

Afghanistan: Six years of a war of terror

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The U.S. launched its first assault in the “war on terror” in Afghanistan six years ago. Today, the country remains one of the poorest places on earth, ruled by a corrupt warlord elite. Here, Tariq Ali, a veteran of the antiwar struggle for four decades, talks to Sherry Wolf about the disastrous consequences of the U.S. war—and what the future holds.

This is the sixth anniversary of the U.S. war on Afghanistan, which a lot of people see as the “good” battle in the “war on terror,” as opposed to Iraq. Is that true?

I have always argued that this was essentially a crude war of revenge to hit back immediately after the September 11 attacks—for political leaders to show the American population that “we are busy defending you.” It had no other major purpose to it other than being for revenge—an eye for an eye.

The second aim of this war, as Bush spelled it out, was to capture Osama bin Laden “dead or alive.” Those were his exact words, which we shouldn’t forget. Apart from that, there were no war aims.

There was never any question that they were going to capture the country. For one, the Northern Alliance wasn’t going to resist—nor were the Iranians, who were very strong in Western Afghanistan. Iranian leaders were hostile to the Taliban for their own opportunistic reasons, so they clambered onto the imperial bandwagon and said, “Fine, we can’t get rid of these guys, but if the Americans do, we’ll see how the situation develops.”

Then there was the Pakistani military regime, without which the Taliban would never have been in power, and which had been backing up the Taliban logistically, militarily and in every other way.

Given that the U.S. was going to use Pakistani military bases, the regime asked for a few weeks to get their military personnel out of Afghanistan before the U.S. went in. In those two crucial weeks, of course, Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership also left Afghanistan. They weren’t going to wait around.

So the U.S. took Kabul with NATO help, but it wasn’t difficult because there was no resistance at all. Then the question arose: What were they going to do with the country?

They couldn’t find Osama, though there was a two-week period media hysteria about “reaching the Tora Bora caves” and all this kind of propaganda. They dropped all these bombs and what happened? Nothing. They destroyed the caves, but the quarry had escaped.

So what were they going to do now? It’s obvious that bin Laden left the country and went to the tribal zones between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the traditions of hospitality are very strong,

and he wasn't going to be handed over.

The U.S. then implanted a puppet regime in Afghanistan. Let's remember that Zalmay Khalilzad was Bush's chief advisor on Afghanistan at the time, and he brought in one of his cronies who once worked for the Unocal oil company, Hamid Karzai, to be president of Afghanistan. And, presto, we had a country.

The problem soon became very obvious to the West that its arrangement didn't really extend beyond Kabul and Kandahar, the two big cities in the South, during the daytime. Elsewhere, in the west of the country, pro-Iranian forces were in control. And in the North, the former Soviet republics, still heavily under Moscow's influence, were in control.

So what were they going to do with this country? The answer is nothing.

Does the U.S. have any support within Afghanistan?

I've argued that there's no doubt quite a number of Afghans were relieved to have the Taliban removed—quite a few thought, well, at least now we'll have some peace and safety, and maybe some food to eat. This was also the view of quite a few liberal commentators inside Pakistan.

Some of us argued with them, saying that the Taliban might have been removed, but what would happen now? We warned them that as far as the social infrastructure was concerned, it wasn't going to change for the majority of Afghans.

That's exactly what has happened in these six years. What people underestimate is that imperial occupations under neoliberalism reflect the priorities of the new capitalist order, where they're privatizing everything in their own countries. So what happened was that money did pour in—and this money was used by Hamid Karzai and his cronies to construct an elite in Afghanistan.

In the heart of Kabul, on prime land that they took by land-grabbing, the elite were and are building large villas protected by NATO troops in front of the entire population of the city and country.

It costs about \$5,000 or \$6,000 to build a cheap house for a family of five or six, but they didn't do that. They spent millions of dollars constructing large villas. God knows why, since they need a permanent NATO guard to live in one of those villas. And they'll be taken away from them once the Western armies withdraw.

That created a big crisis, and coupled with it was the fact that a trigger-happy U.S. military embarked on killing innocents.

