

## Afghanistan: Race to the finish

NATO pays Taleban for security, a Canadian appointed governor of Kandahar

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*NATO pays Taleban for security, a Canadian is appointed governor of Kandahar. When will the madness cease.*

The war in Afghanistan is spreading its tentacles around the world. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai are now being explained as a plot by Lashkar-e-Taiba to divert the Pakistani military away from the Afghan border areas, a replay of the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001. Ahmed Rashid, author of *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*, says, "Nobody could touch the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Afghans and others for the next four years." Recent explosives found in a Paris department store were part of a planned attack by the Afghan Revolutionary Front to protest French troops in Afghanistan.

Hundreds of supply vehicles headed for Afghanistan were recently torched, and the NATO supply depot in Peshawar ransacked, forcing Pakistani authorities to close the vital Khyber Pass. The main supply routes are no longer secure and Pakistani truck drivers are refusing to transport military supplies. Nato and US officials insist this has had no effect on military operations in Afghanistan despite the fact that attacks happen daily.

In a truly bizarre development NATO is now paying the Taleban to guarantee the security of these supply routes. "We estimate that approximately 25 per cent of the money we pay for security to get the fuel in goes into the pockets of the Taleban," said one fuel importer. Another boss whose company is subcontracted to supply to Western military bases said that as much as a quarter of the value of a lorry's cargo was paid to Taleban commanders. "The Taleban come and move with the convoy. They sit in the front vehicle of the convoy to ensure security."

Raising the prospect of an even wider threat to the convoys, Jamaat-e-Islami staged a rally last week in Peshawar, turning out thousands to condemn NATO missile strikes on Pakistan. The marchers demanded that Pakistan end the NATO convoys, and vowed to cut the supply lines themselves.

2008 saw British deaths there surpass 100, soon followed by Canadian deaths, and US deaths now surpass their total in that other criminal enterprise - Iraq - with the US poised to double troop numbers, despite the fact that popular opinion polls in all the occupying countries regularly show 60 per cent of citizens want their troops home immediately, apparently unfazed by talk of bring democracy and freedom to the grateful locals. A report by the independent US-based Pakistan Policy Working Group claims that at least some of these deaths are at the hands of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, as it is "no longer certain the coalition forces will prevail in Afghanistan and is using militants groups in an

attempt to expand its own influence.”

But as Stalin told Churchill, while the death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistic. More disturbing than any of these statistics are the words of Russell Higgins of Nova Scotia, Canada, whose nephew Tom died there recently and who was preparing to say goodbye to his son Peter, headed for the killing fields. “I don’t figure our boys should be over there to start with. You can’t win a war against people that don’t mind dying. My son is getting ready to go over. What can be said? You can only do what you can do.”

As president-elect Barack Obama prepares to double troops levels, US President George W Bush made a parting visit to Kabul, and cautioned that the war would be a long one. Already Defence Secretary Gates is calling on Canada to extend its commitment of troops beyond 2011, despite the agreement to withdraw them by then. No freedom and democracy for citizens of the West or Afghanistan, it seems.

Predictions are now that the violence will subside as the US builds up its military presence. Apparently the unremitting violence of NATO troops against Afghans is not counted. To counter the “violence” of the insurgents – which might be better called partisan warfare against an illegal occupation – Canadian forces have turned to their Israeli allies for help, buying their deadly unmanned drones which are so effective at murdering Palestinians. This is hardly news that will convince Afghans of the occupiers’ good intentions – Israel effectively attacking and killing them along with their Palestinian brothers. How long will it be before the Mumbai tragedy is repeated in the heart of peaceful Ottawa? How can anyone possibly think that Israel will find peace by spreading its criminal activity farther and farther afield?

Perhaps even more bizarre than paying the Taleban while killing them with Israeli bombs, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has just appointed Canadian Tooryalai Wesa governor of Kandahar. He is a close friend of Karzai’s brother Ahmed Wali Karzai who just happens to be chairman of the Kanadahar provincial council. The last governor lasted only four months, but Tooryalai promises to bring order and prosperity. It’s as if Kanadahar has become Canada’s 11th province, bristling with 2,500 Canadian troops, and now even governed by a Canadian.

There is a sense of foreboding about the planned push by Obama, with no enthusiasm or hope for success apparent among anyone involved. In an unprecedented breach of protocol, General Hans-Christoph Ammon, head of the German army’s elite special commando unit, branded his own country’s efforts a “miserable failure”, singling out its poor record in training the Afghan police and allocating development aid. The ruling coalition of Christian and Social Democrats face elections next year, with the anti-war Die Linke party making huge gains.

