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Is Afghanistan worth it? A brigadier general answers

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I was recently asked if Afghanistan was worth the death of a Canadian soldier. It is a question that goes to the root of our nation's involvement in this vitally important region, a question made all the more poignant by the losses here that our nation has endured.

Let me answer.

The terror of 9/11 was born and bred in the lawless vacuum that was Afghanistan, a shattered land of shattered lives left desperate after 30 years of war and corruption. Around this vacuum swirled the regional turbulence afflicting Iran, Pakistan, China, India and Russia. An Afghanistan left unstable and vulnerable to the inrush of these forces would prove an immense incubator for terrors beyond the compass of imagination.

So, as part of a coalition, we went to Afghanistan. If we fail here, if we leave Afghanistan without security forces, without sound governance, without the rule of law, without an infrastructure and an alternative to narcotics, we will invite back the forces that spawned 9/11.

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I have been to Afghanistan every year since 2003; every year, I see improvement as the country, with the help of the international community, reawakens. Kabul is home to ten times the population I recall in 2003. Young women and girls are in school, an economy is growing and the people have a capable, principled army of which they are proud. In the growth of a police force and the admittedly, but perhaps understandably, more gradual birth of a system of governance, Afghans can see the dawn of a rule of law.

In April, 2007, I joined the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, a coalition comprising military personnel from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, Albania, Germany, France and Romania, as well as contracted civilian advisers, all working together as mentors and trainers. Our mission is to partner with the government of Afghanistan and the international community to organize, train, equip, advise and mentor the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. As deputy commanding general for Afghan National Army Development, I am focused on development of the army.

Success for us is a national army that is professional and competent, literate, ethnically diverse, and capable of providing security throughout Afghanistan. The army comprises five ground manoeuvre corps and one air corps; by December, it will consist of 70,000 troops. Each region of the country is secured by one ground corps. In addition, we have trained and equipped three battalions of superbly capable commando soldiers. Equipment, from helicopters to rifles, has been donated by coalition countries.

I have seen little evidence of corruption in the army; its senior leadership is working hard to ensure it is a national institution Afghans can trust. Part of that is to identify and root out corruption, if and when found.

Afghans come to their army already quite willing to fight. Training occurs nationally and in each corps area. Beyond the basics any new soldier learns, commanders at all levels hone the ability to work in units and in co-operation with coalition forces. Growing leaders in the non-commissioned officer and officer ranks takes time, but pays off: Two corps are now able to plan and conduct complex missions with police and coalition forces. Of the security operations now in progress across the country, ANA forces are in the lead in all but a small minority.

We are working with the army to improve their artillery force, which is based on old Soviet equipment. While the coalition now provides air support and aerial medical evacuation, the Afghan air component, as its capabilities increase, will begin assuming these missions.

With soldiers from all of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups — the Pashtun, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmen — this is truly a national force. Their battlefield success attests to their competence: These are soldiers who want to close with and engage their enemy. Whenever that enemy has been foolish enough to stand and fight, they have lost. We do not see hundreds of Taliban forming up to attack. They know better. They poke around by the handful and most end up dead or captured.

Instead of fighting, insurgents are resorting to improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers; the growth of confidence among Afghans in their army is, in turn, prompting more tips that expose such threats.

The spectacle of suicide bombs notwithstanding, violence is not the rule. Last year, 70 per cent of incidents occurred in 10 per cent of the nearly 400 districts. The commander of our Regional Command East, centred around Jalalabad, reported that more than 90 per cent of Afghans there enjoy a peaceful life; the violence shown by our media does not represent the lives of the vast majority of Afghans.

Instead, the lives of most Afghans are lived peacefully, with increasing access to basic services, the prospect of a representative and responsive government at the local, regional and national levels. The economy rewards honest work, and the possibility of education exists for their children.

Instead of a breeding ground for corruption and terror, their homeland is becoming, ever so slowly, but ever so surely, a nation of stability and dignity with something of value to offer its global neighbours.

Back to the question. There is nothing we do that is worth the life of an individual, but do I think it is important for me to be in Afghanistan and do I think my actions and the actions of other Canadians have made a difference here — the answer is, absolutely yes.

Brigadier General Dennis Tabbernor is deputy commanding general, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan.