

RETHINKING SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN

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One regularly reads reports, in the international press, about the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Afghan observers generally also seem worried about the security situation, especially with the upcoming elections, in October 2004 and spring 2005. However, the only two surveys that have been made in this field (one from October 2003 and one that was recently published²) indicate that ordinary Afghans throughout the country globally consider their security to be quite good, and in almost all cases, that it has improved over the last years. Nevertheless, they still name “security” as one of their main concerns.

This apparent paradox needs to be addressed as the international community is attempting to mobilize nation states to commit more security forces to Afghanistan. Last August 18, the Secretary General of the UN called for “an urgent increase in international forces in Afghanistan to address the deteriorating security situation in the country. (...) Security assistance is “an urgent requirement” to improve prospects for the success of the electoral process, to deter factional violence, to assist the deployment of Afghan security forces, and to help those forces control the illicit drug economy”. The question is, however, whether international forces can really deliver on these prospects, and if so, if they are the most efficient and durable solution to Afghanistan’s security problems. If Afghans that are not being protected by international forces feel their security has improved this may indicate there are other alternatives to improving security, which cost less and require less political will.

In the author’s view, some of the international forces may actually have a destabilizing effect on the peace process in the country. The paradigm of security in Afghanistan must be seriously rethought.

The War on Terror

As one travels down the road from Kabul to Khost, one progressively enters a war-zone. After the regional center of Gardez, the road is cut by a military base set up by the US Army for the Afghan Militia Forces they support. These militia forces are rogue elements that, when unchecked by higher authorities, rob the local population to sustain themselves. They have done so in the past years, and would do so now if they got a chance. Many of them are of shady backgrounds - certainly some of them fought for the Taliban - and the only thing that unites them is that they convinced the US Army they could help them fight Taliban and Al Qaeda. These mercenaries receive a relatively good pay from the US Army, uniforms, barracks, transport and communications equipment, and now they are being rearmed by the US with superior weaponry. The population despises them for their predatory behavior and fear the day they will be left on their own again: when the US considers its presence here is no longer necessary. It remains to be seen whether they will indeed be integrated into the nascent Afghan National Army, as promised: their income will certainly be less than what they can make by extorting the population.

The base, with Afghan and US flags flying over it, is actually removed more than 100 yards from the road, in completely flat territory. However the US forces considered they needed to block the road for their security, forcing the substantial traffic between the city of Khost (a border crossing point) and Kabul to go

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² The Human Rights Consortium report, published by CARE in November 2003 (http://www.careusa.org/newsroom/pressreleases/2003/nov/11182003_afghconsortium.asp) and the survey on electoral attitudes published by The Asia Foundation in July 2004 (http://www.asiafoundation.org/pdf/afghan_voter-ed04.pdf)

on a long detour through the adjacent hills, on a terribly bad path. It takes about 20 minutes to make this detour. This is just one of the many instances of disregard for civilian life shown by the international military forces. All visitors in Kabul have experienced the lengthy traffic jams caused by the blocking of some of Kabul's most central streets for the security of the international soldiers, or by the practice of closing down several thoroughfares in the city to allow Afghan and international dignitaries to choose between several alternatives when they cross the city. Kabul International Airport is still controlled by international military forces, and they show little regard for the needs of the relatively heavy civil aviation.

Our driver edges up to the checkpoint, relying on my white face to get us through. Indeed, after several minutes' negotiation with the Afghan soldiers, they let us through, and we slowly drive to the exit under the lazy looks of machine-gunners in watchtowers.

Down the road, we go through the territory of the Zadran tribe, probably the strongest in the region. One of their leaders was Pacha Khan Zadran, a boisterous royalist warlord. He rebelled against the transitional administration in 2002, saying he was not happy with the power-sharing, notably with the minor role allocated to the King. During his rebellion he "taxed" the population to sustain himself and his troops, and the people are generally happy he was neutralized. However, as a result the only Zadran leader in opposition to the government is Jalaluddin Haqqani, one of the most important Taliban commanders. Most of the Coalition operations in the area are against his supporters. Inhabitants of this province admit that he does enjoy a substantial amount of sympathy, not for being a Taliban, but because of his military prowess, his social standing and his bravery.

As we enter Khost, the driver points out a bombed-out mosque along the roadside. In a mopping-up operation after the fall of the Taliban, US planes struck this building because fleeing Taliban were reportedly hiding there. The driver doesn't deny this, but says many innocent inhabitants were also in this mosque. Dozens of people died, including youngsters. After the bombing, the inhabitants wanted to erect a shrine to commemorate their dead, but the US Army, taking this as defiance, didn't allow it. They even surrounded the ruins with barbed wire, not letting any mourners in. Eventually they relented, partially, but they had already created a lot of bad blood among the population.

Khost is absolute no-go area for almost all foreigners, and I have dressed as an Afghan to keep a low profile. But I soon discover one of the most orderly cities I have seen in Afghanistan. The soldiers stay in the barracks, under good command; the police wear new uniforms and stick to policing jobs; there are no weapons visible in the streets, and the ominous SUVs with dark windows, used by all Afghan mafia and warlords, are completely absent. As the Governor, an Afghan returnee from Virginia, puts it: "In Kabul the warlords rule; here we put them in prison". The town has quite an active civil society and many independent media. This seems to be the result of a combination of factors: a merchant population that wants peace and order, a military commander (General Khialbaz) that consults with the population, and outside neutral governors sent by the Central Government. In other words, the people themselves have made the most of a power vacuum, and created the conditions for peace and security. In the surrounding districts there are periodical clashes between Coalition forces and Taliban, but here there is peace.

Suddenly, a heavily armed US Army patrol erupts on the scene: Humvees, Armored Personnel Carriers and light tanks. From the turrets, threatening figures point their weaponry at the population. The soldiers I see have their heads wrapped up in cloth, with their eyes covered by wrap-around sunglasses. One can't determine whether they're human beings at all. I try to smile and wave at one of them, and get absolutely no reaction. Obviously they are trying to strike fear into the population, with this heavily armed, alien appearance. God knows how afraid they are themselves. They have obviously been told that this is dangerous territory, where anybody can be a Taliban suicide bomber, and they are ready to defend

themselves. With “shock and awe”. The problem is that these Pashtun are not easily impressed. My local friends shrug them off as a necessary evil, or just a nuisance.

But my guides are older intellectuals and artists, with an aversion to any kind of conflict. They just want to get on with their lives now there is a chance to do so. Many other Afghans I speak to, especially young Pashtuns, are deeply upset about the Americans: they have occupied their country and behave like... warlords. Certainly, they don't extort the local population, but in other ways they are worse. They don't respect the honor of Pashtun women according to the local code: frisking them, forcing them to unveil themselves, openly urinating in their vicinity, and entering their houses when no men of the family are present. They may pick up practically anybody and put them in prison, without charges, for an indefinite period of time, without allowing visitors, without even giving any information about the prisoners to concerned relatives who come to enquire at the prison gates. They bomb and strafe from the sky, killing people and destroying property, without anybody asking them to account for it, except in the most extreme cases. Even then (as in the case of the bombing of the wedding party in Uruzgan, or of children in Ghazni) one rarely gets more than an apology, the promise of an enquiry, and at best some compensation money. But not a change in tactics. Finally, stories go round about trigger-happy US soldiers killing people for no apparent reason at all. They may not be true, but that is what is heard in the street. The point is that the US Army acts with complete impunity - ironically, that was the case of the Al Qaeda fighters in Taliban Afghanistan, and some Afghans I know have made the comparison.

More importantly, the people wonder why the US Army is still in Afghanistan. Everybody enormously appreciates that they got rid of the Taliban (also among most Pashtuns in the South) and this has earned the US Army a lot of goodwill. Now this goodwill is slowly, but surely, eroding. And not only among Pashtuns in the war-zones: among everybody. The civil war, with its shifting alliances, and the need to understand politics for one's survival, has made Afghans very politically astute. And cynical. Few Afghans believe the story that the US-led Coalition is still only in the country to fight the war on terror. How come the most powerful army in the world, with its technological prowess, hasn't been able, in nearly 3 years, to wipe out the last remnants of the enemy? How can Osama Ben Laden and Mullah Omar, especially the latter, still be on the run? Most Afghans speculate that the real intention of the US is to keep Afghanistan as a military base, between Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia. And that the US is still eyeing the gas and oil reserves in Central Asia, and a pipeline route through Afghanistan.

