

The Unending Failure of the Afghan War

Afghanistan has been a disaster for U.S. policymakers since Presidents Carter and Reagan started funding Islamists almost four decades ago and then the U.S. began fighting them post-9/11, a failure that needs ending, says Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

Sixteen years have passed and we are still fighting a war in Afghanistan which is not only the longest in American history (at a cost approaching \$1 trillion and the blood of thousands of brave soldiers), but one which is morally corrupting from which there seems to be no exit with any gratification but shame.

It was necessary to invade Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda following 9/11, but once it was defeated we should have departed, leaving behind some residual forces to clean up the mess. Instead, we decided to introduce democracy, a totally alien concept to a land historically governed by tribes, and which no foreign power has ever been able to govern or fully conquer for long.

Today, we are still discussing the best course of action to bring this war to some form of a satisfactory conclusion. Before we discuss prospective solutions, however, we should take a hard look at the real cost of the war and its implications that will startle many to their core.

Nearly 2,400 American soldiers have been killed and 20,000 wounded; over 33,000 Afghani civilians have lost their lives. A record number of civilians—1,662—were killed in the first six months of 2017 alone, and over 3,581 civilians were wounded. Overall, Afghani casualties are estimated at 225,000, with 2.6 million Afghani refugees and more than one million internally displaced.

Thus far, the cost of the war to date is approximately \$783 billion; the cost for each soldier is \$3.9 million per year. If we were to divide the war's cost among Afghanistan's 30 million citizens, it would amount to \$33,000 per head, from which the ordinary Afghan has derived zero benefit in a country where the average annual per capita income was only \$670 in 2014.

While we are spending these sums of money on an unwinnable war, 15 million U.S. children (21 percent) live in households below the federal poverty threshold. Hundreds of thousands go to sleep hungry, and many are living in squalid conditions, with infrastructure and homes on the verge of collapsing.

To understand the travesty of these expenditures on the war, just think of the cost to America, not only in human lives and money, but our moral standing in

the world and the pervasive, corrosive thinking that the war can still be won with military muscle.

It is naïve to think that after 16 years of fighting, dispatching an additional military force of 4,000 soldiers (as recommended by Secretary of Defense James Mattis) will change anything, when at its peak over 140,000 soldiers were unable to win and create a sustainable political and security structure that would allow us to leave with dignity.

No Win in Sight

No one in the Trump administration, including the Pentagon, is suggesting that additional forces would win the war. At best, they can arrest the continuing advances of the Taliban, which is now in control of more than one third of the country – and then what?

After a visit to Afghanistan, Sen. John McCain was asked to define winning: “Winning is getting major areas of the country under control and working toward some kind of ceasefire with the Taliban.”

But as Robert L. Borosage of The Nation points out, “we’ve had major areas under control before, and the Taliban continued to resist, while corruption and division continued to cripple the Afghan government.” Beyond this resurgent Taliban threat, Al Qaeda is back in full force and is successfully spreading its wings far beyond the Afghani borders.

If anything, the situation today is even worse both in the political and security spheres, and the prospects of developing sustainable conditions on the ground and a functioning government in Kabul are next to zero. Sadly, Defense Secretary Mattis resembles a gambling addict pouring money into a slot machine, but ends up leaving depressed and frustrated for having lost every dollar, hoping against hope to win a jackpot that never pays out.

One might ask Secretary Mattis, what is our goal now in Afghanistan, and what is our exit strategy? For the past 16 years, no Defense Secretary provided a clear answer, and now we are asked to gamble again with the lives of our soldiers, with no hope of ever winning this debilitating war, which has now become a war of choice.

To be sure, there will not be a military solution to the Afghan war. The sooner we accept this reality, however bitter it may be, the better so we can focus on a practical outcome that can emerge only through negotiations with moderate elements of the Taliban.

The second option of conducting the war, which is championed by Trump’s chief

strategist Steve Bannon, is to hire private contractors in lieu of American troops to fight a proxy war on our behalf. There is nothing more disdainful than such a proposal. If we were to choose this route – sending mercenaries to foreign lands to do our killing – will there be anything more morally decadent than this breach of our humanity?

The fact that we used mercenaries in the past to act as security guards or manage detention centers was bad enough, in that they abused their mandate and committed egregious crimes while making billions of dollars.

