

# Afghanistan

## Nail the myth

*Caroline Lucas MP*

*The Green Party MP for Brighton Pavilion intervened in the Parliamentary debate on Afghanistan, which took place on 9 September 2010. These excerpts are taken from what she said.*

It's an important tradition of this House that the names of those brave troops who have been killed in Afghanistan are read out at the beginning of each week's Prime Minister's Questions. Yesterday, that roll call seemed to go on forever. And after it, the Deputy Prime Minister said

'Each of those men was an heroic, selfless individual who has given his life for the safety of us and the British people.'

Each of those men was heroic and selfless – our troops are doing an extraordinary job with great courage – but I think we need to nail the myth that their presence in Afghanistan is making the British people safer. We are constantly told that our troops are fighting in that country to keep us safe in this one. But we know the terror plots against Britain weren't hatched in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan and Britain itself. On that logic, we should be sending tanks into Dewsbury.

The Afghan war was put to the British people on a simple premise – that it was an act of self-defence in response to 9/11. The objective was supposed to be to capture and kill Osama Bin Laden and prevent al Qaeda using Afghanistan as a base from which to launch further attacks. But now that rationale seems a distant memory. Al Qaeda has been effectively dispersed around the world, particularly over the border into Pakistan. So now the objective is something else – to defeat the Taliban, which once hosted Bin Laden, and to reshape Afghanistan into a functioning society which can never again give shelter to al Qaeda. Yet stepping up this war seems to be terribly misguided. If al Qaeda remains the

ultimate enemy rather than the Taliban, then it makes no sense to spill so much blood in Afghanistan.

Or we are told that troops are there to bring human rights to Afghanistan. But while there was some improvement in human rights between 2001 and 2005, they are again drastically deteriorating. For many Afghans, especially those outside Kabul, improvements were anyway slight or non-existent. Vicious warlords in rural areas can be just as bent on enforcing sharia law as the Taliban.

According to Malalai Joya, the outspoken woman MP who was expelled from parliament, the government of Hamid Karzai is ‘full of warlords and extremists who are brothers in creed of the Taliban’, notably the judiciary, which is ‘dominated by fundamentalists’. This is the President whose authority our troops are dying to defend. A President who passes into law the so-called ‘marital rape’ law, which gives a husband the right to withdraw basic maintenance for his wife if she refuses to obey his sexual demands.

### **Amnesia**

When it comes to Afghanistan, it seems that we are struck by a particular kind of amnesia. There is so much we have forgotten. As Dan Plesch of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy has said, there is no sense that we sought to crush and dominate that country throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We appear to have no memory of that – but the Afghans do.

There is no sense, either, that the sentiment expressed by advocates of war time and time again – that to pull out now would be a betrayal of those who have given their lives so far – is the same sentiment expressed the last time the United States and its allies feared they were about to get sucked into a foreign quagmire. Advocates of escalation in Vietnam used to say that, too: we have to send more men to die, otherwise those already dead will have died in vain.

Or we might remember the last time a mighty superpower tried to subdue Afghanistan. The Soviet Union invaded in 1979, and within a few years their soldiers were losing their limbs or lives to landmines – the improvised explosive devices of their day – and there were the same kinds of angry complaints about a shortage of helicopters. As the journalist Jonathan Freedland has said, whatever other reactions we should have to the fate of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan – horror, grief, despair – surprise should not be one of them.

It is not unpatriotic to seek to recognise that there is no military solution to the crisis in Afghanistan, and to bring our troops safely home. Almost

everyone agrees that there will have to be a negotiated regional settlement sooner or later. Let's make it sooner, and stop the bloodshed now.

### **Human Cost**

This amnesia has an enormous human cost. The evidence of escalating violence and increasing insecurity in Afghanistan is reinforced by the WikiLeaks circulation back in July of huge amounts of official communications and reports about the US war on the ground. The leaked war logs also reveal that coalition forces have tried to cover up the fact that they have killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents. As they increasingly use deadly Reaper drones to hunt and kill Taliban targets under remote control from a base in Nevada, civilian deaths or collateral damage rise still further.

