

Canada's Role in Afghanistan

'Ask Afghans what would help them, don't ask Karzai'

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[Mike Skinner](#), co-founder of the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group and a researcher at the York Centre for International and Security Studies in Toronto, believes a simple question is being left out of the debate about Canada's continued military involvement in Afghanistan: "Why are we there?" It is a no-brainer to ask this but there are no easy answers it appears.

To understand the goals of Canada's role, he said, we need to examine the forms of intervention under current consideration as alternatives to Ottawa's combat mission in Kandahar. During extensive travels in Afghanistan in 2007, Skinner studied firsthand Canada's intervention, assisted by Afghan-Canadian reporter Hamayon Rastgar, and has [written widely](#) on this question. The two men formed, along with fellow-researcher Angela Joya, the Afghanistan-Canadian Research Group.

When considering the example of Canada's supposed "humanitarian" aid projects, which the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois propose as an alternative to a military mission, Skinner emphasises the limitations of the approach and the bad feelings it can engender.

"Canadian aid agencies in Afghanistan have to follow the orders of the military," he says. "Aid is meted out as rewards to co-operative communities and withdrawn from others as punishment."

It was not always the case. "Canadian development and aid agencies – like Care Canada and the Red Cross – had been working in Afghanistan, through all the upheavals in government, the Soviet occupation, and then, after 1992, the Mujahedeen period, and, after 1996, under the Taliban regime. They operated in very difficult conditions, negotiating with the government in power," Skinner says.

NGOs Conscripted to Military Service

"In 2008, these organizations were told that humanitarian operations had to serve military purposes. If they did not, they would be in 'very threatening circumstances,'" Skinner says. In effect, the non-governmental organizations were constrained to become part of the U.S. military's counterinsurgency program.

NGOs also were imperilled by "special ops" – secret strike forces of the Canadian and U.S. armies. "U.S. special forces have impersonated NGO workers, posing as civilians," Skinner says. When fighters resisting the U.S.-led occupation see this, all NGO workers become suspect in their eyes.



The Ghazi High School, in Kabul.

“NGOs began protesting against these practices as early as 2004.” In 2008, “many NGOs, including Care Canada and the Red Cross, pulled out from conflict zones in Afghanistan.”

Under the Obama presidency, U.S. military control of “humanitarian aid” was heightened. Eight NGOs including Care and OXFAM criticized the use of “aid as a weapons system” in a joint statement released in January 2010. In February, United Nations aid officials refused to co-operate with U.S.-led military operations, which the UN officials describe as the “militarization” of Afghan Aid.

In the early stages of the war, the occupation of Afghanistan consisted of two separate operations, Skinner explains. “There was OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) – the original invasion carried out by the Anglo-Saxon states: the U.S., Britain, Canada, and Australia.” OEF, organized under the umbrella of GWOT (Global War on Terror), operates worldwide: it directs the war in Somalia and the decades-old U.S. involvement in civil conflicts in the Philippines. Ominously, OEF/GWOT started up operations in 2008 in the Caribbean and Central America.

“A second parallel mission, sanctioned by the United Nations and under NATO leadership, is the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), which is supposed to conduct ‘peace’ operations and help stabilize the [Hamid Karzai](#) government. But Obama rolled both operations into one under the command of [General David Petraeus](#),” strengthening U.S. military control of “aid” projects.

‘Training’ For What?

As for the military ‘training’ mission favoured by the Conservative and Liberal parties, Skinner asks, “just what are we training Afghan soldiers to do?”

Here we must examine, he said, the record of U.S. training missions around the world in recent decades. “They have immense experience around the world, in the Vietnam war, elsewhere in southeast Asia, and in Latin America. This ‘training’ has had devastating results for the people of these regions.”

The U.S. military have ‘trained’ more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers in their notorious Fort Benning, Georgia, School of the Americas, now renamed WHINSEC (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Co-operation). The school’s alumni include prominent supporters of rightist military coups, repression, torture, and killings directed against democratic movements.

The U.S. and its allies have been ‘training’ Afghan soldiers for almost a decade, Skinner noted. “What is this army for? Simply to control the population by military means,” he suggests. The intent is to ensure that people will consent to massive projects to extract and ship raw materials, which will displace large numbers of residents – “like in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, except that now extermination is not an acceptable option.”

Secret Military Operations

Unmentioned in the present debate on Canada’s Afghanistan involvement is its Special

Operations forces – the 600-member JTF 2 (Joint Task Force Two) and two recently formed units. Such elite units carry out special strike missions, “avoiding any kind of accountability.”

“They are never mentioned in the press or official documentation. Are they operating with the U.S. in covert actions in Pakistan? Probably. But a member of parliament can’t get an answer to that question.”

When Canada ends its “combat mission” in Afghanistan next year, will JTF 2 and other special ops groups be withdrawn? Not necessarily. “It’s not clear,” said Skinner

A Worm’s Eye View of the Occupation

During his 2007 travels in Afghanistan, Skinner interviewed more than a hundred Afghans on their view of the occupation – intellectuals, farmers, miners, university students, shopkeepers, and human rights activists.

“Afghans don’t see Canada’s involvement as a sudden rush to their aid. Their urgent needs – fresh water, sanitation, basic infrastructure, electricity, telephone – they see little of that. Instead, they see construction of infrastructure for large-scale commercial development,” he notes.

“They are sceptical of electrical development, for example, which is more likely to provide power for smelters, not meet people’s needs.”

Canada’s signature development project, he said, was the rebuilding of a dam in the Helmand river valley – repairing a U.S.-sponsored development project of the 1950s that had a devastating impact on local farmers and the environment. The repair project “has now been apparently abandoned – a boondoggle for SNC-Lavalin,” the major contractor.

Opinion polls in Afghanistan have shown a majority against the invasion of the country, Skinner adds.

Opening Afghanistan for Capitalism

“What was the goal of the invasion?” Skinner asks. “Liberation of women? If that was the goal, it has failed. Build the state? A failure. But on other issues, the invasion has been very successful, and Afghans are quite perceptive of this.”

Afghanistan is “important real estate,” Skinner says. “It sits astride the shortest route between China and Europe, between India and Russia.” Iran, China, and Turkey are all active in Afghanistan, “and they have great economic and social advantages over the Western countries.”

The U.S.-led invasion is part of a two-track policy articulated in the 2008 U.S. National Defense Strategy. The first and preferred track, Skinner notes, is to engage China and Russia within the globalization of capitalism. Failing this, the second track is a “containment policy reminiscent of the Cold War. Occupying Afghanistan serves both purposes of engagement and potential containment.” Previously, “Afghanistan was cut off as a buffer zone; today it is a bridgehead into Eurasia.” For the invading powers human welfare is secondary to the “opening up of Afghanistan to capitalist development.”

What Should Canada Do?

In Skinner's opinion, under present conditions – foreign occupation, all-out war, and a puppet government – none of the forms of involvement now being considered by Canada's political parties will serve the needs of the Afghan people.

What should Canada do? "Ask Afghans what would help them. Don't ask Karzai, ask the people. That is easy to say but hard to do. We need to open up communications with Afghan organizations on the ground." There are many such organizations, isolated by the language barrier and silenced by repression. "We have a task here of human solidarity."

But the first step, Skinner says, is clear: "The Canadian state needs to dissociate itself from the U.S. imperial project in Afghanistan – fully and completely." •

John Riddell is a Toronto-based activist and co-editor of [Socialist Voice](#). This article was first published in [rabble.ca](#).

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