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## **Mission Unaccomplished: Taking Stock of the**

### **U.S. and Soviet Wars in Afghanistan**

*A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan.* By Artemy M. Kalinovsky.  
(Harvard University Press, 2011.)

*The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan.* By Francis J. West. (Random House, 2011.)

*A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan.*  
By Dov S. Zakheim. (The Brookings Institution Press, 2011.)

Twelve years after "Operation Enduring Freedom" was launched in Afghanistan, the situation in the region is more volatile than ever. The Taliban have increased bombings throughout 2013: killing seven women and children during a Muslim holiday (August 8), a district governor and seven others attending a funeral (August 30), the female author Sushmita Banerjee (September 5) who wrote a book about the Taliban's repression, seven civilian passengers on a bus (September 10), four Afghans at the U.S. Consulate in Herat (September 13), and six Afghan charity workers (November 27). The Afghan President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly stalled in signing the bilateral security agreement, which would allow some U.S. and coalition security forces to remain after the main troop withdrawal at the end of 2014. The Karzai administration has even proposed resuming public stoning to death as a punishment for adultery. Meanwhile, U.S. drone attacks, like the one that killed Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud on November 1, 2013, only martyr slain Taliban commanders and whet their followers' appetite for revenge. Not always "surgical" in their strikes, drones have also killed innocent civilians and provided fodder for the Taliban's anti-American propaganda. Pessimists predict a cutthroat civil war after 2014, given the increased attacks between the

Taliban and the Afghan National Army (ANA), the possibility of a total U.S. troop pullout in 2014 (“the zero option”), the high turnover rate of ANA personnel through casualties or desertion, and the ANA's dependence on the U.S.-led coalition for logistics, intelligence, and medical evacuation. Indeed, British Prime Minister David Cameron's malapropos comment during his December 17 visit to Afghanistan, namely that soldiers can return with the summary commendation “mission accomplished,” reminds one of George W. Bush's televised speech on an aircraft carrier in 2003, just as the insurgency in Iraq was escalating.

Regardless of the invading state's aims, ideology, firepower, or population-centric “hearts and minds” strategies, counterinsurgency wars in Afghanistan always seem doomed to fail. The British (1839–42, 1878–80), Soviets (1979–89) and Americans (2001–2013) have all underestimated the difficulties of waging war in this fiercely independent country. The plethora of books published on Afghanistan describing these difficulties fall roughly into four categories: archive-based historical studies, soldiers' war diaries, strategic analyses, and policy makers' memoirs. This article will assess three recently published books by an academic (Artemy Kalinovsky), a U.S. government official (Dov Zakheim), and a U.S. Marine combat veteran (Francis J. West), respectively. A reading of these books sharpens our understanding of how the Soviet and U.S. wars resembled and differed from each other, particularly with respect to nation building, decision making, use of technology, and conflict termination.

For many Russians with “twenty-twenty hindsight,” the similarities outweigh the differences. The U.S.-led coalition is fighting the same Islamic fundamentalist insurgents, backed to varying degrees by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, without a clear understanding of Islamic culture and motivations. It encounters the same logistical difficulties in counterinsurgency warfare, including an elusive hit-and-run enemy, ability to clear but not hold

areas, local civilian casualties, growing recruits for the insurgents, and a meek population that either supports the insurgents or fears their retaliation. The coalition grapples with the same mountainous terrain and lack of roads, making supply convoys targets for attacks on the few extant roads. Imperial hubris spawned hasty decision making among a small circle of elites in both superpowers, faith in superior firepower, belief in quick victory, and the assumption that Afghanistan can be changed from without. Both countries' military personnel, trained for combat, resented the need for nation building. The withdrawal process was tortuous. Each has faced difficulties uniting the belligerents around the negotiating table. The corrupt client regime usually wants to maintain the status quo and continue receiving outside funding; the insurgents—sensing impending victory—want to attack harder, not to compromise, and the occupier fears withdrawing before a peace treaty and an interim government are formed. To leave a power vacuum is to invite an embarrassingly quick collapse of the client regime.

