

Afghanistan: Why Canada Should Withdraw Its Troops

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The Afghanistan Canada Research Group was formed in 2006 by a group of York University graduate students concerned with the Canadian Mission in Afghanistan. The focus of our work over the past two years was to document Afghan opinions of the international intervention in Afghanistan.

In June and July of 2007, I spent five weeks travelling in Afghanistan with another researcher Hamayon Rastgar. Based out of Kabul, we travelled to Bamiyan and Yawkawlang in the central region of Afghanistan, north into Parwan province, and as far south as the city of Ghazni. During Hamayon's three month visit, he travelled further north to Mazar-e-Sharif and Konduz and as far south as Kandahar City.

The purpose of our visit was to ask ordinary Afghans – particularly workers and students who do not have a voice in either the international or Afghan media – what they think about the international military intervention in their homeland.

We set up a video camera on two university campuses in Kabul and Bamiyan, at the teachers' college in Kabul, on street corners, in markets and poor neighbourhoods in the communities we visited. We invited Afghans to tell us what they think of the international military intervention.

We cannot claim our research in Afghanistan is scientifically conclusive; it was in fact anecdotal and relied on the self-selection of respondents who volunteered to appear on camera. We also had a difficult time getting women to speak – a situation symptomatic of deeper problems experienced by women, some of which I will describe below.

Despite these methodological limitations, the high number of grievances Afghans expressed in opposition to the international intervention, we recorded, suggests there may be far less support for the military mission than some polls suggest. The quantitative analyses of recent polls conducted in Afghanistan fail to capture the complexly nuanced analyses of responses we heard from Afghans.

Many Afghans told us they consider the current military mission the same way as they consider previous invasions by British and Soviet military forces. We were reminded the invading forces in both those cases claimed to represent the best interests of Afghans, but both occupations proved to serve the geopolitical interests of these powerful states at the expense of most Afghans.

Many Afghans told us they consider our occupation of their country colonialism or

imperialism.

Numerous Afghans told us variations of the phrase: “If you come as a guest we will treat you with the greatest hospitality, but if you come as an invader we will resist and ultimately overcome your force.”

Afghans expressed to us numerous grievances regarding the international intervention: 1) the international military forces are causing high numbers of civilian casualties, displacing populations, arbitrarily arresting and detaining people, and generally humiliating Afghans; 2) the international intervention has reconstituted the theocratic regime first instituted by force with American support, in 1992, and has rewarded warlords who are accused of war crimes; 3) the international community has not reconstructed the essentials of public infrastructure in any systematic way; and 4) promises of liberating women are perceived as not only ineffectual, but intentionally deceptive.

Many Afghans also indicated a number of geopolitical and economic reasons why they believe Canada and the other international forces continue to occupy their country.

First, I will describe the grievances identified to us by Afghans. Second, I will describe the geopolitical and economic reasons Afghans propose are our underlying motivations for occupying their country. Finally, I conclude the Canadian Forces should be withdrawn from this illegitimate war.

I) The Grievances:

1. Civilian casualties, displacement, arbitrary arrests, detention, and humiliation:

Although no official statistics are publicly available, it is widely recognised that thousands of Afghans have been killed by the international forces and many more thousands injured, since the initial invasion in 2001. Many more thousands are made refugees by the counterinsurgency tactics used by the international forces that destroy the homes and livelihoods of Afghans. The international forces arbitrarily raid homes, arrest and detain Afghans on a regular basis.

Recent demonstrations in Kandahar province where Afghans shouted “death to Canada” in response to the murder of two mullahs by international forces, are an indication of the kind of indignation we heard expressed by many Afghans.

One Afghan told us of how his friend, while riding a motorcycle, was killed when hit by an ISAF vehicle. The convoy did not stop to aid the young man as he died in the street.

Traffic fatalities and injuries are frequently caused by international soldiers, who are apparently under orders to drive at high speed and not to stop if an accident occurs. A fatal traffic accident caused by an ISAF driver in Kabul, during the summer of 1996, sparked a massive riot in the city.

