



COINvasion?

Korengal and Weygal Valleys Post-Mortem

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(Photo: Max Klimburg)

DURING THE HEIGHT of the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan (between 2007 and 2010), Army units engaged in sustained combat in the narrow valleys of Korengal and Weygal in Kunar Province. Having identified Kunar as a crucial region for the Taliban, U.S. forces established several small outposts. Some came under heavy attack by insurgents, including Korengal Outpost, Combat Outpost Restrepo, and Vehicle Patrol Base Wanat. The combat actions performed by U.S. troops in these regions will be remembered as some of the most valorous and honorable in the annals of military history.

Historians, strategists, and journalists have studied and written about these battles in depth. Authors such as Bing West and Sebastian Junger have produced bestselling expositions of the campaigns. The movie *Restrepo* (aired in 2010), illustrated the grunt's view of the battle for the Korengal Valley from 2007 to 2008.

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Therefore, there is no need to rehash the campaign. Instead, this article analyzes the terrain and the sociocultural factors (sometimes called human terrain) of the Korengal and Weygal valleys, primarily from a strategic perspective. It offers an explanation for the fierce attacks on U.S. forces during the multiyear effort at Kunar-Nuristan (between 2007 and 2010). This work is offered for reflection, discussion, and further study on strategic analysis as well as to foster a productive debate.

An Alternate Analysis of Kunar-Nuristan

To the inhabitants of the mountainous region of Kunar-Nuristan, their homeland is and always has been separate from the nation of Afghanistan. In their minds, the U.S. campaign in the Korengal and Weygal valleys was an invasion of their independent homelands. From this point of view, U.S. forces, instead of conducting COIN, were invading and occupying *de facto* sovereign nations who fiercely resisted. That resistance ultimately led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region in 2010.

Korengal and Weygal as Independent States

The Kunar-Nuristan region is a mountainous area north of Jalalabad and east of Kabul. It contains a large valley system created by the Kunar River, which drains into the Kabul River in the south, on the plains of Jalalabad. The Kunar subsequently drains into the Indus River of Pakistan. As such, the Kunar River valley system is a large tributary of the greater Indus Valley, which empties into the Indian Ocean (see figure 1).

The drainage basins of river valleys have defined the boundaries of distinct civilizations and cultures throughout history.¹ The traditional inhabitants of the Kunar Valley are the Nuristani tribes, who are foreign to the inhabitants of the Helmand River system (Pashtuns) and the Amur Darya River systems (Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks).

Between the various branches of the Kunar River the mountains provide natural boundaries between the river's subvalleys. At Asadabad the Kunar River splits into Kunar main and the Pech River. The Pech River again splits into the Weygal and Korengal rivers and creates corresponding valleys. Over time, the rugged terrain shaped the microcultures of these valleys to become largely self-contained and

helped local populations resist outsiders for millennia. Travel between the valleys is possible through various passes over the mountains. The historical significance of these passes is evident in that the majority are named and labeled on local maps.

The Nuristani peoples. The peoples of the Kunar-Nuristan region possess their own languages, but most are without an alphabet. They lack a written history. Therefore, to study these peoples we must study the historical writings of their more literate neighbors. The sciences



Figure 1. The Three River Basins of Afghanistan

Author's own work produced as a geographic information system overlay on Google Earth, based on 3D terrain analysis of the river basins for A688 Wanat and Pech Virtual Staff Ride, December 2011.



1st Lt. Chris Richelderfer, Executive Officer of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment (Airborne), looks at possible enemy positions during Operation Saray Has near Forward Operating Base Naray, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 25 April 2006. (U.S. Army, Sgt. Brandon Aird)

of genetics, archaeology, and linguistics allow us additional insights. We know that the inhabitants of Kunar are mostly Pashtun of the Safi tribe, while those in the Korengal and Weygal valleys, as well as the Nuristan Province, are considered Nuristanis. Geography partitions these two groups. The Pashtun people are limited to the valleys of the Kunar and Pech Rivers.²

The Nuristani tribes have as many as six languages, each with dialects—some numerous.³ Difficult travel over the extremely mountainous terrain of the Kunar-Nuristan region has caused many dialects of Nuristani languages to become unintelligible to speakers living in adjacent valleys. (Linguists cite the Dutch and Afrikaans languages as an example of a relatively recent language split causing a reduction in mutual intelligibility.⁴) Although the Nuristani languages belong to the Indo-Iranian family of languages, they are not mutually intelligible with Farsi, Dari, or Pashto.

