

VII RESTORING PEACE IN A WARTORN COUNTRY: PEACEKEEPERS AND AFGHANISTAN

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RESTORING PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Over and above local, regional, and national systems of criminal justice, the world community, today, helps to ensure peace through the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers. Unfortunately, such peacekeepers are usually tasked to a situation after the indigenous population has been through years of conflict. While the uniforms may change, the psyche of the population remains the same. A man with a rifle is a man with a rifle! The peace efforts of peacekeepers remain, at first anyway, mostly unnoticed to the common people. A situation exacerbated when peacekeepers are seen wounding, killing, and destroying infrastructure. While the peacekeeping forces may explain such actions by noting self-defence, or the war on terrorism, the indigenous population sees only the continuation of the wounding, the killing, and the destruction of their homes and communities by those in uniform. This is not forgotten when peacekeepers engage in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. You destroy, you build, you destroy. You hurt, you heal, you hurt. It is a vicious cycle with no end, and little hope in sight. If Western governments truly wish to bring peace to Afghanistan, they must change the way they go about peacekeeping. While it would be ludicrous to suggest that armed United Nations peacekeepers withdraw entirely, leaving those tasked with reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts defenceless in a dangerous and war-ravaged environment, it is not ludicrous to suggest that frontline contact, with common people, be more in line with aid organizations who try to understand indigenous culture and traditions while fostering dialogue, than with those brandishing arms.

How can peace ever expect to garner a toehold when peacekeepers hold their fingers 'ever ready' on triggers, while the local populace fearfully looks upon those very same peacekeepers as nothing more than a substitute to the previous occupying forces? Without the establishment of trust, any and all reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, on the part of the West, will be for not. Until the cycle of violence is visibly broken, the common people of Afghanistan will continue to feel themselves in a warlike situation. Hate will propagate, and attacks will continue. Because much of the local population has been victimized by violence for so long, the first step in this process must be taken by the West. United Nations peacekeepers need to withdraw to defensive positions where they can be called upon, only when necessary, to protect the front line aid workers who will live amongst, and converse with the locals. Only this will enable trust to become established.

THE AFGHANISTAN SITUATION

From Halkoo, through Chengaz Khan and Alexander the Great, to the British and Russian Forces, Afghanistan is a country that has never accepted foreign occupation. The Afghan are renowned for their fierce spirit of independence.

WHO ARE THE AFGHANS?

Afghanistan is home to a rich and diverse cultural history dating back five millennia. Over twenty distinct ethnicities have been identified in Afghanistan. The dominant ethnic community is the Pukhtton (Pashtun) people, constituting approximately 50 per cent of the population, while Dari (Persian) is the predominant language spoken. The majority of Pukhtoon earn a living through animal husbandry and agriculture, as well as some trade.

The second largest community is the Tajik, who account for approximately 25 per cent of the population. They are identified with farming, and are located mostly in the eastern fertile valleys both to the north and to the south of the Hindu-Kush mountain range.

The other ethnic groups to be found living in Afghanistan are the Uzbek and Turkmen. These northern plains people are primarily farmers and herders. They comprise approximately 11 per cent of the population. The Hazaras, a Mongoloid Persian speaking people, live in the central mountains. The Nuristanis inhabit the high mountain region in the east, and the Balochi live in the desert area to the south. Each of these three populations comprise approximately 1 per cent of the population.¹

Traditional Afghan culture relies heavily on kinship and family loyalty. Afghans, despite their many ethnicities, languages, and traditions, are united by their commitment to Islam. In traditional Afghan culture, a family's reputation is closely linked to maintaining Islamic culture and values. One tradition has been the purdah, the segregation of women from men. The purdah includes protecting the family's honour by limiting a woman's interaction in the public sphere. One example of this is the wearing of the burqa, a cloth that covers all physical features, by women when in public.

