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Afghanistan, the Terrible War: Money for Nothing

By Vijay Prashad
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The Taliban and its allies seized Kunduz, a major city in northern Afghanistan. It was a Mosul-style capture – a few hundred Taliban overran thousands of the Afghan National Army soldiers and pinned down some US Special Forces troops at the airport. In retaliation, heavy US bombardment against the Taliban rattled the cages, but did not itself do much damage. What destruction came was tragic. Twelve MSF (Doctors without Borders) staff and ten patients died when US aircraft “repeatedly and persistently” (according to MSF) struck their hospital. MSF had given the US the coordinates of the hospital in advance. It did not matter.

The Afghan Army said that it had started to take back Kunduz. Parts of the city remain contested. The Taliban has done its job. Their fighters delivered their message. The Taliban – with their allies – are capable of seizing a city even though they have been fighting the US for fourteen years. As the anniversary of this Afghan war creeps up on October 7, the gains from that war seem marginal. The Taliban remains a force despite the death of their founder Mullah Omar. Their new leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, has made his mark.

One of the war aims of the Afghan war was to silence al-Qaeda. Certainly the command & control section of al-Qaeda's international operations has been disrupted. But al-Qaeda's black flags continue to fly in the small hamlets of northern Waziristan (Pakistan), including in areas of Miranshah – the district's capital. Al-Qaeda had, as my late friend Saleem Shahzad showed, taken advantage of the weakness of the tribal system to insert itself. Local grievances morphed into the planetary ambitions of the black flag. When the US drones and the Pakistani army went after them, it did not make any distinctions – it sought to obliterate both the local and the global. But that is simply not possible without complete annihilation. Local grievances have to be untethered from al-Qaeda, which drone strikes cannot do. Al-Qaeda remains intact, not only in northern Pakistan, but also in Yemen, in Mali and in Syria. War gives it meaning.

In northern Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's old allies moved in far more dangerous directions. For the Kunduz strike, the Taliban relied upon three of its associates: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union and Jamaat Ansarallah. These groups have tentacles that reach into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This summer, a Colonel in the Tajik Special Forces – Gulmurod Khalimov – defected to ISIS. He had been to the US three times to be trained for the fight against terrorism. Disgust at the lack of political and economic opportunities in Tajikistan has turned people like Khalimov toward insurgency. The audacity of ISIS in Iraq-Syria inspired Khalimov to sign up his own branch to its franchise. This is how al-Qaeda grew in the old days, but in the shadows. ISIS has opened a new seam – these groups are happy to announce themselves in public, to parade their troops and to go into action. While the Taliban and its allies took Kunduz, ISIS in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province struck ten Afghan Army and police posts. Between Kunduz and Nangarhar lies Afghanistan's rich mining wealth. They have emerged on the roadways into China's Xinjiang province.

Money and Bodies

Days after 9/11, the political class in the United States inaugurated the Global War on Terror (GWOT). One of the distinguishing features of this war was that it had no restrictions of space and time. Under the rules of GWOT, the US would be allowed to strike anywhere and at anytime it wished. International law had been fully suborned to the parochial needs of the US president. The Obama administration dispensed with the language of GWOT. In 2009, the GWOT was renamed Overseas Contingency Operation. Attempts to be bureaucratic about the war failed. It will not shake its apocalyptic nature.

Since 9/11, the United States has expended an enormous amount of money on the GWOT. A Congressional study from December 2014 found that the total bill over the past thirteen years was \$1.6 trillion. That means, by this estimate, the US public is paying \$8.36 million per hour on

a war that has not yet ended. Brown University's Watson Institute released a study in 2011 that showed the cost to be twice that amount – in the range of \$2.3 to \$2.7 trillion.

The rate of return from this money has been abysmal. Both the Afghan National Army and the Iraqi Army do not display the amount of money poured into them. Cash thrown at “moderate” insurgents in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali and Syria do not buy loyalty. These fighters often drift off into the arms of the terrorists. Why should they be faithful to the dollars? No political project holds them fast. To be cannon fodder for American aircraft is hardly a worthy mission. The other side offers bolder ideas. Not warmed over promises of democracy.

Alternative political projects are not available. There is no Chavez of Afghanistan or Mali. When they emerged, the CIA and its allies took them out. Thomas Sankara (1949-1987), the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso, used to end his speeches with the chant, “Homeland or death, we will win!” He was killed. His homeland is a battleground. Victory is far from sight. The West hands out cash to what seem to be mercenary armies. The men take the money and then move on. Why should they wait around to die for a cause that means nothing to them?

The costs to human life from this terrible war have been astounding. Perhaps a million dead in Iraq, a quarter million in Afghanistan, thousands here and thousands there. Millions of people displaced – five million in Iraq, one million in Afghanistan. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have been thrown into a downward social spiral, with little hope of an easy recovery. The violence in Iraq and Afghanistan continues. Brutality in Syria has been astounding – half the population displaced and hundreds of thousand dead. But the arithmetic of brutality from the GWOT is monumental. We move to the millions for our calculations.

Diplomacy

Geopolitics gets in the way of rationality. After 9/11, the countries of Eurasia, who had long worried about the growth of the Taliban, asked the United States to join their struggle. The Shanghai Cooperative Organisation had since the 1990s been trying to create a regional approach against the spread of extremist ideology. But the US rejected any thought of working with the SCO. It held hands with its NATO allies, and drew in its old friends (including Saudi Arabia). China, Russia, India and Iran had been available. They had to be shunned.

Hitched to the old colonial powers, the US started its crusade in Afghanistan and then spread out in both directions. The Chinese – through the SCO – had warned that a military strategy would not succeed. Other means were needed. Funds to the terrorists had to be dried up, economic opportunities for the population provided. This was the Chinese project: build roads and railways, hospitals and schools as the salve against extremism. What the US spent through its development projects in Afghanistan was not sufficient. A Chinese diplomat told me that his government would have spent a hundred times what the US spent to build Afghanistan's social infrastructure. Counter-insurgency by development cannot be done on the cheap.

What the great powers did not understand is that the broken regions such as Afghanistan need more than aerial bombardment and more than schools – they also need a robust national project, articulated with one eye to the past and another to the present. None of their puppets of the new

world order or the exiles with their dreams of revenge – the Karzais and the Malikis – were capable of leading their countries to the future. The Left had been destroyed in these zones, and new populist forces had been discouraged by reliance upon old networks of authority. Brave people such as Malalai Joya in Afghanistan and Yanar Mohammed of Iraq did not find the space to produce broad movements driven by a new kind of patriotism. They had to be set aside. History has not been kind to the Left in these regions. It will take its time to return. A car on Cairo's streets has an amateur sign in its back window: "I've been cursed. Hit by the Evil Eye. Then Marx saved me." This is wishful thinking. There is a great deal of work to be done. It will be a long while before the Sankara of Afghanistan emerges.