We had a close encounter, when our taxi driver mistakenly pulled into an intersection in front of an ISAF convoy. Our driver stated we were fortunate the soldiers were Turkish rather than Canadian or American, because the Canadians and Americans are known to shoot the occupants of the car in such cases.

During our stay in Kabul, we witnessed, from a distance, a bomb attack on an ISAF convoy.

The ISAF soldiers were reported to have fired indiscriminately at civilians in the residential neighbourhood following the attack.

Several reputable sources gave us very disturbing descriptions of the counterinsurgency tactics used by the Canadian Forces.

We were told that, if insurgents are suspected of staying in a village, the villagers are given twenty-four hours notice by the Canadian Forces to evacuate or else risk death. After the evacuation, every building, water well, and any other place weapons could be hidden is destroyed. After thoroughly sweeping the village for weapons caches – a process that can take days – the villagers are allowed to return to care for their parched livestock and wilted crops, and to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

One of our sources stated: “For some reason, the Canadian officers are mystified when these people become refugees, instead of undertaking the nearly impossible task of rebuilding their lives from scratch.”

During battle, the Canadian Forces regularly call in air and artillery support to indiscriminately bombard targets where insurgents may be sheltered among civilians.

While NATO leaders claim insurgents are at fault for civilian deaths, because they hide among civilians, this rationalisation is clearly unacceptable. Such a rationalisation is akin to giving a police force here in Canada the right to bomb an entire neighbourhood, because criminals might be hiding in some of the houses. A security tactic we would never accept for our own population has been given carte blanche approval in Afghanistan.

NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, while expressing regret for civilian casualties, claims: “We are in a different moral category” than the insurgents, because the majority of the Afghan people support the NATO forces (Washington Post, 22 May 2007). However, such claims of moral superiority are repugnant to many Afghans. Even if de Hoop Scheffer could prove a majority of Afghans support NATO, his claim of support cannot legitimise the targeting of civilians; this is an act that remains an egregious violation of international law.

The counterinsurgency strategy used in Afghanistan, which inevitably forces Canadian soldiers to commit war crimes and human rights violations, is a strategy that Canadians condemned in the past when used by American and American-supported forces in places like Vietnam and Latin America. The counterinsurgency war, which the Canadian Forces are spearheading in Afghanistan, is clearly condemned by many Afghans who talked to us.

2. Reconstituting the theocratic regime and rewarding the warlords:

Many Afghans reminded us that Afghanistan had always been a secular state until the mujaheddin instituted the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in 1992. The mujaheddin came to power thanks to the support of billions of dollars of military aid from the United States pumped into Afghanistan, beginning in 1979, via the CIA and Pakistan’s ISI secret service. The Carter Administration initiated this military aid to the mujaheddin in the hopes of instigating a Soviet invasion.

Afghanistan remains a theocratic state today, thanks to the current international military mission. This is despite the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1378, 14 November 2001, which expressly states a new Afghan government should respect freedom of religion,

which also implies freedom of secular beliefs.

The commitment to religious freedom made by the UN Security Council was overturned at the Bonn Conference, where it was decided Afghans have the right “to freely determine their own political future in accordance with the principles of Islam” (Bonn declaration).

Secular Afghans, people of other faiths, non-practicing Muslims, as well as many observant Muslims express their dismay at this reconstitution of the theocratic state. Many Afghans question why western liberal democracies enjoy the freedoms associated with a separation of religion and state, while a group of elite international leaders meeting at Bonn decreed the state religion of all Afghans, which was then imposed by the martial law of the international military forces.

Many Afghans reminded us that the drafters of the Bonn declaration also expressed “their appreciation to the Afghan mujahidin ... whose sacrifice has now made them both heroes of jihad and champions of peace, stability and reconstruction of their beloved homeland, Afghanistan...” (Bonn declaration). This international endorsement of the mujaheddin flies in the face of the many Afghans who suffered horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity under the mujaheddin regime.

