

From Occupied Afghanistan: Accounts of a Fact-Finding Mission

Interview by Kabir Joshi-Vijayan

By [Mike Skinner](#) and [Hamayon Rag](#)

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Mike Skinner and Hamayon Ragstar spent one and three months, respectively, in Afghanistan in the late spring/summer of 2007 on a fact-finding trip investigating how the Canadian and International mission is affecting Afghan civilian life.

Below is the edited transcript of an hour-long interview conducted in Toronto by Kabir Joshi-Vijayan about their reflections and conclusions coming out of the fact-finding mission.

Q: To begin, what was the objective of this trip you undertook to Afghanistan, what were you hoping to investigate?

Mike Skinner: The principal objective was to do an activist documentary film that asks Afghans what they think of the international intervention. We really wanted to listen to Afghans who don't get heard in the West- workers we listened to people on the street, and we listened to students in the university and in teachers college, shopkeepers, and teachers. That was really the intent, to hear Afghans who don't get heard.

And what parts of Afghanistan were you able to visit?

Hamayon Ragstar: We spent lots of time in Kabul city and walked around the neighbourhoods. We went to Kabul University a few times. Mike and I went to Bamiyan - we spent about a week in Bamiyan. From Bamiyan, we also went to Yakaolang (which is a few hours away from the Bamiyan valley) - and we went back to Kabul from there. We spent one day in Ghazni, and before Mike's arrival I went to Ghazni and Jaghori. Later I also went to Mazar and Kundus and I spent about 4-5 hours in Khandahar

What did you see of the international occupation force? Did you have any direct interaction with any of the foreign forces present (ISAF, NATO, the US-coalition)-and were you able to speak particularly with any Canadian soldiers or commanders?

MS: Our most direct personal experience is when we almost got killed at one point.

We were in a taxicab in downtown Kabul and our cabdriver wasn't looking as he pulled out into an intersection and almost ran into an ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) convoy. As he said, fortunately they were Turks. If they had been Canadians or Americans, they would have shot us if we had gotten as close to a convoy as we did. My door was literally a few inches from this military vehicle that almost hit us, so that was our closest experience with ISAF.

In Kabul itself ISAF is always visible, but it's not an overpowering presence either. The Afghan Army and National police are far more evident in most places. We were staying on a main highway from Kabul to Khandahar and we'd certainly see Afghan army and ISAF convoys regularly coming back and forth on that highway. Just a few days after I arrived, we actually saw in the distance, a couple of kilometres away, one of the ISAF convoys hit by a remote control explosive device that blew up a vehicle. So as we were having breakfast we saw the smoke cloud from the explosion, and few seconds later we felt the concussion shake the building that we were in. The reports that came from that were that an American was killed in the convoy and that other soldiers in the convoy opened fire on innocent civilians who were just passing by the residential area where the convoy was hit.

We would have actually liked to meet some of the Canadians there. I tried to arrange something - to try and meet with some of the Canadian soldiers, but it was a difficult situation. Also it is hard to cross the line from talking to Afghan people and then going over to talking to soldiers too, so it wouldn't have been a good situation either. So we really didn't have any direct contact with Canadian troops or any other western forces. In a number of informal situations, we were able to talk with military contractors who were quite informative, but talking off record.

What did you see/hear of civilian deaths while there?

MS: I think on a daily, or almost daily basis during the time that I was there, there were news reports of civilian casualties and by far the greater number of those casualties were caused by western forces in a number of different ways. I already mentioned the hit convoy - where by retaliation or fear or reaction in the moment - the soldiers blindly fired into a crowd, cases like that. There have also been many cases of deliberate targeting from the air or air attacks - this is often when there's a ground battle going on and the ground troops call in for air support; air support comes in and they are not necessarily firing at the right targets. There was one case when I was there where a mosque was targeted in Paktia. It was one of the two eastern provinces where there were several young girls that were killed in a mosque. So we were hearing these reports on a regular, probably a daily basis.

We also need to keep in mind that our military is causing far more damage than just civilian deaths. Many people are injured to die later or suffer miserably. Many people are forced to become refugees when their homes and livelihoods are destroyed. Large areas of the countryside have become uninhabitable because of the war. We were told that the Canadian military is forcing evacuations of villages. Many people also suffer human rights abuses such as home invasions, arbitrary arrest and detention.

We occasionally hear about some of the worst cases of civilian deaths in the Canadian media, but most of the damage our military is doing remains undocumented.

Through the interviews and discussions you were able to have with regular Afghans - what were their perceptions of the international mission? How did they view the initial invasion, and how do they see the current military occupation?

MS: There were mixed reactions. There were people, when we were doing the actual interviews - some people who wholly supported the invasion and occupation - there were people that didn't. There were some people that were fully against it from the beginning -and they had a really good analysis for that. There were also a large group of people -now I haven't gone through the tapes and added up the numbers- but I think that probably the

largest number of people actually had some really mixed feelings; a lot of people said initially they'd hoped there would be some progressive change. The Taliban were a repressive regime, certainly an incredibly anti-woman regime- so people held out hope for some progressive change- but that hope has dissipated in the past 6 years because those changes have not occurred.

Conflicts between various colonial and imperial powers have been key in shaping Afghanistan's history- whether this was colonial Britain and Russia, or the social imperialist Soviet Union against the US in the 70's and 80's. Do inter-imperial rivalries have a role in the current conflict?

MS: There are certainly many indications that they do, and there are a number of players in the mix now – certainly Russia is still very important in the region, China is aggressively moving beyond its borders- and Afghanistan is a neighbour of China, Pakistan and India – which are all regional players in this. Iran is very important, there is also Saudi Arabia, which has been a big player in Afghanistan for a long time. The United Arab Emirates are very influential as well, along with all the western states aligned with the United States that are playing a big part. And certainly Canada has some real interest, and I expect particularly economically in mining in Afghanistan – because there are some very rich mining resources that are largely unexploited. I'm sure Canadian mining companies would love to get in there and get their hands on it. However, that is not what was driving the invasion. But it's one of those side benefits that, while we're there, lets make some money by developing those mines.

A number of 'progressive' forces in Canada and elsewhere, such as the Senlis Council and the NDP, often draw a distinction between the 'developmental' and military role Canada plays in Afghanistan- claiming that the re-construction and developmental aid we are lending is playing a positive role. What evidence did you see of Canadian developmental projects while you were there- and do you agree with this distinction?

MS: There's a new developmental concept, a 3-D approach. It's supposed to balance defence, diplomacy, development- and actually this concept of provincial reconstruction teams that is being applied in both Iraq and Afghanistan is supposed to do this- where you have the military and development agencies actually working hand in hand in the same base going out and working together.

We asked for a list of CIDA projects from the Canadian embassy in Afghanistan and they said they would contact us and we never heard back from them. We stumbled across one CIDA project that was an artificial insemination project – with a sign on an office – it was closed and the windows were broken. That was the only CIDA project we actually found on our own, but we didn't go looking very hard, we kind of stumbled across it. (There was) an interesting situation in Bamiyan, a New Zealand Provincial Reconstruction Team- a PRT base, a typical military base- a well-fortified military base. It had a large airstrip so that planes could come in and out and it was on a high point of land, a plateau above the town of Bamiyan, about 8 km out of the town. And they did build a development project; they built a high school for girls. But they didn't build it in the town of Bamiyan; they built it immediately below the base so that the workers at the base would be protected by the military. Bamiyan has been one of the most stable regions since the invasion.

This is the town where the Taliban destroyed the giant statues of the Buddha. But since 2001, the Taliban has been gone. It's a Hazara ethnic area – and the Hazara have really

acquiesced to the occupation, and there's been to my knowledge no attacks on coalition forces or ISAF in this area, so there's not a big security problem – it's as stable as its going to get. The school was built immediately beside the base below this plateau so as to provide security. It's a clear shot from the base down to this area, with a clear view of the surrounding valley and a good secure place to build this thing. However, it is a 16 km round-trip walk for the girls from Bamiyan to get to the school and back, and you get pretty severe winters in this area as well. It's not the ideal place to put the school; it should have been in town. The university student who pointed it out to me said that this is just typical of the way these projects are – it was obviously considering the interests of the people who built this and not considering the interest of the Afghans who actually have to use it – and it was done without the consultation of the people who live in the area.

Along with development, the Afghan government is also constantly used as a justification for maintaining the occupation. We are told that the current government represents a vast improvement from the time of the Taliban- and that international troops are needed to support and help it. What changes in the government have we actually seen since the Taliban?

HR: I don't think anything substantially has changed since the time of the Taliban – the Taliban was representing the feudal comprador ruling class of Afghanistan – especially the Pashtun ruling classes. This current government is again representing the ruling classes of Afghanistan and is directly at the service of an imperialist occupation. There have been some very minor cosmetic changes. Lets say in relation that this government is giving some positions of power to the non-Pashtun nationalities – the Taliban didn't – this government is giving some symbolic positions to women – the Taliban didn't bother with those kind of things. But I would say all these changes are cosmetic changes, there is nothing substantial.

