTCOM, there were problems finding a country to lead the second ISAF mission when its mandate was extended in May 2002 (the UK had already extended its command from the original commitment of three months and did not want to stay on). In the end the Turkish government indicated its willingness to take over as long as certain assistance was provided.⁸ (UK soldiers found it somewhat ironic that they were constructing brick buildings in the ISAF headquarters for the Turks, while they themselves were living in tents. Indeed ISAF headquarters was a motley collection of buildings around the original Officers Club designated as the ISAF headquarters building, all added in different styles by different command contingents). The Turks marked the start of their humanitarian work with a mass circumcision ceremony and maintained the positive image of ISAF among the local population.⁹

In late 2002 there was again a problem in finding willing leadership for the continued ISAF mission, but Germany and the Netherlands said that, with NATO support, they would be willing to lead and

⁵ <http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/ISAFbackgrounder.pdf>.

⁶ 'It would also be desirable if such a force were to assist in the rehabilitation of Afghanistan's infrastructure.' Annex 1 to the Bonn agreement.

⁷ National Archive, Operation Fingal: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.operations.mod.uk/fingal/index.htm>.

⁸ In the Emergency Supplemental request for fiscal year 2002 submitted to Congress in March 2002, the US Administration requested US\$28 million in Foreign Military Financing and US\$200 million in Economic Support Funds for Turkey to help them take on the leadership duties.

⁹ David Fox, 'Mass Circumcision in Kabul', *Reuters* 23 July 2002, available at www.cirp.org/news/reuters07-23-02/.

use their Multi-National Brigade under Lt. Gen. Van Heyst. The combined German-Dutch command took over in February 2003. NATO then began increase its role and on 16 April 2003 the North Atlantic Council agreed to take over ISAF mission command and coordination, finally doing so in August 2003 under German Lt. Gen. Gliemerth. NATO then significantly widened its involvement with an agreement to extend, in phased steps, its mandate until it covered the whole country (approved by UNSCR 1510 on 13 October 2003 and finally agreed upon by NATO in December 2003); this enabled the German government to deploy a PRT to Kunduz. Also in late 2003, NATO decided to deploy a NATO Senior Civilian Representative, the former Turkish politician, Hikmet Cetin, to provide some balance between the political and military sides of the NATO mission.

In 2002–03, the insurgents ('exsurgents'?) were in retreat from Afghanistan to cross-border safe-havens or back to their communities, with few initial thoughts other than self-preservation. Kabul was safer than many capital cities in the world, and ISAF was partly credited for that by the population. Only later did the insurgent planning and re-infiltration start in earnest, and attacks in Kabul started becoming commonplace, actually targeting NATO/ISAF.¹⁰ The two ministers killed in 2002 (Aviation Minister Abdul Rahman and Minister for Public Works and concurrent Vice-President Haji Abdul Qadir) were both deemed victims of previous feuds rather than Taleban or al-Qaeda attacks.

The early ISAFs' actions were largely uncontroversial. However, there were, perhaps inevitably, issues such as civilian casualties (a man shot dead in February 2002 during curfew, when failing to stop his car at a checkpoint while rushing a relative to hospital to have a baby) and emerging debate as to whether the military (PRTs) should be involved in what could be considered 'aid' and reconstruction; there were conflicting ideas about possibly blurring the lines of aid and security and thus endangering the lives and livelihoods of aid-workers. Most major controversies were instead associated with OEF use of force, such as the July 2002 bombing of a wedding party despite the president's (since oft-repeated) demand that steps should be taken to avoid civilian casualties,¹¹ or the OEF Special Forces' use of civilian clothing and white

vehicles (which are usually used by civilians involved in humanitarian work). Coalition tactics pre-victory, such as the 'strategic bombing campaign' and whole-scale backing of the Northern Alliance, also came under criticism.¹²

The real controversy over the early ISAF involvement is about what it was not and what it did not do. As usual, that criticism has mainly come with 'hindsight bias': the ISAF was not an effective peace-keeping force capable of controlling and mitigating the role of the warlords and former factions who settled scores in their time-honoured ways; it did not train a new Afghan National Army, with the exception of 1BANG; and it did not play a significant role in disarmament of the Afghan Militia Forces.

Should ISAF have done more? Should ISAF have been larger? Many of the experienced NGOs called for a rapid expansion and greater troop numbers;¹³ however, like with so many UN-backed initiatives, there were conflicting opinions among the major players as to the role, or even desirability, of international forces. Despite some on-going fighting in the southern part of the country, the resistance was basically deemed to have ended and many countries were not sure of the utility of further international forces. So what was decided upon was perhaps the lowest common denominator at the time: the US did not want their OEF-operations constrained by the presence of 'peace-keepers', the Northern Alliance did not want their chance to dominate obstructed by the presence of international forces, and neither did their Russian and Iranian backers. So an apparent alignment of US, Russian, Iranian and Northern Alliance interests seems to have conspired to keep ISAF 'contained' – a strange alliance that re-surfaced at the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002 to keep 'The Return of the King' off the agenda – another move seen in hindsight by many as a mistake.

¹² For more on 'problems' with OEF and ISAF see Carl Conetta, 'Strange Victory: A Critical Appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan War' Project on Defense Alternatives, 30 January 2002; in particular, para 4.3.2, available at www.comw.org/pda/0201strangevic.html#4.3.2.

¹³ See for example, the ICG report of March 2002 in which a force of 25,000 across the country was advocated to lessen ethnic tensions and firm up the fragility of the peace: 'Securing Afghanistan: The Need for More International Action' 15 March 2002, available at www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/B013-securing-afghanistan-the-need-for-more-international-action.aspx.

¹⁰ For full treatment of the re-emerging threat at that time, see Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, New York, Columbia University Press 2008.

¹¹ Luke Harding, 'No US Apology over Wedding Bombing' *The Guardian* 2 July 2002, available at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/jul/03/afghanistan.lukeharding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: STEVE BROOKING

Steve Brooking was the first UK Government official in Afghanistan and accompanied the Northern Alliance delegation to the Bonn talks; he became Political Counsellor at the UK Embassy from 2001–04 and was Charge d’Affaires during the Constitutional Loya Jirga; he returned to Kabul in 2005 in a private capacity and has worked as an advisor to, among others, the UN and Afghan Ministers of Interior.

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan’s Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

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