History and culture. From the written history of the Pashtun Kingdom of Durrani Dynasty, we know that the Nuristani people, originally referred to as Kafiri (pagans), were the first inhabitants of

the Kunar River valley. The Pashtun people have advanced into the valleys over centuries, pushing the Nuristanis further north and into the valleys where they now reside. The Pashtun people had united under the Durrani (formerly called Abdali) tribe by the 1700s, while the Nuristanis have remained splintered at the clan and village level.⁵ The Pashtuns became Muslims between the 7th and 10th centuries, while the Nuristanis resisted Islam until the 1890s. The Pashtuns finally conquered all of Nuristan between 1895 and 1896 under Emir Abdul Rahman Khan.⁶ The Nuristanis were forcibly converted but still retain small elements of their original pagan religion. The Nuristani religion bears similarities to many of the religious practices of previous invaders, such as Persian Zoroastrianism, Indian Buddhism, and Greek Polytheism.

The Pashtun conquest converted the Nuristanis to Islam and subjugated them to the Pashtun suzerainty, but the Nuristani tribes never relinquished their independence or sovereignty within their valleys. In fact, the Pashtuns took the lower valleys of Kunar for themselves but were unable to

push into the deeper valleys of Korengal, Weygal, or Nuristan proper. The Nuristanis maintained their de facto independence in return for religious subjugation and recognizing the Pashtun king as their sovereign. This system of swearing fealty to the conquering emir in return for local autonomy is similar to the medieval European feudal system. As long as the taxes were paid, loyalty was sworn, and troops provided when needed, the local tribes were allowed relative autonomy. This ancient system of governance continues to this day within the Taliban-run parallel government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This tribal system of governance derives its legitimacy from its sheer longevity in central Asia, where the people have known it since before the Persian conquest in the 5th century BC.

The Nuristani valley tribes are still ruled by an informal gathering of local elders. This system of governance enjoys the full support of the Nuristani peoples, who have resisted all other forms of government. The elders comprise the true legitimate government of Nuristan, using a rudimentary form of democracy through a system of shuras (referring to an approach to decision making involving a consultative council) to build valley-wide consensus. The corrupt officials of Karzai's government never achieved legitimacy in this region. Their insistence on halting the native logging trade in the name of nature conservation is a direct affront to the traditional Nuristani way of living.⁷ To the Nuristanis, unaccustomed to government meddling in their internal affairs, the Afghan officials' attempt at halting their native economy while building roads and police stations with an overt U.S. presence appeared to be an invasion by corrupt proxies of the West. The settlement pattern of the Pashay Pashtuns in the Kunar Valley leading into the Pech Valley is the historic outline, or the high water mark, of the Pashtun conquest of the Nuristanis. It also marks the furthest extent of the control and governance by the Pashtun-dominated leadership of the government of Afghanistan. This crucial fact has been glossed over during the past 10 years of war in Afghanistan.

Defensive valley civilization of Nuristan. Due to the lack of Nuristani historiography, we have to speculate as to how they conducted their wars of resistance against past invaders. However, their culture bears the scars of centuries of defensive warfare. People throughout the world prefer to live

in the most naturally comfortable locations that support their lifestyles. This means they build houses in locations that provide easy access to transportation and water. This explains the prevalence of cities and towns around the world near coastlines or by rivers, usually on a plain or a small patch of flat land. People generally do not like to live on steep slopes or on high ground away from their water source or farms. Walking from a house built on a steep slope down to the river to draw water every morning is a very tiring act, unnatural to most people in the world.

The typical layout of towns and villages in the Korengal and Weygal valleys demonstrates an unnatural pattern of settlement. While the sparse farm plots of the Nuristanis remain on the small valley floor, their houses are built in crowded formations along the steep hillsides. These multistory houses are built with stones, with small windows facing the valley floor. This uncommon style of settlement is traditional to the Nuristanis. The Pashay Pashtuns of Pech and lower Kunar live on the valley floor, using traditional mud bricks for their houses (see figure 2).

The most likely explanation for this type of village design is that the Nuristanis built their houses on steep hillsides to defend themselves against invaders who traveled up the valley floors to try to conquer them. The design of the villages is the culmination of the Nuristani tribes' two millennia of generally successful defense of their culture and their way of life (see figure 3).

The villages of Korengal and Aranas show an advanced defensive design allowing nearly all houses of a village to provide suppressive fire on the single narrow chokepoint that leads into the main valley. One can easily imagine the villages adopting this defensive formation over time in place of the more comfortable formation that would have placed the houses near the valley floors. The Nuristanis are de facto independent tribal nations, each ruled by a council of elders; their fortified towns have helped the tribes protect their autonomy for millennia.

COIN or Invasion?

U.S. COIN doctrine assumes that forces are supporting a legitimate government, however basic, with the aim of increasing its legitimacy, influence, and strength. It identifies the "people" as the center of gravity, whose support the U.S.

and host-nation forces must try to win. An assumption in this narrative is that the people—imagined, evidently, as relatively homogenous and capable of cohesion—will eventually support the government as their own once it proves itself legitimate and capable. The problem with this narrative, when it comes to the perspective of the Nuristanis, is that each tribe already has its own legitimate government, its own culture, and a nation it considers its own. We moved into these valleys to “win hearts and minds,” to “separate the people from the insurgents,” and to “protect the people from the insurgents.” We were instead invading sovereign, if internationally unrecognized, tribal nations

that did not want the Pashtun- and Dari-speaking government of Afghanistan to displace their local system of governance. The doctrine of COIN addresses the support of a legitimate government fighting an antigovernment force. Perhaps it is not the best doctrinal framework to address an outright invasion of a *de facto* nation.

Decades after the United States withdrew from Vietnam, a nebulous consensus emerged among U.S. historians that we had misconstrued a Vietnamese war of independence as a purely ideological communist insurgency. These scholars posited that in the eyes of the Vietnamese people, the corrupt South Vietnamese government was a continuation of the