For example, the imperialists during the invasion talked a lot about the issue of women and in that regard have given to some women individuals and groups some positions in the ranks of the puppet regime; this has nothing to do with rights of women of Afghanistan, rather it is purely for the purpose of turning the question of women a political tool at the service of imperialist occupation. It's still a chauvinist government – a male chauvinist government, an ethnic chauvinist government. It's a theocratic government. Taliban was a single party theocracy; this government is a multi-party theocracy. This government also states in its constitution that no law shall be put into place in Afghanistan that is in contradiction to Sharia law – and Sharia law is obviously not very friendly towards women or religious minorities. I would say there is no change substantially from the time Taliban. On so many levels this government is worse than the Taliban. For example, this government is more corrupt. There was no bribery during the Taliban's time- it was much cleaner on those issues. However, in this government, from the President to the very low ranking officials of the government, everyone is taking bribes – so it is much, much more corrupt than the Taliban ever was.

There is a position put forward, by RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women), Malaia Joya (former Afghan parliamentarian), and sections of the international 'left' who recognize the presence of warlords and drug barons in the Afghan government, but who say the regime as a whole cannot be dismissed. That is, they claim that people like Karzai are different from these warlords, and can still be worked with. Do you agree with this assertion?

HR: I don't agree with this position at all because it does not reflect the reality on the ground - Hamid Karzai's government is corrupt from A to Z - if anyone would be complaining about the warlords stealing and drug dealings, Hamid Karzai's brother himself, Ahmad Wali Karzai, is the largest drug lord in the southern provinces. Hamid Karzai himself had links with the Taliban; he was working with the Taliban government. There is no substantial difference between Hamid Karzai and the people who would be regarded as warlords. I think Hamid Karzai is as much a warlord as the others around him; and we must never forget that in the context of Afghanistan that the biggest warlords are the coalition forces of the NATO troops who are killing the people with much more sophisticated and modern weapons than the warlords could ever have done. I don't buy that kind of argument that is also put forward by the mainstream western media, the mainstream politics - that they have put in place a democratic government led by Hamid Karzai that is surrounded by bad warlords. This is buying into this imperialist discourse of the issue.

The reality is that Hamid Karzai is the head of this puppet government and this puppet government is a multi-party puppet government that has different people within it: previous warlords, Mujahideen commanders, some remnants of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan, remnants of the bureaucrats from the time of the king - they are all coming together and they are all in the body of this puppet government which is supported by the American imperialists. So to distinguish between a good section of the government and the bad section of the government, I think is playing into the politics of the western imperialists. They all are equally taking part in the national treason.

So to distinguish between a good section of the government and the bad section of the government, I think is playing into the politics of the western imperialists. Above all it shows a kind of capitulationism towards the imperialist occupation and thinking if they would put a lot of resources in hands of the Karzai led "national government" (which I would call the puppet government) things would change for the better. The people who are with Karzai are also with his imperialist masters. Thus, they should be considered pro-imperialists, and they are not forces of the left to me. In these kinds of situations we should have no illusions about who our friends are and who our enemies are?

The people in Afghanistan loathe the puppet regime. That is why resistance to the puppet regime and the occupation are on the rise. People there very frequently hit to the streets with radical slogans like "Down with America" and "Down with the puppet regime".

Can you talk about these various factions within the Afghan government, and what relation they have with the inter-imperial issues and rivalries Mike described earlier.

HR: The principal agents of American imperialists in Afghanistan are Karzai and his cronies in the government. For example, the minister of finance Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi, who is the leader of the Afghanistan's Social Democratic party, the minister of defence General Wardak, the ex-minister of the interior Ali Ahmad Jalali - they are usually the Pashtun ruling classes, and they are the principal agents of American imperialism. The Russians and Iran has another base of support with the puppet government, which are famous in the west as the warlords; they are usually the ruling classes of the non-Pashtun nationalities, though some Hazara reactionaries are with Karzai - they are divided.