The occupiers and Karzai try to convince Taleban to switch sides, but just the opposite is happening. After fighting the Taleban for the past seven years, many working for the Afghan security forces are joining them. Afghan policeman Sulieman Ameri, now a Taleban commander, used to patrol the border with Iran. Ameri told Al-Jazeera he and his 16 men joined the Taleban because of anti-Muslim behaviour by international soldiers. “I have seen everything with my own eyes, I have seen prostitution, I have seen them drinking alcohol. We are Muslim and therefore jihad is our obligation,” Ameri said in the mountains south of Herat. “Our soil is occupied by Americans and I want them to leave this country. That is my only goal,” he added.

“When Russia came it was only one country, today we have 24 foreign infidel countries on our soil. All our men and women should come and join the jihad,” Fida Mohammad, a new Taliban recruit, told Al-Jazeera. Abdul Rahim, another new recruit, said he received training from Blackwater for 45 days. “I can use the training to save my life in these mountains and I can also use it to fight them,” he said. NATO spokesman Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette dismissed such talk: “The Taliban and other insurgents are conducting a propaganda campaign against us.”

Kai Eide, head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, recently told the UN Security Council that Taliban attacks – at an all-time high – would probably grow in the coming weeks instead of easing, as they have in previous winters. “We should be prepared for a situation where the insurgency will not experience the same winter lull, the same reduction in hostilities we have experienced in past winters,” he said. Eide added that attacks against humanitarian workers had also increased.

NATO’s response to its failure to build a reliable Afghan army and police is to set up local militias. The plan is causing deep unease among many Afghans, who fear that Pashtun-dominated militias could get out of control, terrorise locals and turn against the government. “There will be fighting between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns,” said Salih Mohammad Registani, a member of the Afghan Parliament and an ethnic Tajik. Registani recalled the Arbaki, a Pashtun-dominated militia in the early 20th century. “A civil war will start very soon,” he said.

As Afghanistan prepares for its own election cycle – presidential elections are scheduled for 2009, with parliamentary elections to follow in 2010 – it is likely that the resentment fueled by the presence of troops from the 24 infidel countries and the treatment of Afghans as second-class citizens by the foreign NGOs and military will become a rallying point for politicians. There have been growing indications of this even from Karzai’s administration, notably his agreement to sign the anti-cluster bomb treaty earlier this month despite US disapproval.

The Taleban are not to be treated lightly. They were feared, but respected too, when they ruled. With no help from anyone, they disarmed the entire nation and proceeded to wipe out opium production before the US invaded (after which rape became endemic, warlords amassed arms and opium production soared to record levels). There was virtually no crime, as “we all had nightmares of them cutting off your hand if you stole,” Afghan Canadian Abdul told *Al-Ahram Weekly* after returning from this year’s Hajj.

“We hated the Russians but we knew they didn’t want to be there. The Afghan communists took power in 1978 and then the US flooded the country with weapons to fight them. I remember this well. The last communist leader, (Mohammad) Najibullah, was actually a good leader, but the US insisted on backing Bin Laden and the other terrorists against him. The US could solve the whole problem in a week if they wanted to. There is no Bin Laden now. Even though I don’t like them, the Taleban should be allowed to take power. They would be better than what my family in Kabul are living through now,” said Abdul.

The current US occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq, the refusal to allow the Somali Taleban – the Islamic Courts and the Shabab – to come to power there, and the unremitting

vilification of Syria and Iran can only be explained as the US trying to force the Muslim world into submission. It is no coincidence that these holdouts are the focus of US hostility.

This is all eerily familiar. In the 20th century, the communists were the enemy. The Cold War was the vehicle for keeping alive the enemy myth so necessary to holding together the imperial order. Communism was supposedly destroyed, with no positive effect for anyone, it turns out. But conventional wisdom still celebrates the “victory over Communism” at the same time as it exhorts us to hold firm against the new enemy, recalcitrant Islam, as embodied in Afghanistan’s resistance fighters.

One can, of course, understand why few in the West want the orthodox view of the Cold War overturned, or want to see the withdrawal of US/NATO forces from the Middle East. If that were to happen, the whole edifice of postwar politics would begin to crumble. People would realise the heavy burden of postwar rearmament was for naught. Israel would quickly have to make peace with the Palestinians, ending their criminal occupation. People everywhere would wake up to the reality that the war against Communism – and now Islam – actually imperiled rather than saved us, and they would see the real enemy. Is there time? Can the Afghan resistance prevail against the mightiest death machine in world history?

The war in Afghanistan is now a race to the finish – for us all.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker

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