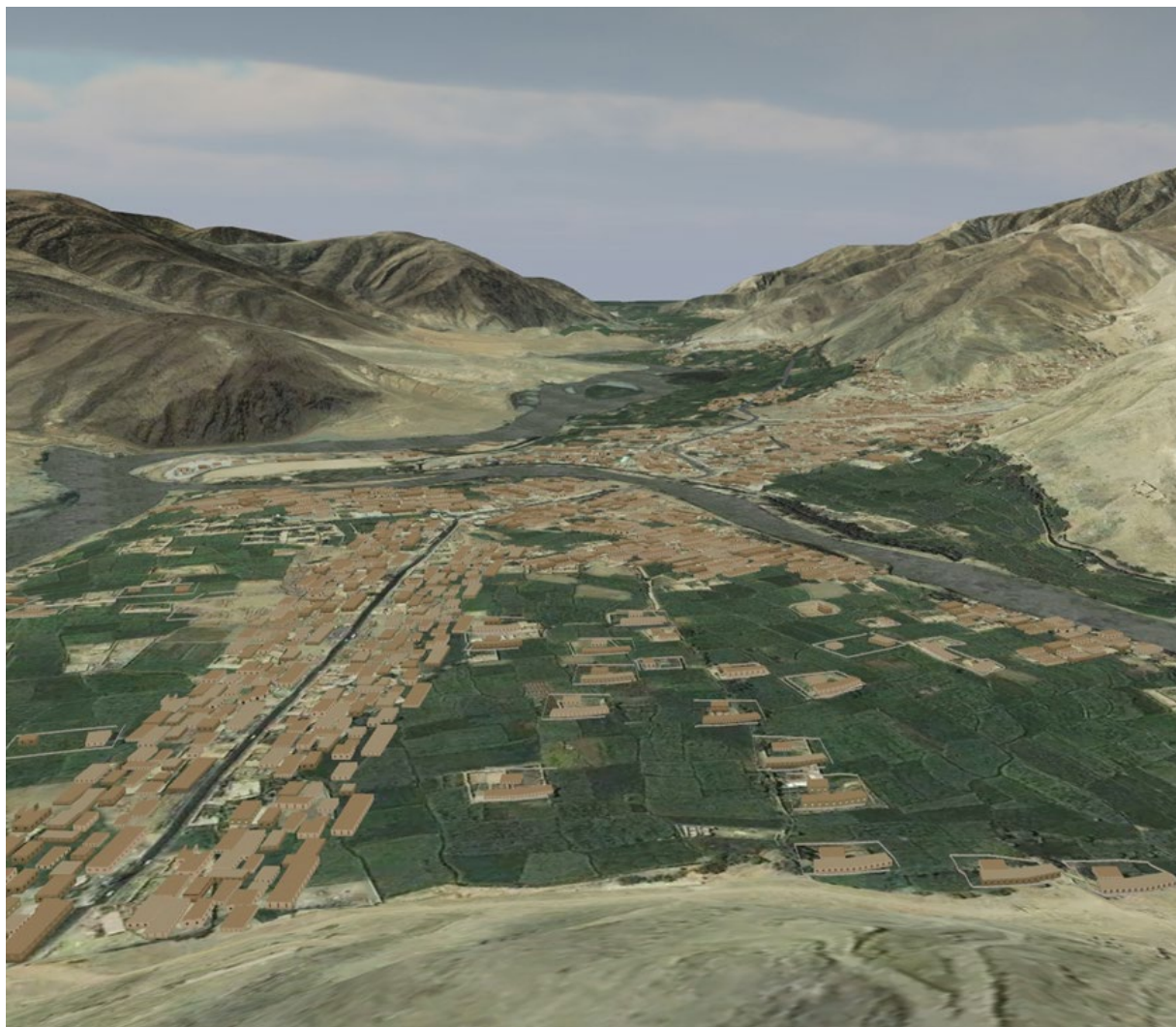


Figure 2. Pashtun Valley Floor Agricultural Settlement

Looking west from Asadabad and the Pech-Kunar River confluence, showing a typical Pashtun valley floor agricultural settlement, Kunar Province, Afghanistan (Geographical and Terrain data depicted via MedRView, supplied via A688, Wanat and Pech Virtual Staff Ride, December 2011).



Figure 3. The Korengal Valley

View of the Korengal Valley from the Korengal Outpost, Kunar Province, Afghanistan (Geographical and Terrain data depicted via MedRView, supplied via A688, Wanat and Pech Virtual Staff Ride, USACGSC, December 2011).

western colonialist regime under France. Ho Chi Min's communists were freedom fighters who happened to be using the communist ideology to assist them in fighting the greatest military power in the world. Similarly, there are those within the Army, such as Col. Gian Gentile, who think the population-centric COIN doctrine is the wrong framework with which to address Afghanistan.⁸ The debate continues, as does the fighting, and our understanding of culture and history is still incomplete. After 10 years of war in Afghanistan, most Army officers still cannot differentiate between Sunni and Shia, Arabs and Persians, and Taliban and al-Qaida.

Therefore, in the face of a pervasive lack of understanding at the strategic and operational

levels, it might be premature to declare that COIN has been the right or the wrong framework in Afghanistan. However, we should be open to that conclusion because the tribal governmental structure had never been replaced or even defeated by the host-nation government. Our insistence that the Karzai regime was the legitimate government of Afghanistan has fostered little goodwill among the Nuristanis.

Our Defeat in Afghanistan

In the future, military historians perhaps will categorize Korengal and Weygal campaigns as invasions into sovereign valley tribal states. In these areas, at least, whether the current COIN framework was the correct approach is an open question.

Limited to the tactics, techniques, and procedures within the COIN framework, our military officers did the best they could. The establishment of the combat outpost Restrepo, resulting from a sound tactical terrain analysis of the Korengal Valley, precipitated a dramatic reduction of violence in the valley. Our military leaders have not failed at the operational and tactical levels. Our national leaders who start wars from their Washington, D.C. offices do not use a rigorous framework similar to the joint operational planning process, the military decision-making process, or even “design” to keep them focused. The decision to adopt the COIN framework, pushed heavily by ideologically driven private lobbies and think tanks, resulted in the limitation of military options at the operational level.