Stability or Security? ISAF

But now let's return to Kabul, and examine the other component of international forces in Afghanistan: the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF. If the Coalition, fighting its war on terror, represents the nasty military, ISAF represents the friendly neighborhood police, the *humanitarian* military. One may reflect that “humanitarian military” is an oxymoron, despite the many images (one might say propaganda) to which we've been subjected over the last years, showing international military forces protecting local populations and aid workers. The military, by training and profession, may not be the best people to provide humanitarian relief and reconstruction. Moreover, they are traditionally also not the institution to provide public security in a country: that role is traditionally reserved to the police. However this may be, ISAF is generally, almost universally, viewed benevolently by foreigners, who consider ISAF to be the key to security.

One reads over and over again that security is good in the capital, but not in the provinces - because ISAF, despite a new mandate since it is under NATO command, has not expanded much beyond Kabul. That's why most internationals don't venture beyond the capital. However this vision is not supported by available data and what ordinary Afghans tell you. Data on crime is practically non-existent, but it appears quite likely that crime levels in Kabul are similar to those in most other areas of Afghanistan. Every day

one hears of burglaries, rape, assassination, land-grabbing, extortion, gun-point robberies and other violent crimes in Kabul. On 19 August 2004 the following data on crime in Kabul were released: “*The Director of the Crimes Prevention Department of the Ministry of Interior (Gen. Sibghatullah Saiq) claimed 200 security incidents in one month (Asad-July/August) only in Kabul city. The graph of criminal activities rose significantly recently and left the Kabul residents living in much fear, Saiq said.*”³ Moreover, in surveys Afghans in the North of the country have generally indicated a high sense of security, superior or equal to that in Kabul. It thus seems, both in data and in perceptions, that ordinary Afghans don’t think ISAF provides security to them.

As to foreigners, there have also been attacks against foreigners and foreign organizations in Kabul: (suicide) bombings - one at the entrance to an ISAF base - and cases of rape, strafing of humanitarian vehicles, and quite a lot of armed robberies. In most other provinces, with some notable exceptions (Kandahar) the level of violent attacks against foreigners does not seem higher. The security provided by ISAF thus seems to be mostly psychological. Foreigners *feel* safer in Kabul, but they *are* not safer. One manner in which ISAF purportedly protects foreigners in Kabul is by giving briefings to those responsible for their organizations’ security. The result is periodic scares, whereby foreigners hole up in their offices or guesthouses for a few days, interrupting all their activities. As far as I have ascertained from the ground, these scares have never been substantiated by actual attacks. Those attacks that have occurred seem to have caught ISAF unaware. What the cost is of these work interruptions, not only in economic terms but also in psychological ones (growing fear among foreigners) has never been calculated.

Indeed, ISAF has neither a mandate to protect ordinary Afghans, nor to protect foreign organizations. Their mandate is to provide security to the Afghan government as it struggles to enforce the UN-assisted peace process throughout the country, and as it embarks on an internationally-aided reconstruction effort. Undoubtedly, their presence has been essential in this regard. Without them President Karzai and his government could not have stood up against the warlords and other challengers. Without ISAF the gun would rule unchallenged, making humanitarian and reconstruction activities all but impossible. Therefore, I am in no way arguing that ISAF is useless and should go; I’m just pointing out that they are not essential for, or even capable of, providing actual security to Afghans and foreigners. Rather, they are providing stability to a government that is attempting to increase security, and their presence has a psychological effect: it is a tangible international commitment to defend the political arrangements crafted in Bonn.

What the ISAF *does* protect is itself. A disproportionate amount of ISAF’s resources, both in time and money, are allocated to its own security and well-being. This is also the case with the Coalition, but less markedly, as they are, after all, fighting a war of sorts. Day after day new layers of protection are drawn up around ISAF bases, new rows of sandbags impinging on public space, higher barbed wire, new entrances and new (and better) barracks. Security of ISAF, the Coalition and international organizations has brought to life a construction mafia⁴, because the international forces have seemingly unlimited budgets for their security. This allows for huge kick-backs and profit-margins, fuelling corruption. Since contractors providing security must themselves be secure, the market is only open to the big players, many of them purportedly related to the warlords, notably the current Minister of Defense. The assassination earlier this summer of 11 Chinese road-workers in Kunduz province, erroneously considered by some as a terrorist attack, is evidence of the large amounts of money that are at stake.