Residual bipolar-era rivalry lingers in the minds of some U.S. policy makers and military strategists. They want to prove that they can win a war that the Soviets lost. From their perspective, the differences between the wars outweigh the similarities. For one thing, the geopolitical context is vastly different. The Soviet war took place during the Cold War, and Moscow was immediately ostracized by most countries after the initial invasion in December 1979. Conservatives in Washington underscored the Kremlin's alleged intention to acquire access to oil and warm-water ports in the Middle East. U.S. President Jimmy Carter cut off shipments of grain to the Soviet Union and called for a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics. By contrast, world opinion—in the aftermath of the 9/11 horror—for the most part supported U.S. President George Bush's decision to attack Afghanistan for having harbored Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. Although Afghanistan does not border the United States, and the Taliban

and Pashtun tribal leaders themselves had not attacked Americans on their own soil, numerous countries initially empathized by sending contingents to fight in the coalition, participating in nation building, or just by offering the use of their airspace.

Moreover, the Soviets had less technology in the 1980s: no cell phones, Internet, drones, digital transceivers, and global positioning systems. The United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and United Arab Emirates were providing military and humanitarian aid to the mujahedeen. A victim of numerous Islamic terrorist attacks since the two Chechen wars in the 1990s, the Russian Federation today not only has not aided the Taliban and al Qaeda, but has supported the U.S.-led NATO coalition against them. The “rogue ideology” today is Islamic fundamentalism, not communist expansionism. Throughout the 1980s, Moscow kept war funding and troop levels steady: about 15–20 billion rubles (about \$10–15 billion) for the entire war, and roughly 120,000 troops, respectively.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Washington has spent about \$721 billion since 2001, or roughly \$1 million per soldier for one year.<sup>2</sup> (Total U.S. national debt grew from \$5.8 trillion in 2001 to \$17 trillion in October 2013.) The Pentagon launched a surge of 33,000 troops in 2009, bringing the total U.S. troop level to 101,000 at its peak and total NATO coalition forces to about 140,000 in 2011. Finally, the Soviet occupation lasted nine years, while the U.S. and NATO occupation continues to drag on after 12 years.

Mixed results have soured American views of nation building, despite the technological advantages of the twenty-first century. U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, as articulated in the 2006 US Army and Marine Corps manual, was “to secure and serve the population” (e.g., training the army, building roads, bridges, and schools) in the hope that the population would

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kalinovsky (2011, 42), the cost was roughly \$7.5 billion in the 1982–86 period. See “The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan: An Intelligence Assessment.”

<sup>2</sup> The war up to the end of 2013 has cost about \$662 in nominal dollars and \$721 in 2014 dollars. See the National Priorities Project, “Afghanistan War Costs.”

reject the insurgents in return (West 2011, 249). However, this strategy is inconsistent with Islamic values. Deriving from Rousseau's social contract, COIN strategy assumes rationality and material desires. As Francis "Bing" West, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, points out, Afghan villages have in fact shunned partnering with Americans in order to avoid violent skirmishes with the Taliban that inevitably follow (248). Moreover, the COIN strategy does not consider what to do when the population remains neutral, despite the good will and works of the foreign occupier. If devout Muslims see Westerners basically as infidels and occupiers, then no material largesse will alter their opinion. Instead, nation-building projects have bred a "culture of entitlement," West argues. This author, who was embedded with military units in Afghan districts such as Marja and Garmsir, recounts one incident in which Marines offered to pay each Afghan villager \$9 a day to clean a canal that was choked with weeds, thus drying up their fields. The villagers refused, insisting instead that the Marines give them 10 men to do the work (234).