We should never repeat such a practice which is morally reprehensible. This scheme, not surprisingly, comes from the self-serving master manipulator Bannon, whose advice to Trump so far has got the President in more trouble than he cares to handle. A war for which we are not prepared to sacrifice the life of a soldier for a worthy cause must never be fought.

A Way Out

In a series of conversations I had with Ajmal Khan Zazai, tribal leader and Paramount Chief of Paktia province in Afghanistan, he spoke with deep frustration about the American military approach that has never had a chance of succeeding.

He said, “Afghanistan is a tribal country, the tribes are the past, present, and the future. To win this hard fight against the Taliban and their associates [including Al Qaeda and ISIS] without the support and backing of the tribes would be a miracle and I doubt a miracle is happening these days.”

He was emphatic about the naivete of successive American administrations, saying that government officials in the Departments of State and Defense going back to the Bush era appeared to be “either obsessed with their version of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ or believe only in a U.S. military solution. They don’t believe in homegrown or Afghan local solutions led by the tribes, or even winning hearts and minds.”

It is time for the U.S. to realize that the long-term solution lies, as Zazai said, with the full backing and support of the tribes. He told me that he is prepared to gather the chiefs of all the tribes to seek commitment from top U.S. officials to empower them by providing \$400 million to \$500 million dollars, over a few years (which is a fraction of what we spend today). The purpose would be to recruit and train their own militia to fight their own battles – not mercenaries for hire, who want to prolong the war only to enrich themselves.

The solution to the Afghanistan debacle lies with the Afghani tribes, who must take the lead in fighting the insurgency. The tribes will be fighting for their

country because they want an end to outrageous foreign interventions that did nothing but cause havoc in the name of pursuing an illusionary democracy.

In the end, the solution lies in peace negotiations with moderates in the Taliban, who are Afghani nationals and will not be dislodged from their own land, and no one is better equipped to achieve that than the tribal chiefs. They want to take matters into their hands and end the decades-long suffering, death, and destruction they have and continue to endure.

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The Bloody ‘Liberation’ of Mosul

Official Washington deemed Syria’s defeat of jihadists occupying Aleppo a “war crime” but called the U.S.-backed defeat of ISIS in Mosul, Iraq, a “liberation,” yet it too killed civilians and destroyed an ancient city, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The Iraqi and U.S. governments have declared Mosul as liberated from its ISIS occupiers. But author Vijay Prashad says it’s not so simple: the “liberation” included the slaughter of civilians by both sides and left large swaths of the ancient city – the second largest in Iraq – in rubble and ruins. And ISIS is still entrenched in other parts of the war torn country.

Prashad is a professor of International Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He is the author of some eighteen books, including *Arab Spring*, *Libyan Winter*, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*, and *The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution*.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, Professor Prashad, the prime minister of Iraq calls it a liberation. How would you characterize what we’re seeing continuing to unfold in Mosul?

Vijay Prashad: It’s a complicated situation. The city of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, a city with great history and character, has been under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The group took Mosul some

two years ago. It has taken nine months of concerted fighting to remove the Islamic State group from Mosul. In that respect, of course, it is liberation from the Islamic State.

On the other hand, this war of nine months has been a war of very significant aerial bombardment and immense use of artillery fire. The US Air Force has pummeled the city, particularly Western Mosul, and destroyed large parts of it. There are a million refugees out of Mosul in 19 emergency camps that the United Nations is struggling to maintain. The city has been utterly destroyed. It is very unlikely that the million-plus people will be able to return to their homes. But most strikingly, the nature of the bombardment was so brutal that within a year or two years we are going to see something like the revival of the Islamic State group.

After all, the brutal US military destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi in 2004-2005—which included the use of depleted uranium and perhaps white phosphorous—is what produced the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. The savage form of warfare used to eject the Islamic State from Mosul this time is not going to mean the end of that group. Instead, I believe it will lay the ground for its reemergence again in a few years.

DB: You refer to the groups Airwars and Amnesty International, who discuss the disproportionate use of weaponry and the extensive, unnecessary killing of civilians.