Due its geopolitical importance, Afghanistan has historically been target for foreign domination by powers intent to exert their influence within the region. The most recent of these foreign attempts involved the deployment of the Soviet Union's 40th Army, on December 25, 1979, in support of Afghanistan's Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (the PDPA) against the rebel Mujahideen insurgents, who found support with the United States, Pakistan, and other Muslim nations. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan on February 15, 1989 the conflict continued between various Mujahideen factions and camps. It was out of this struggle that the Taliban came to power, occupying almost all of Afghanistan, with the exception of the north. The Taliban were

¹ [Http://www.afghan-network.net/Ethnic-Groups/](http://www.afghan-network.net/Ethnic-Groups/)

overthrown by western forces in order to facilitate the establishment of the democratic government of President Karzai.

Armed Forces from thirty six NATO, nine partner, and two non-NATO countries² are still waging war in Afghanistan in their hunt for al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents. The suicide attacks of the insurgents kill, and maim, not only their intended targets, but many bystanders. The indiscriminate fire, and bombardments, of the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, has also claimed its share of unintended targets. There is no way around it, innocent people continue to be the fodder that is known simply as collateral damage.

THE SNAPSHOT THAT IS AFGHANISTAN³

Population: 25,838,797 (July 2000, est.)
 Area: 652,000 sq km
 GDP: \$21 billion (1999 est.)
 Ethnic groups: Pashtun 38%, Tajik 25%, Uzbek 6%, Hazara 19%
 Minor ethnic groups 12% (Aimaks, Turkman, Baloch, other)
 Religions: Sunni Muslim 84%, Shi'a Muslim 15%, other 1%
 Languages: Pashtun 35%, Afghan Persian (Daari) 50%, Turkic
 languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%, 30 minor
 languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%. There is
 much bilingualism also.

UNDER THE SURFACE:

The old Pustho proverb that: *a village rabbit can easily be caught by the village dog because the dog knows everything about the village* is helpful in explaining why the combined armed forces, some 30,000 troops in total⁴ from thirty six NATO countries has failed to bring about peace to a region tamed by the Taliban. The Taliban originate from the region and are intimately acquainted with the prevailing customs, traditions, language and psyche of the population of Afghanistan. As such, from the start the Taliban were intimately aware of the value to be gained from tapping into the concept of jihad, this time focussed toward NATO, not Soviet troops. While the uniforms have changed, the seeds of hatred had already been planted from previous fighting. The religious dichotomy of 'othering' has been used, on both sides, to fuel the hatred. Muslims, the world over, are hearing the call to defend Islam while feeling the affects of Western hatred, and fear, via the increase in racism. Both sides are engaged in a vicious circle of hate, out of which violence is to be expected.

² www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/040628-factsheet.html

³ <http://www.afghan-network.net/Culture/facts.html>

⁴ <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/index.html>

The lack of a centralized government within Afghanistan has led to governmental corruption along with the entrenchment of local War Lords. The common Afghan people, like everyone wish to live in peace and prosperity, but are angry as they see no end to the war and exploitation around them. This is how the traditional systems of jirga⁵ has become so easily co-opted. Corrupt officials, insurgents, and War Lords alike claim themselves jirga members. Desperate, and angry, common people answer the call of jirga in the hope of bringing change. Rampant unemployment, crushing inflation, a lack of educational opportunities, and almost non-existent health care abound even now, five years after the fall of the Taliban. Electricity for domestic use is available to the people of Kabul, the capital, only on alternate days, and only for a few hours per day. Even during the day, lights are visible within the compounds of the Peacekeepers.

The short-sighted and ill thought marriage of the War on Terrorism to the War on Drugs has a great potential to cripple the reconstruction efforts of the West within Afghanistan. Afghanistan's major cash crop is the poppy! Focussing upon poppy eradication, without first putting in place other avenues for local farmers to make a living will only add to the already rampant unemployment. This is simply asking for problems, especially since there is a legitimate market for opiate production in the form of pain killing medicine.