Inside the camps, the soldiers live lives of luxury, with shops, bars, and other modern amenities. Only 6 months after their arrival in Kabul, ISAF became known as the “International Shopping Around Force”

³ BBC Pashto service, distributed by Prof. Barnett Rubin, 18 August 2004

⁴ see AREU paper: “Political Economy in Afghanistan: 3 case studies” june 2004 : http://www.areu.org.af/publications/Political_Economy/Construction_Case_Study.pdf

because they were mostly seen in carpet and antiques shops spending their big allowances⁵. A documentary movie⁶ on the Dutch ISAF contingent showed simple soldiers with a relatively sophisticated understanding of the country, hungry for action and lamenting they can't intervene more effectively to provide security to ordinary Afghans (chase thieves or help the police make arrests).

Given that ISAF cannot provide security to Afghans or to the international reconstruction effort, but that they do undeniably provide stability to the government and are a reminder of the international community's commitment to support that government, the question about their expansion into the regions must be reexamined: how many soldiers are needed to provide this stability and prove this commitment? In most provinces, it seems a dozen or two of well-trained and well-briefed men of arms would be enough⁷. They would work closely with the representatives of the central government (usually the governor, sometimes military commanders). One hears that to isolate such small detachments in provincial capitals doesn't make military sense - except if the security situation is re-evaluated in a more positive way.

This modus operandi has been followed by the Coalition forces with great success; unfortunately, though, they are not working for the peace and reconstruction process, but for the "war on terror" (with often opposite results). The question is: why can't ISAF apply the same model?

Mercenaries and Private Security

There is a third international security force in Afghanistan, mostly undeclared: private security. The heavily-armed guards one finds throughout Kabul, mostly in civilian or paramilitary uniforms, and almost exclusively white ex-military men in their 40s and 50s, do provide effective protection: very tight security. They act like cowboys, wear wrap-around sunglasses and act with bravado. In a sense they are primitive romantics, of an era when good guys could just shoot evil guys without anyone asking questions. They enjoy Afghanistan's state of lawlessness and impunity. And they make a lot of money while enacting this boyhood's dream. Working for anybody who pays.

Although this is the most disorganized aspect of security provision in Afghanistan, it might be the most pernicious. The recent arrest in Kabul of Jonathan K. Idema and two western associates brought to light this rapidly growing phenomenon. Mr. Idema was arrested by Afghan police as he was torturing and interrogating Afghans he suspected of being Al Qaeda. He was described as a bounty hunter, but, given the US Army's legal troubles when they want to apply more effective interrogation techniques, and their corollary fondness of hiring private contractors to do this work, and given Mr. Idema's illustrious past, most Afghans concluded that he was working for the Pentagon, as he himself claims⁸. Suddenly all these other paramilitary private security forces came to stand in a different light. Who knows who they really work for? Who accounts for their actions?

Of course not all private security forces are mercenaries. There are also those security forces working for international organizations in rapidly growing numbers. They reflect the same phenomenon that is being seen throughout the world, as our obsession with security is leading to increasing employment opportunities for those with combat skills. Responding to the anxiety of their employers, and driven by a particular ideology where "security" is synonymous to "isolation", they are taking measures to protect international staff and key Afghan government officials. As a result, more and more foreign offices and guesthouses resemble fortresses, with high barbed wire-topped metal fences, anti-blast protection film on

⁵ Of course, not all soldiers earn good salaries: this depends on their country of origin.

⁶ "Smile and Wave" by Marijke Jongbloed, 2003.

⁷ This is what I and a number of colleagues in the political affairs department of the UN mission to Afghanistan pleaded for when the nature of the ISAF mission was being discussed.

⁸ The desire of the US authorities to obscure Mr. Idema's links to them led the FBI to confiscate all documentation found in Mr. Idema's house before the Afghan police could examine it

the windowpanes, and guards both outside and inside the compound. Contact between foreigners and non-staff Afghans is becoming progressively more difficult. Nobody seems to reflect that cutting off the humanitarian and development workers from the populations they are supposed to serve, and demonstrating such fear of the neighbors, may have adverse effects on the way Afghans perceive foreigners - and thus on the foreigners' security. Even from an economic point of view, it would be cheaper to provide collective security (including to the Afghans living next to the foreigners) rather than individual security for each house/office⁹.

