

NO to More War in Afghanistan

The Obama administration plans to send at least 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. Although the US occupation of Afghanistan is often described as “the good war,” escalating the US military presence there would have disastrous consequences for both Afghanistan and the United States. Instead, the US government must begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and—if it’s serious about preventing terrorism—replace military force with diplomacy and economic aid. Several points, though rarely discussed in the US media, are central to understanding the current situation in Afghanistan.

1. Escalating the war will be bad for the US and bad for Afghanistan

Escalating the war will lead to the deaths of more US soldiers while squandering hundreds of billions of dollars. Direct spending on the Afghanistan war has already totaled nearly \$200 billion, money that could have been spent on human needs like education, health care, and housing, and on development assistance for desperately poor countries like Afghanistan. Moreover, continued military intervention in Central Asia will *increase* the threat of terrorism against the US, not reduce it (see point #2 below).

Increasing the number of US soldiers is extremely unlikely to produce any reduction in violence. In fact, judging by previous increases in US/NATO troops, doing so will probably have the *opposite* effect. From 2007 to 2008, US/NATO forces were increased by 44 percent (from 36,000 to 52,000 soldiers) but the level of violence increased dramatically during that period. Last year civilian casualties skyrocketed by around 40 percent according to the United Nations, which recently issued a highly-conservative estimate of 2,118 civilian deaths for 2008. Forces operating under US/NATO command were directly responsible for about 40 percent of these deaths, according to the same report. The Kabul-based Afghanistan Rights Monitor estimates that almost 4,000 civilians were killed in 2008, in addition to at least several thousand more police, soldiers, and “militants.” Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have also been driven from their homes since 2001. The unfortunate pattern is that increased US military activity leads to increased violence overall and increased numbers of civilian casualties.

The US strategy of bombing civilian areas where suspected “insurgents” are located kills mostly women and children (who comprised 72 percent of the victims in the first eight months of 2008) and is a clear violation of national and international law (Articles 48 and 50 of the Fourth Geneva Convention). Moreover, it ultimately fuels more violence by strengthening support for insurgents among the Afghan population. 2008 was also the deadliest year to date for US and NATO troops, with 294 killed.

Most important, the Afghan people are strongly opposed to any escalation of the war. A January 2009 poll by ABC, BBC, and ARD news agencies found the following results:

- 73 percent of Afghans are opposed to the Obama administration’s escalation of the war, and 44 percent want US and NATO forces to begin withdrawing immediately
- 77 percent say that the United States’ use of air strikes is “unacceptable” because of the civilian deaths that inevitably result
- 51 percent want US/NATO forces gone within 1-2 years, a percentage that has risen steadily in recent years

2. There is no battlefield solution to terrorism

Any serious approach to fighting terrorism must be predicated on respect for national and international law, which strictly prohibit the use of violence except in self-defense. But the use of brute military force is also *ineffective* in countering terrorist groups like al-Qa’eda. A 2008 study by the RAND corporation, an organization with long ties to the US military and CIA, found that very few terrorist groups end as a result of military force. It concluded that “there is no battlefield solution to terrorism. Military force usually has the opposite effect from



Freshhta Shagad, a 9-year-old girl killed along with her baby brother in the initial US invasion

what is intended: It is often overused, alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature, and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment.”

History also suggests that the use of military force will not work. Afghanistan is far larger than Iraq, has more difficult terrain, and has a population of 30 million people. No empire in history—from Alexander the Great, to the British, to 110,000 Soviet troops in the 1980s—has been able to control it, leading to Afghanistan’s reputation as the “graveyard of empires.”

An effective approach must therefore involve a fundamental reorientation of US foreign policy. This approach must include the following:

- An immediate end to US military offensives in Afghanistan and Pakistan
- An immediate start to the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and Central Asia, to be replaced by temporary UN forces and local police that will take the lead in disarming the various warring factions and in confronting al-Qaeda
- Support for a regional diplomatic initiative involving all of Afghanistan's neighbors and domestic Afghan groups, including Taliban forces, to stabilize the region and isolate al-Qaeda, in accordance with the wishes of the Afghan population (see below, point #3). The Obama administration has tentatively signaled its desire for negotiations, but these will stand much less chance of success if accompanied by US military escalation.
- Full US support for secular, nonviolent sectors of Afghan society and their right to participate in negotiations
- US reparations for the human and material damage it has done
- Increased humanitarian and development aid to Afghanistan, with mechanisms to ensure that the aid benefits the people who need it most

“There is no battlefield solution to terrorism. Military force alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment.”

—2008 RAND Corporation study

3. The Afghan people want peace with justice; the US is promoting neither

Unfortunately US government policy in Afghanistan has gone against the wishes of most Afghans. For the last three decades the US has supported fundamentalist warlords known as the Mujahideen, first as allies against the

Soviet Union and later as a counter-weight to the Taliban. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the US has worked through the government of Hamid Karzai in an effort to shape the country’s political and economic destiny, and has continued to support Mujahideen warlords throughout the country, most of whom are affiliated with the group known as the Northern Alliance. Despite their atrocious crimes against Afghan civilians (especially women), many of these warlords have acquired high-level positions in government: 60 percent of the politicians in the Afghan Parliament are warlords or have close connections to warlords. As a result, warlords and fundamentalists have successfully enshrined Islamic Sharia law in the Afghan Constitution.

Although most Afghans dislike the Taliban, 74 percent favor government negotiations with Taliban leaders, and 64 percent think

that “the government in Kabul should negotiate a settlement with Afghan Taliban in which they are allowed to hold political offices if they agree to stop fighting.” At the same time, however, most Afghans insist that warlords and others guilty of human rights violations must be prosecuted, and that the rights of women must be ensured. Negotiations to end the fighting must therefore include strict stipulations ensuring the equal rights of women and legal investigations into past and future human rights violations.

- ***Call your Senators and Congressperson today and tell them to oppose escalation of the war and to support the measures outlined above. Rep. Tim Bishop (NY-1) and New York Senators Schumer and Gillibrand can all be reached by calling the US Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.***

“The US government first of all considers her own political and economic interests and has empowered and equipped the most traitorous, anti-democratic, misogynist and corrupt fundamentalist gangs in Afghanistan...RAWA from the very first days stated that no country will grant freedom and democracy to another country and today this reality is evident to all.”

—Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA.org), active since 1977