The fact that the ISAF patrol in a somewhat aggressive and culturally thoughtless manner only compounds local resistance to Peacekeepers. Both the media and the ISAF have notified the local population, through print and electronic media, that no one should overtake an ISAF while it is on patrol. Suicide attacks on ISAF patrols have been known to elicit indiscriminate defensive fire that sees, in the end, the deaths of many innocent civilians. During house searches, Afghan families are routinely dishonoured when their women are touched, grabbed, and unveiled. When women are dishonoured, the only option open to the family is revenge.

Afghan people have never experienced the casualties, nor the level of violence, that has come with the ISAF. This has led many to discuss the difference between the Russian invasion and the present. One direct question, arising out of such discussions, is whether the ISAF is on the ground to protect the people and help rebuild a nation, or there to keep a friendly government in power, even at the expense of the common people.

This is not to say that the vast majority of the Afghan people lay the blame entirely upon the laps of corrupt officials and the ISAF. The peaceful people of Afghanistan know that it is hard, sometimes even impossible, to discriminate between insurgents, whether those insurgents be Taliban, al-Qaeda, or simply a commoner bent on revenge for a past injustice, from the ordinary mass of

⁵ For a complete discussion of the system of Jirga, the reader is referred to this writer's submission *Traditional and Introduced Approaches to Conflict Resolution* which may be found within Vol 2, No 2(a): 97-108 of the International Journal of Restorative Justice.

civilians going about their daily lives. By restricting avenues of contact, by giving up on opportunities to engage in dialogue, by labelling the population as terrorist friendly, the West is fostering negativity, and possibly violence, from the indigenous population.

Afghanistan additionally finds itself a divided country. There are blatant distinctions between the north and the south, and between urban and rural life. The Afghan internal political situation is divided on an ethnic basis. The north has more representation and influence than does the south. The north is more developed, while the south is home to most of the fighting.

The NGO (non-governmental organization) community in Afghanistan faces security threats that both the Afghan government and the ISAF are not in a position to deal with on the whole. As a result, their activities are focussed primarily upon urban areas. As a result, rural Afghanistan remains pretty much untouched by any rebuilding, medical, and educational advances the West is trying to implement. The small amount of NGO activity that does venture forth into rural Afghanistan generally encounters resistance to goal implementation from both sides. Those who work for NGO's, and UN sister agencies, either do not know how to develop communications with local elders, or they are afraid of them. For their part, the local leadership within rural Afghanistan rails against local and foreign NGO's, whom they fear have arrived to spread vulgarity and question the basic principles of traditional religious life so as to promote an outside political and religious agenda. Such tugs-of-war only retards the developmental process in most of the rural communities within the east, south and west of Afghanistan.

A further drawback of foreign NGO's is that they want to implement processes that will bring about immediate change according to the expectations of outsiders. Basic ideological differences are very much ignored in such a scenario. There is little, if any, time given for compromise with, or education of, the local leadership. This lack of empowering the indigenous leadership basically spells the end to any sustainability for a project as there will be little community support. The projects life-cycle will be limited to outside funding. Once that funding is removed, the project will die.

While both foreign governments and NGO's raise the legitimate issue of human rights violations, specifically in regard to the rights of women, they often do so in a counterproductive, and possibly simplistic, way. Outsiders do not typically take the time to familiarize themselves with traditional cultural and ethnic ways that would serve to open dialogue and thus promote change. Especially within rural Afghanistan, the elders of the community are still strong enough to control the traditional system. It is these individuals who are in a position to either foster, or resist, change. These people need proper linkages for education and awareness.

The world must understand and appreciate that the elders of rural Afghanistan are neither blind to situations at hand, nor simplistic in how they deal with those situations. Foreign governments, and INGO's, must acknowledge that the

Afghan elders to whom they are preaching, for example, gender balance slogans are acutely aware that the West does not have all the answers. While the West's demands for women's rights, for example the criticisms around the veil, is heard, Afghan elders filter such messages through the knowledge of the West's overly sexualized culture and its indulgent use of alcohol. The elders of Afghanistan are fully aware that those who demand full participation for all women are from a culture that objectifies and sexualizes their women. If the West wishes their culturally based messages to be given credence, then Westerners, especially those on the ground in Afghanistan such as the Peacekeepers, must demonstrate a respect for the prevailing values of the Afghan people, even if those values are seen as wrong.