"Security" has also reflected negatively on aid workers in other manners. Some private security forces, in order to go around undisturbed, have asked for the same license plates as NGOs. White SUVs with humanitarian license plates filled with private security guards armed to the teeth, and working for any contractor, mingle with similar cars filled with humanitarian workers distributing wheat or medicines. This has caused ACBAR, the NGO coordinating body, to complain publicly¹⁰.

Even the UN has employed private security forces. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, UNAMA, decided to contract a private security group, Global Risks, to provide security for the elections. Global Risks decided, after a survey of the field, to allow local warlords to provide security at the polling booths. The alternative, national police officers, was discarded by them because these police, representing the central government, would be offensive to the local warlords. Local warlords showed themselves more than ready to provide security, with their armed cronies even making sure the people fill in the ballots correctly. From a security point of view, this made sense. There would be less trouble at the ballot boxes. Luckily, in this case, political sense prevailed. National police officers will be dispatched to the voting booths, ensuring some degree of freedom from the interference of local warlords.

Warlords between conflicting international agendas

Warlords have been mentioned several times in this document. Also, Karzai recently declared that the presence of warlords endangered the future of Afghanistan more than the Taliban assaults. This bold statement, that came after widely criticized negotiations between Karzai and the warlords of the Northern Alliance, preceded the sacking of one of Karzai's running mates: Minister of Defense Fahim, probably the country's number 1 warlord¹¹.

Although Karzai's declaration on the danger of the warlords seems to have been politically motivated, they have been frequently pointed out by knowledgeable observers as the main threat to security and political stability in Afghanistan. However, in my opinion, warlordism as a concept in Afghanistan has been misunderstood by foreigners. What we imagine as warlords are regional military commanders, firmly entrenched, protected by a group of loyal henchmen, who have decided they will not give up military power in their area to the central government without a fight.

However in practice these "warlords" seem quite willing to negotiate their political and economic survival with the central government. Military power is a bargaining chip which they are willing to give up. All of them are pragmatic, not fundamentalist. The prospect of them engaging international troops in warfare is *very* unlikely. That, again, shows that large amounts of troops are not needed to neutralize them in

⁹ Stories have been published in the Afghan press about non-intervention of these security forces when Afghans living in houses neighboring well-protected foreigners were assaulted in their houses.

¹⁰ ACBAR unfortunately did not conclude that NGOs should stop using expensive 4wds as their standard vehicle.

¹¹ He was replaced by Ahmad Zia Massud, the brother of the national martyr Ahmad Shah Massud, and a founder of the "Nehzat-e Melli" party (the political wing of the military alliance "Shura-ye Nezar", the core group of unsavory warlords and mafia-figures from the Northern Alliance to which Marshall Fahim also belongs). Karzai did thus not make a radical break with the "warlords", rather choosing a figure more palatable for both Afghans and internationals. His other running candidate, Mr. Khalili, has been the object of many complaints for war crimes. We can therefore not interpret this move as evidence that Karzai is moving away from the warlords.

military terms. The “warlords” have been renamed “regional or factional leaders” by the UN, and this indicates their political (not military) essence. The truth is that these “warlords” have almost no military capacity: their weapons are old and unsophisticated, their discipline and tactics very shaky, and the commitment of the soldiers minimal. They rarely have any support among the local population. They are really “paper tigers” and could be dealt with very easily. That is also how Afghans see it: as a political problem. Afghans designate them as the main obstacles to a long-awaited normalization of Afghan politics and most of them can’t comprehend why the international community has not dealt with them swiftly.

One of the main reasons the problem of warlords couldn’t be solved is because the Coalition in many cases has supported warlords as allies in their war on terror, giving them political, financial and military support in exchange for their information, manpower and other support. In the absence of any other kind of aid, this provided the warlords with more power over the populations, and allowed them to defy Kabul when that suited their interests (typically, over appointments and customs revenues).