VP: This is a very important piece of the equation. There are photographs across the internet showing the quite serious devastation in Mosul. But what has already begun to happen is that the Western corporate media have started to indicate that this destruction was caused by ISIS. It is true that ISIS did at first destroy many sites of historical importance in the city, but ISIS doesn't have the capacity for aerial bombardment. Much of the physical destruction of the city has taken place as a consequence of US aerial bombardment.

Amnesty looked at a series of important bombing raids and concluded in a report published on July 11 that there was needless loss of civilian lives and even claimed to have evidence of so-called "unlawful attacks" in Mosul. The reaction from the US military was swift. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend very quickly announced that "the United States rejects any notion that the coalition targeted civilians." What is very interesting about that statement is that a few days later Townsend told the New York Times that in Raqqa, Syria, the United States is bombing bridges, targeting civilians trying to flee the city.

So in the case of Mosul he said that the United States does not ever target civilians and in the case of Raqqa he very cavalierly explains that we are

bombing bridges because we don't want people to flee the city. In other words, we are committing a war crime by trapping civilians in a city that we are now going to bomb very aggressively in order to "annihilate" ISIS.

DB: I believe the exact wording the general used was: "We shoot every boat we find. If you want to get out of Raqqa right now you've got to build a poncho raft."

VP: After Stephen Townsend made his claim that the United States doesn't commit war crimes, Airwars—a very important group that monitors aerial bombardment—showed there has indeed been extensive bombing of civilian infrastructure in Mosul and in Raqqa, including things like internet cafes, swimming pools, mosques, etc. The destruction of civilian infrastructure is meant to create despair among the population. If this very serious allegation by Airwars is true, we are indeed looking at a violation of the Geneva Convention.

DB: We are talking about what has been characterized by the prime minister of Iraq as a liberation of Mosul but, as you say, there has been great suffering there. Maybe we could step back a little bit and consider the kinds of policies of the Iraqi prime minister and the US that might foster another ISIS in a couple years.

VP: One of the things that American nationals should not forget is that the United States, in an illegal war in 2003, began to systematically destroy Iraq. This is where the conversation should always begin. It is very easy to attribute these conflicts to some pathologies in Islam or to say, well, it's that part of the world, they have always been fighting, it has nothing to do with us.

The fact is that the author of this particular set of tragedies is absolutely the illegal war perpetuated by George W. Bush's government in 2003. That war not only destroyed the Iraqi state and significant elements of Iraqi society, it also destroyed agriculture and sent many farmers into deep distress. When there was an uprising against these policies in Anbar Province, the crackdown by US forces, led by Jim Mattis, now secretary of defense, was extraordinarily brutal. There was use of depleted uranium, which has produced radiation in parts of Ramadi and Fallujah that is many times higher than the radiation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was out of this immense destruction of Iraq and the targeted destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi that ISIS emerged in the first place.

When, afterwards, the exiled Islamic Dawa Party emerged in Iraq, it was sidelined and rejected by the Iraqi people. At this point there was an attempt inside Iraq to create a sort of patriotic agenda which was fostered by civil society groups. They emerged in force in 2011 and at this time there was a crackdown against this kind of peaceful patriotic platform. When this crackdown

occurred, many people became disillusioned with the Iraqi project and went over to ISIS.

The harsh destruction of Iraq by the United States, combined with the current government's very sectarian politics and its rejection of the people's patriotic platform which was put forward in 2011, created a combustible situation which gave energy to the resurfacing of ISIS in 2013-2014.

The current war in Mosul and in Raqqa is not going to destroy ISIS. Instead, it is creating immense civilian suffering. Unless there is a political project that integrates people into some kind of civil nationalism, we are going to see the emergence of very extreme groups in the future. This kind of brutal warfare rarely results in a positive outcome. It has always produced something quite ugly.

DB: I think it is important to take an even broader view of the history of the United States in Iraq and in the region. Let's start with the very cynical policy of the United States to support both sides in the Iraq/Iran war: Let them kill each other and then we'll move in and take the resources. The kinds of wars that we have conducted, the kinds of actions that have destroyed this ancient city, the embargo that cost hundreds of thousands of children their lives, the epidemics that stem from our use of depleted uranium...