The majority of foreigners presently working in Afghanistan work for organizations that wish to achieve certain targets designed to bring about positive changes. Unfortunately, these positive changes are not always 'perceived' as being positive by the Afghan people themselves. The above paragraph is a good example of this. Further, Afghans, like anyone, can easily become resentful of foreign 'experts' who show up, with budgets, and start dictating their targets to the locals while spending a large amount of money upon their own food, security, and logistical considerations. Under such circumstances, (disrespect for local customs and values coupled with a preoccupation with personal indulgence), how can anyone expect anything but resistance?

Aside from direct consideration of Peacekeepers, the international community, especially the West, must keep in mind that neighbouring countries have different interests in Afghanistan. The only country that is under tremendous criticism is Pakistan, where 1.6 million Afghan refugees reside. It is common for the world to view the tribal belt, an area that covers more than 12,000 miles along the Afghan/Pakistan boarder, as 'the' refuge for anti-Western insurgents. Pakistan, a country that itself experiences terrorist attacks, has deployed 80,000 troops to cover its boarder with Afghanistan; especially in the Waziristan area. The government of Pakistan has advocated for the employment of barbed wire and mines be used to seal the boarder in order to check insurgent movement. Afghanistan has resisted not out of loyalty to any insurgent movement, nor due to any anti-Western thinking, but simply because such an undertaking would weaken any claim on the Pukhtoon areas presently under Afghan influence within Pakistan. Further, there is the politically motivated issue that Pakistan is not happy with the influence that India is now exerting within Afghanistan.

THE WAY IN BETWEEN

Afghans have never accepted armed foreigners, invaders, peacekeepers, Soviet or American, upon their soil, for whatever reason. Today, this is such a danger because arms and ammunition are found in such abundance. NGO's offer a possible solution. Workers for these organizations not only work, but live for a time, in rural areas. They typically take on the local dress, and they follow the local traditions. Further, they seek local input in strategy development and

implementation. Such practices not only serve to make these workers less visible, but additionally tend to facilitate their interactions with locals. While these workers may be outsiders, they are not seen as preoccupied with their own personal indulgences.

Foreign Peacekeepers can learn a lesson from how NGO's work in the field. Why is it that military officials are not able to develop policies that would see small groups visit rural areas in order to develop lines of communications with the local populace? This can easily be accomplished with the cooperation of NGO staff. While Peacekeepers are known to give candy to children, the military as a whole seems at a loss to take the next step and try to ingratiate themselves into the indigenous culture. The Afghan Code of Life dictates that those who arrive as guests be treated with respect. If Westerners became involved with local life, learned the language, customs and dress, attended marriages and funerals, then they would make inroads toward their acceptance, at the grass roots level, that would never be achieved by showing up in force. Such practices would also avoid some of the miscommunication conveyed to the ISAF force by local informers regarding insurgents.

The international media has a role to play too. While full coverage is given to the death and destruction caused by foreign insurgence, little, if any, coverage is given to local custom. The international media can play an educational role. The international media, rather than reporting on nothing more than death and destruction, can introduce the Afghan people, their customs and traditions, their way of life, to the World. While there is no magic cure for fear and hatred, education has been shown, over and over again, to be an effective tool to combat such negatives. If an armed peacekeeping force is being met with fear, resentment, and resistance, then maybe it is time that the West rethinks its strategy. The ISAF needs to develop supportive linkages with the developmental agencies in a move away from the present coercive nature of their involvement with the local people.