Several other ironies emerge. Aside from materialism, COIN strategy is predicated on close contact with the people. Infantry ("grunts") have the closest contact with the people, yet comprise less than 10% of the U.S. Army and Marines (West 2011, 169). Moreover, in the face of increased attacks by cheap "improvised explosive devices" (IEDs), the Pentagon has spent billions of dollars on armored vehicles that have further limited interaction with the people. "It's hard to talk through twelve inches of bulletproof glass," observes West (175). He also notes the irony that, while U.S. Democrats oppose the war in Afghanistan because it diverts funds from domestic entitlement programs, Republicans generally support this war, albeit based on the same types of entitlements that they oppose in their own country (250). Not only has COIN strategy implemented in Afghanistan over the past 12 years drained the national exchequer with little or

no payoff, but it has also obscured and shifted overall war objectives, resulting in “mission creep.” In effect, the military took on too many roles and dissipated its energies. West believes the military should do what it is trained to do; it should not be used like the U.S. Peace Corps.

The Soviets also failed at nation building. In chapter four of *A Long Good-bye*, Kalinovsky covers the policy of “National Reconciliation,” a nation-building program implemented in 1987 under Soviet protégé Babrak Karmal's successor Mohammad Najibullah. It entailed construction projects and other measures to win over the clergy and peasants. According to Kalinovsky, Soviet generals shared the views of Bing West and other U.S. military officers. He reports one Colonel General Vladimir Vostrov who said “To hell with national reconciliation. Warriors receive medals on their chests and stars on their epaulettes and money, not for reconciliation but for conducting combat operations” (2011, 103). He also cites Aleksandr Liakhovskii, a former military advisor in Afghanistan, who stated that the Soviet army was “faced with tasks which it was not in a position to carry out” (37).

Dov Zakheim takes a view similar to West's: over the past 10 years, nation building and protection of the population as U.S. military missions in Afghanistan have failed. Zakheim served from 2001 to 2004 as civilian coordinator for Defense Department activities in Afghanistan, in addition to serving as comptroller and chief financial officer at the Pentagon. Unlike West, however, he argues that *more* money should have been spent in Afghanistan. He repeats the common argument that, had the Pentagon not diverted resources to Iraq in the spring of 2003 and instead invested in a network of roads, the Afghan economy would have flourished. However, “in 2003–04, the United States had more than ten times as many troops in Iraq as in Afghanistan” (Zakheim, 212). The Taliban gained time to regroup in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and linked the flourishing opium trade to its terrorist

ambitions (267). According to Zakheim, the Bush administration had “virtually won” the war in Afghanistan before it invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003 (37, 267). By 2011, however, the Taliban had regained control of large parts of the country, the Haqqani network (a pro-Taliban militant group) had developed, and al Qaeda slowly regrouped (273). Perhaps Zakheim himself contributed to this diversion of funds; he admits that he and his colleagues prioritized the fundraising for Iraq over Afghanistan, fearing “donor fatigue” (211).

The books by Kalinovsky and Zakheim provide insights into the decision-making processes in both Moscow and Washington, although definitive documents about the Bush Administration's decision making remain classified. Both in December 1979 and September 2001, the decisions to invade Afghanistan were ostensibly made in anger and haste by a small group of elites. Just four senior Politburo members made the decision to invade: General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev (73 years old), KGB chairman Yuri Andropov (65 years old), Foreign Affairs Minister Andrei Gromyko (70 years old), and Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov (71 years old). United in their conservative views, commitment to supporting Third World regimes, and pride in a series of military successes in the 1970s, the septuagenarians “often shut detractors out of the decision-making process” (Kalinovsky 2011, 219). Earlier in March 1979 after the Herat massacre, they had decided *not* to invade Afghanistan, amidst warnings by military officers about the incompatibility of Islam and Marxism-Leninism, difficult terrain, Soviet soldiers' unfamiliarity with Islamic culture and tribal relations, and probable international fallout (22). However, the murder of communist leader Nur Mohammed Taraki—the general secretary of the Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)—by his colleague, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Hafizullah Amin, resulted in an emotional volte face. Brezhnev had considered Taraki to be a close friend who had traveled to Moscow in September

1979 to ask for his help. Upon Taraki's return to Kabul, Amin ordered his arrest and later death by strangulation. Amin's erratic behavior in the ensuing weeks deepened Brezhnev's anger and suspicion that Amin was a CIA collaborator. Thus, a key motive for the Soviet invasion was regime change: replacing Amin with Babrak Karmal, an initially more tractable PDPA member. As Kalinovsky points out, Moscow never intended for Soviet troops to take the lead in fighting the Afghan insurgency.