A study of Afghan and Central Asian history shows that the land of modern-day Afghanistan was repeatedly conquered and settled by successive waves of invaders. Cyrus the Persian conquered Afghanistan in fifth century B.C., settling the area with Farsi-speaking ancestors of today’s Tajiks. Alexander’s Greeks conquered Afghanistan in the third century B.C. They established Bactria, which lasted over three centuries, in an area completely isolated from their European cousins. The White Huns, or Hephthalites, followed the Kushans, who conquered and absorbed the Greeks of Bactria. The Hephthalites are today known as the Abdali tribe of the Pashtuns. The Mongols under Genghis Khan and later under Timur and Babur also conquered and settled this land. The very presence of the Tajik, Pashtun, and Hazara people in Afghanistan shows that outside groups have successfully conquered and integrated themselves into Afghan civilization. Only western armies have failed to fully subdue Afghanistan, beginning with the British and later the Soviets and now the Americans. The successful conquerors of Afghanistan understood and respected the local tribal system of governance. Requiring little more than submission, swearing of fealty, and the payment of reasonable taxes, conquerors such as Cyrus, Alexander, Genghis Khan, Timur, and Babur brought centuries of peace to Afghanistan. Only the West, which tried to dismantle the traditional Central Asian way of life and replace it with utterly foreign, and

ultimately dysfunctional types of governance (communism in the 1980s and liberal democracy in 2000s), has failed to provide stable and lasting governance in Afghanistan.

The invasion of the Korengal and Weygal valleys represented a microcosm of the overall Afghan campaign. U.S. forces entered numerous

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areas in Afghanistan trying to displace cultures and systems of governance with a poorly functioning substitute, represented by the Karzai kleptocracy. In contrast, defining a small and precise end state for the operation and then allying with local governance structures to realize small goals would have been far easier. Instead of focusing on what brought us to Afghanistan to begin with, we tried to transform an ancient central Asian civilization into a replica of western democracy.

A better approach would have been to conduct a punitive expedition with an end state limited to killing Osama bin-Laden, destroying al-Qaida, punishing the Taliban for supporting it, rewarding our Northern Alliance with significant monetary resources, and then departing in victory. By trying instead to transform an ancient culture into our own image, we unwittingly placed ourselves in an invasion scenario of numerous tribal nations within Afghanistan. Having fought others for centuries, now they were galvanized against us, their common enemy, making the situation a quagmire from which we are now ignominiously withdrawing. Despite the failure of analysis at the strategic level, our soldiers managed to snatch honor and victory at the tactical level. However, good tactics do not salvage a broken strategy, and young men and women pay for this mistake with their lives. **MR**

NOTES

1. David Park, *The Geopolitical Destiny of East Asia* (Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, December 2011), 62-63, see <<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a566063.pdf>>

2. Michael Moore and James Fussell, *Kunar and Nuristan: Rethinking US Counterinsurgency Operation, Afghanistan Report I* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, July 2009), 7.

3. See <<http://www.ethnologue.com/map/AF>> for the language groups of the Kunar-Nuristan region.

4. Charlotte Gooskens, "The Contribution of Linguistic Factors to the Intelligibility of Closely Related Languages," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 28, no. 6 (2007).

5. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great*

to the War Against the Taliban (Boston: DaCapo Press), 114-21.

6. Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: Harper, 2009), 98-109.

7. It is a fact that in the recent decades Nuristani logging has resulted in mass deforestation of the region, in keeping with the acceleration of desertification in the entire Central Asia, see <<http://easterncampaign.com/2008/01/05/timberlords-and-the-deforestation-of-afghanistan/>>.

8. See Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press: 2013), and posts at *Small Wars Journal* blog, <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/gian-gentile>>, and. As of 2012, an increasing number of junior and midgrade officers with combat service in Afghanistan are agreeing with Col. Gentile, while some experts in various think tanks continue to push COIN.

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