Development work in the city of Kabul, the capital, is nearly nonexistent as far as work designed to benefit the average citizen goes. While there are buildings under construction, the common infrastructure is in ruins. Sanitation problems overflow onto streets unable to support transportation. Yet, when representatives from NGO's, and other agencies, speak at seminars and conferences, one can listen to their self-appraising initiatives being implemented with great success within different parts of Afghanistan. The problem is, even within the NGO's, the senior administration is so distanced from what is going on, 'on the ground', that they are living in a different reality at times. This does not mean that the administration of these NGO's is necessarily corrupt or incompetent. To a certain degree the circumstances of the Afghan situation dictate this outcome. Outside Kabul, the roads heading toward the south and the east are so unsafe that government officials and NGO staff hesitate to leave the city. If those stopped by insurgents appear to be associated with either the government or foreign NGO's, they are kidnapped. This fact contributes greatly to why

rural Afghanistan is so distant to those in the cities making decisions.

NGO and ISAF leadership have a tendency to request consultation with local Jirga's, yet because both sides are so far apart, in all aspects, these consultations are not productive. Elders listen, but are generally at a loss to understand the very technical language used by outsiders. The NGO and ISAF leadership have almost no knowledge about the internal dynamics of rural Afghan life and the Jirga system. What happens is that the elders listen and forget, the NGO and ISAF leadership talks but makes little, if any, effort at being understood.

Arbkai is a system where the local leadership within rural Afghanistan takes responsibility for their communities. The Jirga needs to be utilized when either the NGO's and/or ISAF leadership engage in planning/consultation sessions with the Afghan people. The Jirga would very much help to ensure that the restorative elements of *inclusion*, (that both sides are in fact listening to the other), and *accountability*, (that both sides agree to a plan of action and see it through), are taken into account which would help to garner grass root support for projects. The key to making this work is for the West to come to such discussions with an understanding of the local language, customs, and traditions of the people. Showing up with a small army and dictating how things will be done from then on will only encounter resistance.

Again, America's War on Drugs is germane. If the West continues to dictate that certain crops, i.e., poppies, are not to be grown, and no alternatives for poor farmers are viably offered, then the West is delusional that poppy growing will cease. Yet, if the ISAF leadership was to sit down with the Afghan people, in Jirga's, and offer viable alternatives, alternatives which may even increase the standards of living for poor farmers, then grass root support may come about. Under such a scenario, poppy cultivation could either be substantially curtailed, (why grow illegal crops when legal and more lucrative ways of making a living are available), or its cultivation could continue, this time destined toward the legal, painkiller, market that the West is so hungry for.

With the support of rural Afghanistan, the West would take a major step toward achieving peace with the country. With a curtailment of the violence then issues pertaining to human rights could move to the forefront.

CONCLUSION

Not that long ago the Afghan nation received a tremendous amount of moral, logistical, and even military support from the West in order to further resistance to the Soviet occupation. During this time, poppy production was at its peak. Vast amounts of Western weaponry and training, along with a large part of the proceeds from poppy exportation, found its way into the hands of local War Lords and criminals. Now that Western Peacekeepers have replaced the Soviet army as an occupying force, the West is fighting its own weaponry and training.

The West has now adopted an approach, in Afghanistan, whereby material support is given in order to reach certain targets and goals which have been defined by the West as appropriate. These targets, and goals, are being

implemented primarily through the armed ISAF. The question is, 'how would you feel if an armed force showed up and demanded that your cultural norms and customs needed to be changed'?

The Afghan people are fed up with war. They have been victims long enough. Afghanistan's youth want education, jobs, and better futures. What youth want anything different? The resistance fighters in Afghanistan want their due share. They want to be able to provide for their families. What rural farmer anywhere in this world would not resist an armed force demanding that they stop making a living? If the West truly wished to end poppy production, then the poor farmers of rural Afghanistan must be given alternative ways to make a living; it is that simple. Further, resistance movements in Afghanistan seek a voice in the decision processes that affect what is going on in their part of Afghanistan. Does the West not refer to such a process as Democracy?

If the West wishes to fight the War on Terror, then the Western countries need to step back from their military occupation of foreign countries fed up with living deprived and poverty stricken lives. Understanding, aid and development, along with education need to replace military force. If any headway is to be achieved in the War on Terror, both sides will need to work together.

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