The U.S. decision to invade Afghanistan was also made in a whirlwind of rage and lust for revenge but ostensibly with little or no foresight. "My blood was boiling," Bush famously wrote about 9/11 in his memoir, *Decision Points*. "We were going to find out who did this, and kick their ass." Although Zakheim was not in the foreign policy-making chain of command, he attended the first meeting of the senior Defense Department team at the Pentagon after 9/11. On that day, September 12, he quotes Bush as saying, "We're gonna kill the rattlesnakes." "No one misunderstood his meaning: the United States was going to war," Zakheim writes. "The matter as he presented it was straightforward: the Taliban had nurtured al-Qaeda, whose people had attacked Americans on U.S. soil. The United States would retaliate against both to make sure they could not attack again" (Zakheim 2011, 81). Apparently, the decision to go to war was delivered from above; there was no open debate among wider circles of policy makers. If just one day after the terrorist attacks Bush had decided to use military force, it is doubtful he had had enough time to consult experts about the lessons learned from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Key steps to effective decision making include articulating the objective; specifying what one wants to achieve, preserve, or avoid; gathering intelligence; considering several options; weighing the benefits, costs, and risks of each option; choosing the best option; and troubleshooting the chosen option to anticipate what might go wrong. As with Brezhnev's

leadership, probably only a handful of elites—the “Vulcans,” or group of foreign policy advisors who originally guided the 2000 Bush presidential campaign—participated in the decision-making process.<sup>3</sup> There was certainly no genuine public debate. A week later, on September 20, President Bush issued an ultimatum to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to turn over al Qaeda's leaders. And two weeks after that, air strikes on Afghanistan began.

Zakheim's *A Vulcan's Tale* is one of many books by Washington insiders and reporters who describe the Bush administration's improvisational style of decision making and tendency to favor loyalty over expertise. The failure to weigh pros and cons before invading Iraq, for example, is noted by Seymour M. Hersh in *Chain of Command* (2004), Larry Diamond in *Squandered Victory* (2005), and George Packer in *The Assassins' Gate* (2006). Zakheim writes, “Few of them focused on the practicalities of executing decisions, or even on the feasibility of doing so. This failure was a major flaw of US policymaking during the first few years of the Bush administration” (Zakheim 2011, 284). As Pentagon comptroller, he found it vexing that they “showed little interest in the nuts and bolts of costs and expense management” (187). They never “felt the need to audit the myriad contractors who would be employed to support any military operation virtually from the outset” (187). Zakheim concedes that his own appointment as civilian coordinator for Defense Department activities in Afghanistan—since he was outside the policymaking chain of command—revealed the low priority the Bush Administration attached to the reconstruction of Afghanistan (7).

Comments by Zakheim, one of the Vulcans himself, reveal his own ignorance of the thorny nature of counterinsurgency war, the long-term resilience of Afghan warriors, and the Soviet experience. For example, he writes simplistically that by 2004, before the revelations of

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<sup>3</sup> The Vulcans included Condoleezza Rice, Richard Armitage, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Blackwill, Stephen Hadley, Richard Perle, Robert Zoellick, Scooter Libby, and Dov S. Zakheim.

U.S. abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, the United States “had vanquished the Taliban and Saddam's forces, both in short order” (Zakheim 2011, 37). In truth, they had merely regrouped in Pakistan. He also writes that the Soviets “were driven out” of Afghanistan (108). However, Kalinovsky's research clearly shows a Soviet Union *reacting*, not *proacting*, to the growing anticommunist insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s (which the Jimmy Carter administration began funding six months before the Soviet invasion). As early as 1982, Moscow officials actively sought a diplomatic solution to pave the way for withdrawal (63). Hardliners in Washington (“bleeders”), however, wanted to keep funding the mujahedeen via Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to make the Russians suffer in “their own Vietnam,” pauperizing themselves in the process.