The mujaheddin are accused of deliberately targeting civilians during the bloody civil war fought, from 1992 to 1996, between competing mujaheddin factions. This war reduced eighty percent of Kabul to rubble, killed and maimed thousands of civilians, and forced thousands more to flee their homes. The mujaheddin are also accused of numerous other war crimes and crimes against humanity including: rape and sexual abuse; abduction; prisoner abuse; mutilation and torture; forced labour; disappearances; as well as pillage and looting (Human Rights Watch). Afghans who suffered through these times see the rewarding of the mujaheddin as payoffs made by the international community to criminal warlords.

The Taliban, who defeated the mujaheddin, in 1996, imposed an even more repressive regime of Sharia law, but many Afghans regard this as a matter of a difference of degrees of repression, rather than any substantive differences between the two theocratic regimes.

Many Afghans reminded us that the military leaders of the Northern Alliance – the same warlords accused of multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity and the same leaders who first instituted the repressive and misogynist regime of the original Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – now form the core of the ruling and business class of the reconstituted Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Hamid Karzai was also installed as the leader of Afghanistan at the Bonn conference in the fall of 2001 by an elite group of international leaders. Many Afghans perceive the confirmation of Karzai’s leadership in a national election three years after his installation as a thin façade of electoral democracy for the theocratic regime now kept in power by the international military forces.

The theocratic government that is propped-up with the help of the Canadian Forces is perceived by many Afghans as an illegitimate, repressive and misogynistic, antidemocratic regime. Many progressive secular Afghan organisations must still remain underground.

While it might have been expedient and economic for the American-British-Canadian invading force to use the Northern Alliance as the ground troops for the mission and to

reward the warlords at the Bonn conference, this choice has created an environment of great mistrust among Afghans.

3. Dissatisfaction with the development project:

Few development projects of any consequence have been completed by the Canadian Forces or the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Canadian government agency responsible for development. While there are isolated development projects initiated by various state and non-governmental organisations, there is no systematic infrastructure development.

Spiralling inflation combined with a snail's-pace program of social development is killing Afghans. CIDA's own figures, which indicate one of every four children still dies before the age of five, show little to no improvement in health during the past six years.

Peter Mackay claims: "More than 80 per cent of Afghans have access to basic health care today." (17 Oct. 2007. news.gc.ca)

But in reality, few Afghans have access to adequate medical care. The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) reports: The healthcare statistics many policymakers cite are exaggerated; living in a district where a healthcare facility exists in no way means people have real access to these services; and services are often of poor quality and facilities cannot meet the high demand (*Afghanistan's Health System Since 2001*. AREU Dec. 2006).

An investigation of CIDA's claims of improving healthcare, states:

We could not find evidence of CIDA work or CIDA funded work at Kandahar hospital that matched the information given to us by CIDA. ...there were 28 children sharing 8 beds (*CIDA in Kandahar*. Senlis Council 2007).

For our research, we were unable to obtain a list of CIDA projects to tell us the specific location of projects in Afghanistan from either CIDA in Canada, or the Canadian embassy in Kabul. We happened to find two CIDA projects in Bamiyan province. Both were artificial insemination projects that appeared to be abandoned, or at best mothballed. These were the only evidence of CIDA projects we saw. At both sites, we found expensive vehicles and construction machinery left scattered about the sites in various stages of disrepair.

After six years of occupation, only 29% of people in Kabul have access to safe drinking water, according to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

We witnessed desperate people in Kabul forced to draw their drinking water from beneath cesspools of raw sewage and in one location even from beneath a cemetery. We witnessed sewage flowing in the streets of Kabul, where it bakes in the sun, turns to dust and is picked up by the wind to blow disease-laden fecal matter about the city.

The international forces claim they cannot construct development projects without first stabilising the security situation – a claim met by incredulous disbelief by Afghans who must live in this environment.

We witnessed disgusting scenes of abject poverty immediately outside the walls of the American embassy – within sight, earshot, and I suspect smelling range of American embassy officials. This is a neighbourhood which, along with most of Kabul, has been secure

since 2001, so claims that reconstruction must wait for stabilisation obviously do not apply. The smell of sewage and garbage is overpowering. Children line up throughout the day at water taps – sometimes waiting for hours – for water to be turned on.