So we should remember that the puppet regime in Afghanistan, which is a result of the Bonn conference in December 2001, was a compromise between different imperialist players: the US, the Russians, the EU and also the regional players like Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India

and China – they all compromised over what the future settlement in Afghanistan should be. But gradually the US wing of the regime gained strength and is kicking out and cleaning the puppet government of the Russian backed players (the Northern Alliance for example), so Russia is not happy with the whole situation. All the imperialist powers have their representatives in this government; even Germany has its representative in this government. For example, the German representative in the government is the foreign minister, Rangin Dadfar Spanta. The parliament doesn't like him very much, the parliament wants to kick him out, but because of the German pressure, he is still in the cabinet. In the larger inter- imperial rivalry between the US and the Russians, of course the Germans side with the US in this case, so the US is also standing behind a person like Spanta, who is in the Karzai cabinet. So this is the composition of the different factions – some are representing US interest, some are representing Russian interests, and definitely no one is representing the interests of the people of Afghanistan in this puppet government.

One regional issue directly tied to the government and situation in Afghanistan is in Pakistan. We constantly hear of the charges against Musharraf (Pakistani President), that he is not doing enough to fight 'terror' in Afghanistan etc., and of the ongoing tensions between him and Karzai. Can you talk about this conflict between the Afghani and Pakistani governments, and its historical origins?

HR: The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has a long history. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Afghanistan was one of the countries that opposed the creation of Pakistan as a country. It has its roots and effect that in the late 19th century, Afghanistan and Britain signed an agreement that handed over territories of Afghanistan to British India at the time. Those territories are Balochistan province and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan. That agreement was for 100 years- 100 years passed in 1993, these territories should have been handed back to Afghanistan. So it had its roots in there. The Afghanistani ruling classes have always had its ties to these territories- emotional, historical and nationalist attachments to the lost provinces of Afghanistan, which is now under Pakistani control. It goes to that.

The other aspect of this whole thing is that American Imperialism has always played Afghanistani politics through Pakistan – in 1970s, when President Daoud led a coup against his cousin and declared Afghanistan to be a republic, Afghanistan became very close to the Soviet Union. America supported Islamic fundamentalists against the Daoud government from 1973 onward. This whole thing happened through Pakistan – Pakistan was supporting the Islamists in Afghanistan against Daoud's government. In 1978, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan led another coup against Daoud, the Soviet Union became much more involved in Afghanistan, and then America pumped up all the support for the Islamists in Afghanistan – again through Pakistan. Since 1970, until the time of the government of the Taliban, all the governments of Afghanistan had sour relationship with Pakistan – Pakistan was supporting the Islamists against the Daoud's government, and later against the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's government -and all these governments' again, were claiming these two provinces. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, the only pro-Pakistani government was the government of the Taliban. Taliban was the only pro-Pakistani government in the history of Afghanistan. Now that the Taliban is gone, there are talks about the re-mapping of the Middle East. America put out another map of how to re-map and re-shape the Middle East, and according to that map, America is planning to make Balochistan an independent country – but to give North Western Front province and that of Pashtun population – to Afghanistan. And this is very much what the

Pashtun ruling classes in Afghanistan want. So maybe this is why they have stepped up criticism of the Musharraf government – “Musharraf is not doing very much to curb terrorism in Afghanistan” etc. – this has to do with these international politics and the immediate politics of the region – the re-mapping of the Middle East.

How to solve the problem of Balochistan and NWF province? The progressive forces in Afghanistan have always had the position that it is not the business of politicians in Islamabad or the politicians in Kabul to determine the future of millions of people living in Balochistan and NWF province of Pakistan – it is their own business. They should have the right of self determination – they are the oppressed nationalities within Pakistan – so its up to them to decide if they want to go to Pakistan in a voluntary unity – if they want to have their own independent state or if they want to join Afghanistan – but this has to happen from a bottom up resistance in a fight of the oppressed nationalities and oppressed peoples, in the process of the new democratic revolution. This problem (of oppressed nationalities) also exists in Afghanistan.

On the armed resistance actively fighting the occupation troops in Afghanistan-which forces are involved in this insurgency, who is funding/arming them, and how should we in the anti-war/ anti-imperialist movement be viewing them?

HR: Right now two political forces are actively engaging in armed resistance to the occupation. The most important is the Taliban, after the Taliban is the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is also somewhat active but it is a very minor player. The Taliban is much, much more active, especially in the south – Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is somehow active in the northern province of Kunduz. Who is supporting the resistance in Afghanistan? There are some indications that elements in the Pakistani establishment are supporting the Taliban -giving them arms. There are also some accusations against Iran, that Iran is supplying arms and resources to the Taliban and to the resistance against the American occupation, but these accusations cannot be proven. One thing that is very clear is that the Taliban is buying most of its arms from within Afghanistan – they are buying them – either they had them from before, or they are buying them. The price of a kalashnikov in Afghanistan right now is around 1000 dollars – which is very expensive according to Afghanistani standards. Why is it expensive? Because the Taliban are buying all the kalashnikovs; the demand is very high. They are buying them from the underground markets- so that as guns get smaller and smaller they are more expensive. A Mekarov pistol, for example, would be much more expensive than a kalashnikov- the bigger guns are significantly cheaper – because no one is buying them – they are not good for guerrilla warfare, which is the type of war the Taliban are leading.