West illustrates in his book that, while it is true that Americans in the twenty-first century had more advanced technologies than the Soviets did in the 1980s, U.S. military personnel did not always exploit them fully. On the one hand, Americans were able to identify sellers of ammunition via empty cartridge shells and to locate Afghans assembling IEDs by tracing cell phone calls over several weeks (West 2011, 170, 182). By intercepting the Taliban's messages transmitted by limited-range handheld Icom transceivers, coalition patrols often knew precisely when the insurgents were planning an attack. (The Taliban made such interception easy, however, by failing to encrypt their communications.)

On the other hand, Americans' access to new technologies produced an overabundance of data, which obscured strategic objectives. West describes the daily conduct of so-called Battlefield Update Assessments (BUAs). In a Wizard of Oz-like scenario, headquarters' staffs convened in operations centers across Afghanistan. “Rows upon rows of midlevel officers sat in front of laptop computers”; the face of the general appeared on a huge central screen. Each

commander would walk up to a microphone and report minute data for his region (West 2011, 177). West writes, “Like reporting on the speed of race cars at the Indianapolis 500,” these data measured sheer *activity*, yet they did not show who was winning or what changes needed to be made in order to win (178). In this way, the generals, living in luxurious air-conditioned quarters, acted like judges instead of coaches. Morale problems among the lower-ranking soldiers and Marines resulted.

At other times, new technologies were not used; the U.S. military relied on outdated standard operating procedures instead. According to West, local Afghan interpreters with rudimentary English skills and questionable loyalty were hired, when patrol leaders—via Skype on their mobile phones—could have hired U.S.-based American-Afghan citizens who were fluent in the tribal dialects and had access to real-time satellite intelligence. “Every Afghan farmer could have been greeted by a friendly Pashto voice over a headset, while the patrol leader on another headset asked questions,” West wrote (2011, 176).

Moreover, the battalions had handheld devices that could store data on each military-aged male (M.A.M.). If a major obstacle in fighting counterinsurgency wars is the difficulty in distinguishing insurgents from the civilian population, census-taking would have overcome it. It would be tantamount to “putting a uniform on every insurgent” (West 2011, 171). During the Algerian War (1954–62), every house was numbered, and every household was given a family census booklet. West, who fought in Vietnam, recalls that “census grievance teams” were sent to every hamlet and that the effort took two years (175). The U.S.-led coalition has been in Afghanistan for 12 years now, but no systematic biometric and census data has been collected. Apparently it takes too much time: 15 minutes to enter the data for one person in these “clunky” devices. Also, the acronym MAM was considered too demeaning to the male population (171).

Hence, while advanced technologies are an advantage, they have not enabled the U.S.-led coalition to subdue Afghan fighters any more quickly than the Soviets did.

Similarities in the process of conflict termination in the two wars also abound. Two similarities in particular deserve mention. First, as Kalinovsky shows his readers, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev found it difficult to control the headstrong Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah, who in 1988–89 continually sought to sabotage negotiations, delay Soviet troop withdrawal, and obtain more funding and security guarantees from Moscow. He distrusted non-Pashtun politicians too much to form an alliance with the popular Afghan resistance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik who was nicknamed the “Lion of Panjshir.” Soviet military officials like General Valentin Varennikov favored an alliance with Massoud, whereas the Soviet KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov and foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze favored Najibullah. Meanwhile, Najibullah suspected that the Soviets would broker a deal with Massoud behind his back. In the winter of 1988–89, the Soviet military failed to prevent the attack by Najibullah's PDPA army against Massoud, which destroyed any chance of a Soviet-sponsored peace between Massoud's fighters and Najibullah's PDPA regime (Kalinovsky 2011, 168). Since the mujahedeen leaders were not a party to the Geneva Accords (signed on April 14, 1988), they refused to accept its terms, and civil war continued after the last of the Soviet troops left Afghanistan on February 15, 1989. The Taliban tortured and murdered Najibullah on September 27, 1996.