Some days no water flows, if electricity fails to reach the pumps. The electrical supply is entirely unreliable.

We also witnessed the construction of a new shopping centre across the street from a bombed-out school. After six years of occupation, students still study in this shell of a school without protection from the weather, but a tiny minority of wealthy Afghans and international workers will soon have a new place to shop.

With scenes like this anywhere one cares to look, it is hard for Afghans to accept the argument that reconstruction must wait for stability – a stability that will supposedly occur only after an unspecified amount of more brutal counterinsurgency warfare.

Many Afghans find the rationalisation of the international forces hard to believe when many areas of Afghanistan are obviously considered stable enough to construct commercial developments that make a few people rich, but apparently not stable enough to construct social developments that could benefit all Afghans.

By the end of 2007, Canada will have spent \$7.2 billion on the military mission (Department of National Defence “Report on Plans and Priorities 2007-2008”). But Canada has only pledged \$1 billion for reconstruction from 2001 to 2011 (Josée Verner, Minister of International Cooperation, 27 March 2007).

Many Afghans complain most development money never reaches them in any meaningful way, but the impact of the military mission on the people is devastating. They see money spent on expensive vehicles and air-conditioned offices for well paid development staff, as well as incredible amounts of money spent on what many perceive as a foolish military exercise as an incredible waste.

The opinions we heard expressed do not indicate the international mission is winning the hearts and minds of Afghans.

Many Afghans asked us: if the international powers are truly concerned with the welfare of the Afghan people, why have they not at least begun building essential public infrastructure by now, after six years of occupying Afghanistan?

4. Frustration with the promise of liberating women:

It is telling fact in itself that no Afghan woman felt safe enough to speak to us, outside the walls of an academic institution. The few female academics who did feel safe enough to talk to us on the campuses we visited, said there have been some positive changes for Afghan women, since the defeat of the Taliban regime. However, the reinstatement of the original theocratic regime, worsening poverty, and lack of universal access to education promises the continued oppression of women.

These female academics could point to themselves as examples of limited improvement – they are again allowed to study and teach. Nonetheless, they recognise their own rights are severely circumscribed and that they are part of a tiny privileged minority of Afghan women. These women told us, most Afghan women have not experienced and do not expect to

experience any significant liberation within the constraints of the current regime.

The Amnesty International Report 2007 states: "Legal reforms designed to protect women have not been implemented and women continue to be detained for breaching social mores". The report adds: "There was a rise in cases of 'honour' killings of women and self-immolation by women."

How can Afghan women liberate themselves when they are oppressed by a theocratic government, worsening poverty, and when they have little access to education?

Peter MacKay claims: "Since 2001, over 6 million children – 1/3 of them girls – have been enrolled in school." ("[Speaking Notes for Peter MacKay](#), Minister of National Defence." Government of Canada, 17 Oct. 2007.).

However, according to the 2006 Annual Report of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the reality is:

Girls represent only 3% of students, and they are hardly allowed to continue their education beyond the fifth or sixth grade. In addition, the right to education is not granted to children coming from poor families. These children have to work or beg to feed their families, and are at risk as they can easily be the victims of sexual and other kinds of abuses in their working environment" (AIHRC 2006).

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) adds:

Poverty – the necessity for children to work and the expense of going to school – is the primary factor inhibiting children from going to school, but especially for girls (*Looking Beyond the School Walls*. (AREU) 2006).

Another generation of Afghan girls remains illiterate after six years of international occupation. The current literacy rate according to CIDA is 43.1% men, 12.6% women (*Afghanistan Facts at a Glance*. CIDA 2007).

Despite the much celebrated inclusion of a higher ratio of women in the Afghan parliament than in its Canadian counterpart, women remain largely invisible in the public realm of Afghan society. Afghan women told us they are not hopeful that this will change under the current theocratic regime.

II) Why do Afghans think Canada is at war in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is of obvious geopolitical interest, because of its vital geostrategic position between Russia and the Central Asian states to the north; China to the east; Pakistan and India to the east and south; and Iran to the west.

