

Peace in Afghanistan?

Gabriel Carlyle argues that the US and Britain are blocking real possibilities for peace in Afghanistan.

Two years ago, whilst preparing a talk on Afghanistan, I drew up a list of the most common arguments then being used to justify Britain's participation in the war. Looking back on that list today, most have now imploded – sometimes in a dramatically public fashion. Then it still seemed necessary – even with a sympathetic audience – to review a fair amount of unfamiliar background information to rebut the pro-war case. No longer.

Warlords and rape laws

Are we in Afghanistan to protect democracy?

Earlier this year Afghan President Hamid Karzai approved 'one of the most notorious warlords in [the country], with the blood of many Afghans on his hands' (Human Rights Watch) as one of his two vice-presidential candidates, and the recent Presidential election was marked by massive fraud on Karzai's behalf.

Women's rights? Karzai recently approved a Taliban-style measure that effectively legalised marital rape for Afghanistan's Shia minority.

Reconstruction? While the US spends \$100m/day on the war, aid from all donors amounts to a mere \$7m/day – and 40% of this goes back to donor countries in corporate profits, consultants' salaries and other costs.

No alternative?

Two pro-war arguments remain, however. Namely, that most Afghans back the current policy, and that there is no alternative (Margaret Thatcher's infamous TINA). There *is* a kernel of truth to the former claim. Unlike in Iraq, where polls consistently showed large majorities regarded US-led forces as occupiers, a recent Afghan poll found majority support (roughly 60%) for the presence of US/NATO forces (Though Afghans are hardly gung-ho about the war: 77% oppose airstrikes, one-in-four Afghans believes attacks on US/NATO forces can be justified, and 73% oppose Obama's 'surge').

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However, there *is* a realistic alternative to the current carnage that has the support of most Afghans: namely, genuine negotiations to end the war.

Afghans back negotiations

With good reason, a majority of Afghans fear the Taliban (in one recent poll 58% identified the Taliban as the biggest danger to the country, compared to 8% who named the US). Nonetheless, 64% think the government in Kabul 'should negotiate a settlement with Afghan Taliban.' In a second poll 54% said that they strongly (25%) or somewhat (29%) supported the idea of a coalition government with the Taliban. Moreover, most people in Britain back negotiations: in a March 2009 poll 66% of Britons said that the US/UK should be 'willing to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to achieve a peace deal.'

Realistic?

Of course, it's impossible to negotiate if you have no-one to negotiate with. However, contrary to their public pronouncements there is serious evidence that the Taliban are prepared to negotiate. For some time now the Taliban leadership has been talking through intermediaries about a potential peace agreement with the Afghan government. In May the *New York Times* reported the Taliban leadership's (unofficial) demands:

- an immediate pullback of US/NATO forces to their bases;
- a cease-fire and phased 18-month withdrawal of foreign troops;
- a peacekeeping force, drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, to replace the current occupation forces;
- the formation of a transitional government;
- nationwide elections after Western forces leave.

These demands are strikingly similar to the terms of a May 2007 resolutions passed by the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament, which called for a military ceasefire, negotiations with the Taliban and a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Blocking peace

Nevertheless, the US and British governments continue to oppose meaningful peace talks. In December 2007, Gordon Brown declared that: 'Our objective is to defeat the Insurgency by isolating and eliminating its leadership. I make it clear that we will not enter into any negotiations with these people.' More recently, Kai Eide, the UN's special representative in Afghanistan, scorned British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's call for talks with 'moderate' Taliban (rather than the movement's leadership) noting: 'That's an inadequate peace process and that won't work ... We have to have a political process that is all-inclusive. That's the only way to bring this conflict to an end.' Furthermore, having already killed thousands of Afghan civilians, the US and Britain now look set on further escalation.

No illusions

In preliminary talks with the Afghan Government, the Taliban have reportedly 'agreed to soften their position on such things as beards and burqas' (*Independent*) – for example, refraining from banning girls' education. It is impossible to take this at face value. Indeed, there are good reasons to distrust all of the parties that would have to be involved in a settlement, whether it's the super-corrupt Karzai government, the US-backed warlords that currently control large swathes of the country, or the US and British governments, both of which have repeatedly demonstrated a callous indifference to the lives and well-being of ordinary Afghans, whilst flouting international law with impunity.

Moreover, no-one should be under any illusions that a negotiated settlement will be easy or unproblematic, or that it will resolve many of Afghanistan's long-entrenched problems: its dire poverty; its abysmal women's rights situation; or the desperate need to bring its many war criminals

to justice. However, for all its flaws a peace deal – and the withdrawal of foreign forces – is probably a necessary pre-condition for tackling these.

As the courageous female Afghan MP Malalai Joya has noted: 'The entire situation would be improved if Afghans were finally able to decide about their own problems ... If the United States and its NATO allies leave, the warlords will lose power because they have no base among our people. At least with withdrawal of foreign troops, we would have our independence. Today, we neither have freedom nor independence, justice or security.'



Our role

According to the *Sunday Telegraph's* Defence Correspondent, 'a power-sharing deal will have to be done with the Taliban if Afghanistan is to have any semblance of a peaceful future.' The rapid departure of British forces – desired by most Britons, according to the polls – would have a huge political impact in the US, helping to bring forward the day when the Americans will negotiate their way out. Here in the UK we need to pressure the British Government on this as hard as we can. Some sort of deal looks inevitable. The real question now is how many bodies will be piled up to postpone this outcome.

Gabriel Carlyle is Afghanistan news editor for *Peace News*. He will be speaking about Afghanistan at the *Peace News* Winter Gathering in Nottingham, 15-17 January 2010 (www.peacenews.info).