Second, in an effort to convince the Reagan Administration that he was serious about ending the war, Gorbachev made a series of rapid concessions, not realizing it would rob him of bargaining chips vis-à-vis the American negotiators. Washington had insisted that Gorbachev publicly declare a deadline for withdrawal and that the withdrawal be “front-loaded” before

Washington would agree to stop funding the mujahedeen. Having concluded that the war in Afghanistan could not be won, and wishing to improve relations with Washington, Gorbachev made these concessions. Reagan subsequently had no incentive to stop aiding the mujahedeen and would have drawn the ire of U.S. conservatives had he stopped aid (Kalinovsky 2011, 137, 144).

President Obama faces similar dilemmas. He is grappling with an increasingly mercurial Karzai, who has requested an American apology for violating Afghanistan's sovereignty, causing unnecessary civilian deaths, and allegedly striking deals with the Taliban behind his back. He has also accused the Obama Administration of inciting the Taliban to attack the Afghan national army (ANA) in order to gain public support for the bilateral security agreement. Like Najibullah, Karzai has called for greater security guarantees, in this case against foreign intervention from states like Pakistan. Unlike Najibullah, however, Karzai will not remain in power after the elections in April 2014, since he has already served two terms. Politically—and indeed for his physical safety—he must be wary of “selling out” to the United States. Rather than agree to exclusive U.S. jurisdiction over American military personnel for any crimes they might commit in Afghanistan—after the Afghan people's outrage regarding the massacre by Americans of 16 Afghan civilians on March 11, 2012—Karzai cautiously relegated the matter to a Loya Jirga.

Second, by publicly proclaiming in a June 22, 2011 speech the drawdown and planned withdrawal of US troops by the end of 2014, Obama, like Gorbachev, has lost some leverage and emboldened the Taliban to step up attacks. On April 15, 2012, the Taliban launched multiple simultaneous attacks throughout the country, including key targets in Kabul like the NATO headquarters, Afghan parliament building, and the U.S., British, German, and Iranian embassies. In many attacks, the Taliban insurgents don U.S. military uniforms or women's wigs and *burqas*,

videotape their attacks, and post the videos on YouTube to gain recruits. While Taliban leaders have met a few times with the Americans to negotiate possible prisoner exchanges, it is doubtful they will negotiate seriously with Karzai, whom they regard as a mere puppet. Thus, as did Gorbachev, Obama may very well withdraw U.S. troops without brokering an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgents.

No book is perfect. Both Zakheim and West provide useful details as eyewitnesses, but their books are weak in overall strategic analysis. Especially given his official position, Zakheim's argument, made earlier by Seth Jones (2009) and others, namely that the “rush to war with Iraq” detracted from the reconstruction of Afghanistan, is overly simplistic. West writes at the tactical level, criticizing higher-level civilian and military leaders based on interviews from the “grunts” in the field. Interviews with people from the high command would have bolstered his study. Kalinovsky's book clarifies our understanding of the motivations and timing of the eventual Soviet withdrawal, but as he admits, many additional archival sources are still closed to the public. Nevertheless, all three of these books would enhance syllabi for courses in Central Asian politics, Cold War history, and Russian and U.S. foreign policy. Other books, including the ones listed below, should be assigned to raise questions about who really benefits from this expensive “nation-building” war in Afghanistan and why a government that is \$17 trillion in debt continues it when 47 million U.S. citizens at home subsist on food stamps.

Ultimately, the situation the Obama Administration faces is much more complex than the one Gorbachev faced in the 1980s. The Islamic fundamentalist movement is much stronger in the twenty-first century. As revealed recently, the Taliban and al Qaeda have indeed been funded

generously over the years by countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> The conflict has spread to Pakistan, where a Pakistani Taliban has developed. More actors have a stake in the crisis, from NGOs to NATO partners. And the Obama Administration is dealing with a much weaker client government and army, led by a man despised by the Afghan people. But to most Afghans, comparisons are pointless; both the Soviets and Americans equally have failed in their missions.

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<sup>4</sup> Nic Robertson, “Saudis discover new funding channels for Taliban, al Qaeda,” *CNN* (January 27, 2011). <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/27/saudi.terror.funding/index.html>.

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