Many Afghans expressed grave concerns regarding the ongoing military incursions by international forces into Pakistan, which have occurred since 2005. While attacks on Pakistan have received little news coverage in Western media, these events are regular news in Afghanistan. Many Afghans fear similar cross-border fighting or even worse may soon begin to escalate conflict in the region, considering American threats against Iran.

Many Afghans told us they do not appreciate the fact their country is being used as a launching pad to attack their neighbours. They are fearful international aggression could

further destabilise the region.

Many Afghans also told us they believe Canadian and international businesses in the military and development sectors profit from the war and reconstruction at the expense of most Afghans. Considering Canada, according to a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, became the sixth largest arms supplier in the world this year, there is economic evidence to support this belief.

Many Afghans complained that huge portions of the money earmarked for development pays for high salaries for international workers and for buying expensive vehicles and equipment. Little of the development money actually helps Afghans.

The concessions to every Afghan state enterprise in transportation, communications, resource extraction and other profitable sectors will soon be sold at bargain prices. Fortyfour state enterprises with an estimated net asset value of US\$614 million will be sold (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) 2006). Many Afghans regard this as a sale of their economic heritage.

Among the resources up for grabs, are Afghanistan's promising mining resources. A geology student told us about the prospective mineral riches of Afghanistan indicating that rich deposits of valuable resources such as iron ore and gold are abundant and unexploited. The World Bank estimates "the annual value of Afghanistan's mineral reserves could reach at least US\$253 million up from the current US\$60 million" (AREU 2006).

According to the Embassy of Afghanistan website: "Afghanistan's mining industry offers a wealth of possibilities for the prospective investor ... the country's mining sector remain [sic] virtually untouched" (www.embassyofafghanistan.org).

It is hard for Afghans to imagine the Canadian mining industry – the world leader in mining exploration and exploitation – is not interested in exploiting Afghanistan's resources.

Afghans know the "Old Silk Road" through their country has been a vital transportation link for millennia. Today, the under-exploited natural resources and expanding markets of the region offer great growth potential for international investors.

Many Afghans expressed the belief that the international intervention serves the geopolitical and economic interests of the occupiers rather than bettering the lives of most Afghans. It is obvious, however, that a small minority of powerful Afghans are profiting from the current situation.

III) In conclusion:

Concrete geopolitical and economic reasons for war in Afghanistan may serve the interests of some Canadians and some Afghans. But we believe few Canadians are prepared to kill, maim, displace, and humiliate Afghans and sacrifice Canadian soldiers for interests that benefit only an elite minority of Canadians and Afghans.

Based on the concerns of the Afghan people we heard, the Afghanistan Canada Research Group demands the immediate withdrawal of the Canadian Forces from Afghanistan.

We also express our solidarity with Canadian soldiers. Canadian soldiers should not be forced to sacrifice their lives for a mission that is neither in the best interests of most

Canadians, nor most Afghans. Nor should Canadian soldiers be forced to fight a counterinsurgency war in which war crimes and human rights violations are inevitable.

We recognise a withdrawal of the Canadian Forces may result in an escalation of the Afghan civil conflict in the short-term. However, the Canadian Forces are currently helping to escalate an international war initially begun, on 3 July 1979, when U.S. President Jimmy Carter ordered military aid to the Afghan mujaheddin as a ploy to instigate the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Millions of innocent Afghan civilians have been trapped in a bloody international conflict that has continued since 1979.

The Government of Canada made a grave error by taking sides in this conflict and by using alleged war criminals as allies in its stabilisation and reconstruction strategy. Rewarding rather than prosecuting alleged war criminals delegitimizes Canadian foreign policy and undermines Canada's potential role as a neutral mediator and peacekeeper.

If Canadians truly believe in self-determination and democracy, we will immediately withdraw the Canadian Forces from the illegitimate war in Afghanistan.

A military withdrawal will not absolve Canadians of our responsibility to pay reparations for the damage we have done, or our responsibility to hold other powerful states responsible for the immense damages these states have caused to Afghans. •

Michael Skinner is at York University. This essay was written with the Afghanistan Canada Research Group as [their submission](#) to the Manley Committee hearings.

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