The anti-war movement should be putting all its energies against the occupation – because this occupation is the root of all the problems. As long as the imperialist occupation continues in Afghanistan, it means the war will continue. It means many, many innocent people will die. So the antiwar movement should be focusing on defeating this imperialist occupation- forcing the Canadian government, or in the case of America, forcing the American government, to withdraw from Afghanistan. Currently the Taliban are not the principal enemy – the principal enemy is the imperialist occupation and all the resources should be focused on that.

MS: I think something Hamayon has pointed out that is important- is that we can't allow the Taliban and the Islamic party to maintain the monopoly on resistance. That there has to be an alternative to those radical Islamic organizations as far as resisting imperialism, and that

as long as our military is in place we're creating the environment to encourage more recruits for the Taliban for sure. I mean for every person we injure, every person we kill, every person we make a refugee, we are angering so many people that we are making recruits. As an example of some of the things that are happening; I talked about the air attacks that are called in and the indiscriminate retaliatory attacks when convoys are attacked, but one of the tactics that the Canadian military is doing which a number of people told us about, in their search and destroy missions - in the counter insurgency tactics - we are in a counter insurgency war, this is what is being undertaken, the same as in Vietnam, same as in Central America - this is counterinsurgency. This is what we condemned the Americans for in the past and what we are now partners in. The Canadian military will give 24 hours warning to a village - they'll tell the people we are coming to your village - evacuate - and if you don't evacuate you risk being killed. So of course people evacuate, the forces come in, they are looking for weapons, explosives, but because it is considered unsafe to go into a building because it might be booby-trapped -they just destroy every building, they destroy the homes, they destroy the farm buildings, they destroy the wells because there might be weapons hidden in the well and than they leave and tell the people they can go back. Then for some reason the Canadian military is shocked when these people become refugees instead of going back and starting all over again to rebuild their homes and their farms. This is considered to be the more humanitarian tactic that the Canadians are doing as opposed to what the Americans have often been doing - which is outright bombing of homes and farms without any warning.

In terms of eliminating that monopoly of Islamic forces over resistance to imperialism- what leftist/progressive forces are there in Afghanistan sincerely opposing the occupation? And were you and Mike able to meet with any of them?

HR: Mike and I had an informal chat with one of the members of the Communist (Maoist) Party of Afghanistan and he was talking about the importance of an international support for the leftists in Afghanistan. He gave an interesting example - when the Americans invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion and occupation happened with this huge international coalition of countries- all the imperialist powers are either there directly supporting the Americans in the occupation or indirectly supporting it through political and economic means. Either their soldiers are there or they are sending money or doing different things. The political Islamists in the form of the Taliban who are resisting the imperialist occupation also have a huge international coalition; Islamists across the Arab world, from South Asia through East Asia are supporting Taliban in their resistance.

The Taliban alone cannot do the kind of resistance that they are doing, the Americans cannot alone occupy this country, and the left in Afghanistan, since it is an international struggle, cannot play their role alone. So the left in Afghanistan need the support of the left internationally to have a foothold in Afghanistan in the resistance against the imperialist occupation. The left has a long history in Afghanistan - they have resisted the Soviet social imperialist occupation in Afghanistan, they have resisted the Islamists, now they are engaging in an ideological and political struggle against the American imperialist occupation and they say they are in a stage of preparing for a national people's war of resistance to the imperialist occupation. They have a base in there- people are looking up to them. They have much respect across Afghan society - especially the Maoist variant of the left. People consider that they, unlike all other political forces, have not engaged in human rights violations, and in selling out the country. They have been the people who have always asked for the independence of the country, for the pride of the people of Afghanistan for self-

determination, and have always been there with the people kind of thing. So the people are looking up to them.