Thus, we have the ISAF and the Coalition at theoretical loggerheads, as the mandate of ISAF, in support of the government, should be to neutralize the warlords. That is of course why their mandate has been restricted to Kabul. It indicates the balance of power between American unilateralism and international multilateralism. The pragmatic “warlords” have made the most of this situation, but were it to end, will quickly change tactics.

Rethinking Security

Thus the representation of the Afghan government as too weak to tackle the regional strongmen, with insecurity prevailing outside the capital as a result, is misleading in many ways. If the US-led coalition would stop the war on terror, which anyhow is yielding no results, and stop supporting these regional strongmen; and instead support ISAF in its regional expansion, with small contingents providing dissuasive power to central government appointees; while the government negotiates with the warlords or regional leaders to accept its authority in exchange for their political or economic survival; in that case the “security” (or stability) of the country could be rapidly guaranteed.

This may sound objectionable, as many of these warlords have committed war crimes. However Afghan public opinion seems quite clear in that it would be satisfied if these warlords (and their appointees) were taken out of power. Even if prosecution were to follow, that seems a logical first step to take.

The international community, in 2001, pledged to help Afghanistan emerge from its state of endemic civil war, disarm the combatant factions, support civilian rule, create the conditions for a stable peace and launch the reconstruction of the country. Instead, we have launched a new war for which there is no end in sight (the “War on Terror”) probably soon to be followed by another endless war (the “War on Drugs”); we have supported and rearmed known war criminals to help us fight this new war; progressively militarized the country usurping ever more public space for our military and security compounds, from the Center of Kabul to far-away borders; we are allowing all kinds of ill-bred Western mercenaries to parade their automatic weapons in the streets while flaunting their state of virtual impunity; we treat our welcoming hosts with high degrees of paranoia, isolating ourselves from the population; and the US Army is not even respecting international conventions, much less Afghan law and customs, thus provoking hostility and having, basically, a destabilizing influence.

The Western military objectives (first of all, their own security) prevail over any civilian considerations, thus effectively disabling the civilian Government we pledged to support in its projection into the provinces - despite the strong desire of the population to be ruled by a civilian central government, and the readiness of most factional leaders to accept this reality. Meanwhile, none of these international

military or security forces provide any real security, to either Afghans or internationals. Yes, they do dissuade warlords and criminals to a certain extent; but on the other hand they also attract hostility.

As the elections approach, our only response to the lack of political stability and thus security in the country is to send in more troops - recent news clippings indicate that now the US Army is considering taking a role in the War on Drugs in Afghanistan. Ever more military, guns, and disregard for "civilians" - is that the path forward for peace in Afghanistan?

The financial costs of supporting all these soldiers are mind-boggling, and far surpass the reconstruction aid promised to this country. This fact is not lost on the Afghan public.

It is not difficult to see what should be done: the Coalition should wrap up its 3-year old War on Terror in Afghanistan and go home. Cross-border infiltration of Taliban militia can easily be stopped by competent Afghan generals and the freshly trained National Army. A few detachments of Special Forces or SAS can continue the hunt for Al Qaeda in cooperation with their Afghan counterparts. The fight against drugs should not be militarized, and the US Army should not get engaged in it. Meanwhile, the renamed International *Stability* Assistance Force should pan out through the country, with small detachments of experienced soldiers supporting the Central Government's efforts to impose its authority in the provinces. More ISAF is not needed; we need better ISAF, with US support. If 1 or 2% of the money spent on international military forces in Afghanistan were to be spent on reconstruction in the provinces, that would make a significant difference. Finally, the proliferation of foreign private security forces in Afghanistan should be checked. Some rules need to be laid down: contractual responsibilities, fire-arms or other weapons should not be visible in public, these forces must be familiar with and obey relevant Afghan laws, behave appropriately, wear distinctive uniforms, etc. Foreign organizations that contract private security forces that do not follow these rules should be penalized. Security must be envisioned as a collective requirement that encompasses the Afghan population, not as an individual problem where only the wealthy have access to security.

We must thus stop treating insecurity in Afghanistan as a problem which can be solved with more international forces. We need less guns, less military rule, and more peace and reconstruction efforts, and more support to civilian rule. Afghanistan has suffered from what all locals call "the rule of the gun" long enough. Imposing American or other Western guns on a population that is thus cast into the role of the hostile native is not the solution.