Wherever the U.S. heard gunfire, they would drop bombs. Someone should have told them that Afghanistan is a tribal society, a culture where people fire guns to celebrate—whether it's weddings or the birth of a child, they just run out and fire guns in the air. You'd have thought Americans would have been more sympathetic to this, given the gun culture in the U.S., but somehow they didn't appreciate it in Afghanistan.

So the U.S. started bombing people. Reports came of a wedding ceremony in the U.S. came and bombed the hell out of it. Casualties: 90 or 100 killed, men, women and children. And this multiplied.

How has the Taliban been able to make a resurgence?

The Taliban began to regroup, rearm and fight, and it scored a few successes. What also began to happen simultaneously is that there were people who were happy to see them back—since no one

else was defending them.

So they began to treat the Taliban as an umbrella organization and tell them what was going on. Lots of people supposedly working with the U.S.-NATO occupying authorities would go tell the Taliban where the troops were going. Classic guerrilla warfare operations began, and the U.S. responded with more bombing raids. So there's a vicious circle in operation.

If you look at the newspapers over the last year and do a survey of all the reports where there were 60 Taliban were killed, 80 Taliban killed, 90 Taliban killed, you add it up and they've already killed thousands of supposed "Taliban" militia members—and the total force was supposed to be about 10,000.

In other words, if you believe these reports, then they've wiped out three-quarters of the Taliban organization, which is far from the truth. But because the U.S. is embarrassed at having killed civilians, it has to say this.

You have a situation in the country where Hamid Karzai's brother, Wali Ahmed Karzai, is well known as the largest heroin and arms smuggler in the region. He's become that because his brother runs the country.

Here's this guy who was happy running an Afghan restaurant in Baltimore and selling high-priced food to the students at Johns Hopkins—and he's now second-in-command in the country and making a fortune—a "killing," let's say.

Symbolically, this has been a total disaster. So, far from being a "good war," Afghanistan is turning out to be a nasty, unpleasant war, and there's no way the U.S. or other Western forces are going to be able to stay there for too long.

What are the regional powers hoping to get as an outcome in Afghanistan?

The Pakistani military is hoping that the West will withdraw and some sort of coalition government will be cobbled together between Karzai and chunks of the Taliban.

This is worth stressing. Backed by the West, the Karzai regime, even as we speak, is in serious negotiations with the Taliban. So the Taliban, which was demonized as the worst force that ever existed in the world, is now backed by the West—as long as they do a deal with Karzai.

The Taliban's first response to Karzai's offers was to say, "We won't even discuss this with you unless all foreign troops are withdrawn from the country." To which Karzai said, "That's not possible." He thinks it's not possible because without foreign troops, he wouldn't last 48 hours.

But as far as the Pakistani military is concerned, they know that they won't be able to pull off a deal between the Taliban and Karzai as long as foreign troops are in the region. The military imagines that once Western troops are out, it can grab the country again, through the Taliban and Karzai.

But I think this possibility is excluded now, because NATO made a mess of the occupation, and because in these last six years, regional autonomy has set in as a major factor in the country. Afghanistan was always a tribal confederation, but it's now even more confederated in character.

And the Iranians and Russians are not going to permit a U.S.-backed Taliban takeover of the country. So Pakistan's military leaders can hope to rule in one part of Afghanistan, but they won't be able to rule the whole country.

I've been arguing in Pakistan and elsewhere for the total and immediate withdrawal of all major troops and, simultaneously, the convocation of a peace conference by the regional powers involved in Afghanistan—which means Pakistan, Iran, Russia and India, which is the biggest power of all—to set up a national government following Western troop withdrawal and provide a breathing space for this country to rest and hold elections for a constituent assembly in two or three years' time.

In the meantime, these regional powers will guarantee no fighting and no civil war. People should be sympathetic to such a notion, because Afghanistan has been at war virtually nonstop since 1979. It's a horrible business taking place in that country.

It's unlikely that the Americans or Pakistanis would agree to this, in which case the situation will go from bad to worse, in my opinion.

So to sum up the situation in Afghanistan, it's a total mess. The U.S. can never win that war, and the main reason they can never win is that Afghans don't like being occupied. Afghans kicked out the British in the 19th century, the Russians in the 20th century, and now they're fighting again against the U.S. and its NATO allies.

P.S.

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