As of August 2010, over 330 British forces personnel or Ministry of Defence civilians had died while serving in Afghanistan, with several thousand more injured. Over 1000 US troops have died. And what of the Afghan casualties?

Of course, no official count is kept, but the estimate is at many thousands. Civilian casualties from the fighting have risen every year since 2001 but figures are very hard to arrive at. The International Security Assistance Force's own confidential report of August 2009 concedes that its military strategy is causing 'unnecessary collateral damage'. Leaders publicly say that their attacks are proportionate. Yet US Lt Col David Kilcullen has said that US aerial attacks on the Afghan-Pakistan border have killed 14 al Qaeda leaders at the expense of 700 civilian lives.

Alongside US and British military in Afghanistan is a 'shadow army' of private military and security companies, operating largely outside legal or democratic control. As a recent article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* asked, in characteristic diplomatic language, 'How can efforts to put down an insurgency be effective or credible when the countries contributing to the intervention force, and representing the UN, use mercenaries whose motivation is not necessarily the restoration of peace?' Or, as one British contractor is quoted as saying, rather more bluntly, in a War on Want briefing on this subject, for his firm, the more the security situation deteriorated, the better it is for business.

### **Extraordinary rendition – worse than Guantanamo**

We also know that Afghanistan is a key link in the network of secret prisons used by the US for unlawful detention and torture, and there are plenty of signs that Britain is intimately involved. The best known of the

Afghan ‘secret’ prisons is within Bagram airbase. As of late 2009, the Pentagon reported 645 prisoners being held at Bagram, supposedly terrorist suspects. The Obama administration has continued to block granting legal rights to the detainees – so none has a right to a lawyer, and no civilian lawyer, or journalist, has ever been there.

US lawyer Tina Foster, who is arguing several cases on behalf of detainees at Bagram, says that, from the beginning, ‘Bagram was worse than Guantanamo’, and ‘has always been a torture chamber’. And rather than closing Bagram, the Obama administration is expanding it to hold five times as many prisoners as Guantanamo.

### **Afghan Development**

All of this might not be quite as horrific if the lives of ordinary Afghans were significantly improving, and the country developing. But although, on some indicators, there has been some improvement – on access to education, for example – overall the situation is bleak. Indeed, by some indicators, Afghans are getting poorer – child malnutrition, for example, has risen in some areas, an effect of the chronic hunger that now affects over 7 million people.

Meanwhile:

- 1 in 5 children dies before the age of 5, the highest infant mortality rate in the world;
- A shocking 1 in 8 Afghan women die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth;
- Life expectancy is just 44.

The United States has spent 20 times as much on military operations than on development in Afghanistan, while Britain has spent 10 times as much. Yet the UN Security Council notes that 25 as many Afghans die every year from under-nutrition and poverty as from violence.

This is an unwinnable war that is costing us over £7 million a day. If George Osborne is looking at places to cut spending, he should start right here, and bring the troops home. But the financial cost to Afghanistan is huge as well. The Afghan government spends a massive 30% of its budget on the security sector. In 2008, it was spending seven times more than the world average on the military, and more than twice as much as most other countries undergoing war.

I want to conclude by noting that Britain is in many respects a bigger recruiting sergeant for the Taliban than al Qaeda ever was. ISAF’s Director of Intelligence provided a briefing, in December 2009, that outlined information given by militants to the International Security Assistance

Force. It states they view al Qaeda as a ‘handicap’, and that this view is ‘increasingly prevalent’.

Instead, the insurgents were motivated by the government being seen as corrupt and ineffective, by crime and corruption being pervasive among the security forces, and because promised infrastructure projects were ineffective.

Increasing civilian deaths is also likely to be another driver for villagers joining the insurgents, together with a lack of other viable ways of making any money. In that respect, when the government argues that leaving Afghanistan now would provide a boost for al Qaeda, in fact the opposite is true.

The longer the occupation continues, the more jihadists around the world will be likely to be inspired to target Britain, and the more Afghan villagers are likely to side with the insurgents. That’s why I believe that British and other NATO troops must halt their offensive military activities and announce a timetable for withdrawal as soon as possible. We should be engaging in talks to secure a regional solution to the war now.



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