VP: Depleted uranium is one piece of it, white phosphorous is another. There is just a much higher level of munitions used in Iraq than in other comparable conflicts. I was surprised to read the other day how more weapons were used against Vietnam than in all World War II. It is the stunning volume of weapons used against these societies, with absolute impunity, no sense that they will be censured by anybody! So if the United States uses this kind of weaponry against people whose spirits are broken and whose political projects are rendered hopeless, it is not surprising that they turn to extremism.

Let me give you a parallel example. It is not that, for instance, the Palestinian people have not suffered great indignity, have not been the victims of the worst kind of occupation and oppression. But because there is a unifying political project, the eventual creation of some sort of homeland, that movement has achieved a very great maturity and you don't see the kind of extremism that one might imagine.

In other words, you would think that after sixty-odd years of the conditions faced by the Palestinians there would be near anarchy in Palestinian politics. But that is not what you see. Wretched conditions in themselves do not lead necessarily to extremist politics. It is the destruction of hope. This is where the character of the American occupation of Iraq has to be brought before an

international tribunal. It is not just the bombing or the use of depleted uranium.

The character of the American occupation destroyed Iraqi history, the development of its national identity, the character of its political project. It has set Iraq off the rails of its own historical development. The campaign in Mosul further underscores the tragedy. And the mainstream corporate media seems oblivious to this. They are reporting the battle in Mosul as if they were stenographers of the State Department or the Pentagon.

DB: We're hearing it is the end of ISIS but we know that ISIS still holds other parts of Iraq and the war continues in Syria. Does the war move now into these other parts of Iraq, do the survivors head into Syria for the final battle?

VP: I want to emphasize two points here: First, Mosul was very definitely not the final battle. In Iraq there will be battles along the road to Syria. ISIS is still quite entrenched in parts of Anbar Province. It is along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. So there are still fights in Iraq.

In Syria, ISIS is quite spread out. It is not just in Raqqa. It has holdouts around the major eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, it is in Al-Hasakah, it is in various places. Also, ISIS has become a kind of brand. And so there are ISIS outfits in Afghanistan, in Tunisia, in Libya. We haven't seen the end of ISIS yet.

The second issue is that this is not just about ISIS. The question is what this kind of war is going to produce in five or ten years. That's what I am more concerned about. Because there is no political cohesion in Iraq, because there is no plan to integrate this section of Iraqi society, I fear that new forms of extremism are going to emerge. Whatever emerges will certainly be alienated from the government in Baghdad and decidedly alienated from the United States, which they will certainly see as one of the authors of the great destruction.

DB: The BBC is investigating at least one video showing government troops assassinating detainees by handcuffing them and throwing them over the side of a cliff. Human rights groups are receiving numerous accounts of tortures and executions in Mosul. So this is the beginning of the next phase, isn't it?

VP: Yes, this is already a problem, not only in Iraq but in Syria as well. The national armies in these countries have deteriorated quite significantly. In fact, in Iraq the army was destroyed during the American occupation. These governments have had to rely more on irregular groups and militias, often organized along very sectarian lines. These groups don't have the training or the discipline and they have little concern for human rights.

Secondly, they have lived through the decade of American occupation, where they have seen US troops performing night raids, driving detainees into factories like Abu Ghraib, etc. It is not merely a question of irregular armies which are misbehaving because they haven't attended a seminar on the Geneva Convention. The example of the United States has not provided any instruction in respecting human rights.

This is entirely the legacy of three sources: One, that there is no regular army with a strong chain of command. Two, the horrible example of the US military. And three, the Iraqi army during the war against Iran was hardly trained to be a kind and decent army, it was a vicious, harsh army, using chemical weapons against the enemy, for example. These are the sources of the violence and people should not be surprised to see this level of retribution.

DB: As you've undoubtedly noticed, there's a new administration in the United States. Do you think there is any more hope under Trump than under Obama?

VP: Not really. Mr. Trump has said that he wants to see military action "with the gloves off." He immediately congratulated Iraq on the "liberation" of Mosul and there won't be any concern about human rights violations or things like that. The United States government is now using the phrase "the annihilation of ISIS." This is a dangerous phrase which declares open season for people like Duterte in the Philippines authorizing the assassination of people in slums, or the government of Mr. Abadi in Iraq essentially authorizing the assassination of detainees in Mosul. This is a world that Mr. Trump is quite comfortable in.

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