Sometimes the people are even joking and saying that all the political forces in the history of this country have ruled Afghanistan for a while – the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, – they ruled Afghanistan – the Islamists ruled Afghanistan for a long time through the Mujahideen, then the Taliban variety, the chauvinist, pseudo-fascist version of Afghanistan’s social democratic party are in power with Hamid Karzai right now. So the only movement in Afghanistan that have not been in power are the Maoists- the people are saying now it is your turn. So for that kind of thing to materialize, I think the left should understand its international duty – that it is not only enough to condemn the American imperialism, the imperialist occupation- to get to the streets when denouncing the imperialist occupation – it is not enough to complain about the reactionary nature of the Taliban. What the left should do – the left have always been internationalists – they should extend their support and solidarity to the revolutionary and progressive forces in Afghanistan. I think Mike’s thing to go to Afghanistan and talk to the people is an excellent example of that kind of internationalist solidarity; this is what internationalist solidarity should be all about and in the future they (the left) should be doing those types of things. If they cannot send their Che Guevara’s to go and pick up guns – then do it by having reporting of the situation on the ground and to do support by other means. They should coordinate and cooperate with the left in Afghanistan on joint-projects. I think these things can definitely change things on the ground in Afghanistan.

To finish off Mike- from your time in Afghanistan, is there a message you have? Something you think the left internationally, but in Canada in particular, isn’t getting or is not doing?

MS: One thing the left can do, and particularly considering a Canadian election is imminent, is taking a stand against our military presence in Afghanistan. I think we need to really do some much deeper analysis of what it is we’re doing there. I don’t think there is a politician in Canada that could stand at a podium and speak to an audience here and say we should send our military into a place like Afghanistan to a fight for the capitalist empire. We need to force politicians to be in that position where they have to be honest about that statement, because that is exactly what we are doing in Afghanistan right now. Yet we are not forcing our politicians to be honest about that. The only politician that I’ve ever heard honestly make that statement is Michael Ignatieff in his book “Empire Lite” where he says exactly that in those explicit terms and he’s never been brought to account by the media to actually have to own up to that since becoming a politician. Yet I think most Canadians and those in positions of leadership understand that that is what they’re doing – we are fighting a war to expand a capitalist empire throughout the world. But there is not a politician that has the guts to say that and bring that out for discussion.

So that is certainly a role of the left to put that on the table before an election. We need to ask our politicians: “Are you supporting fighting a war for capitalist empire – is that what we are going to send soldiers to do? And if Canadians are unwilling to support that, which I highly doubt they are, then we should be bringing the troops out of Afghanistan. There is certainly no evidence that the troops are in Afghanistan to improve human rights, to improve women’s’ rights. Even after six years of occupation, only 3% of students are girls. I can’t see how that means we’ve improved women’s rights very significantly. Even though there are some marginal improvements for some privileged women, there is no doubt that there have been some minor improvements, but overall very minor. That’s something the left has to grapple with, because the left has been very confused up to this point. I think –

particularly because the Taliban was so repressive, so misogynist, that this is being seen as a choice between a Taliban rule or an authoritarian occupation by the West and I don't think those are the only two alternatives.

We have to provide some other options for Afghan people - particularly the progressive Afghans and particularly secular Afghans and moderate Muslims who don't agree with the theocratic state that exists and that we're fully supporting. What the Canadian government has done is sided with one radical Islamists regime at war with two other radical Islamists regimes and we've left absolutely no space for progressive alternatives in that. And I think the left in Canada is not helping that because we're not seeing any space for progressive alternatives in Afghanistan.

So it's essential that these issues are put on the table - that the soldiers are pulled out of Afghanistan and in their place - we should have 30,000 doctors in Afghanistan rather than 30,000 soldiers. This could have a very positive effect -and some of those things we've promised - like building hospitals and schools and creating infrastructure could actually be positive influences, but not having the troops. Particularly not having the troops in the kind of counterinsurgency war where human rights abuses and war crimes are inevitable, because these crimes are part of the counterinsurgency process.

Finally, if we really believe in democracy and self-determination, we need to ask Afghans what they need and want, rather than force them at gunpoint to do what is in our best interest.

Mike Skinner is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of political science at York University and a Researcher at the York Centre for International and Security Studies (YCISS). A well-known activist and researcher, he is also a member of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers Toronto Local and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, local 3903.

Hamayon is an Afghan-Canadian who grew up in his country of origin- and experienced a foreign occupation under the Soviet Union first hand. He is finishing his last year as a political science student at York University, and has a thorough understanding of Afghan politics and history. They have, along with fellow-researcher Angela Joya, recently formed the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group- of which the trip represents the first phase of the work.

To read the dispatches written by Mike from Afghanistan and to learn more about the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group visit: <http://www.tuaw.ca/other/dispatch0.html>

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