

Should all foreign troops leave Afghanistan?

A personal contribution to the debate about foreign troops in Afghanistan by Matthias Tomczak (3 May 2010)

In 2008, in an address at the Australian War Memorial CEW Bean Foundation dinner, Prime Minister Rudd said that "*under the Taliban, the people of Afghanistan lived in an environment of oppression and extreme poverty with the constant threat of violence. This was a period where the basic needs of Afghans were left ignored - indeed people's lives went backward - amid the pursuit of violent ideology. It was an ideology that bred hatred. It was an ideology that brutalized women.*" He went on to assure his listeners that the presence of Australian troops in Afghanistan "*will make for a more secure world...a goal endorsed by the United Nations Security Council*".

Many Australians believe him. They support the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan because they are convinced that the Afghans will never overcome the threat of the Taliban without foreign military help.

But what has the presence of foreign troops achieved? Has the "*ideology that brutalized women*" been defeated or at least pushed back? On the contrary, self-immolation of women is more frequent than it ever was, government law sanctions rape in marriage, hospitals are overflowing with women brutalized by relatives and husbands.

If your declared aim is to help a suffering population your first responsibility would have to be to listen to the people. Since 2005 the US television ABC, the British BBC and the German ARD are conducting an annual poll of the Afghan population. It shows a clear decline of support for foreign involvement in Afghanistan:

| | Afghan's view of the USA | | Support for U.S./NATO/ ISAF forces in your area |
|------|--------------------------|-------------|---|
| | favorable | unfavorable | |
| 2005 | 83% | 14% | n/a |
| 2006 | 74% | 25% | 67% |
| 2007 | 65% | 32% | 52% |
| 2008 | 47% | 52% | 37% |

The surveys show that the support for foreign troops has steadily declined, and in 2008, after seven years of experience with foreign involvement, public opinion had clearly swung against the presence of foreign troops.

It is true that the next survey, conducted in December 2009, showed a slight swing back to a majority who think of the USA favorably, a result that caused the world media to announce that "we are beginning to win the hearts and minds of Afghans." The poll was conducted during a period of hope for positive change during the build-up to the elections. But the elections turned out to be a cynical exercise of vote-buying and vote-rigging, and whatever hope there was has quickly evaporated.

It has also to be noted that national poll results do not give the true picture. The presence of foreign troops is not felt everywhere. A regional breakdown shows that, while in regions without foreign troops the people still think that something good might come from their presence, support for foreign troops is lowest, and support for military actions against foreign troops highest where the troops actually are:

| | Afghans who experience bombing in their area | Afghans who do not experience bombing in their area |
|--|--|---|
| Support for the presence of foreign forces | 46% | 70% |
| Support for violent retribution against foreign forces | 44% | 15% |

(This regional breakdown was not yet available for 2009; the figures are based on the 2008 poll.)

It is thus clear that, if we were to listen to the Afghan people, we would have to withdraw our troops and leave Afghanistan's future to the Afghan people. Many well-meaning Australians counter that with arguments that there have been mistakes in the past but the performance of the troops will improve, that the Afghan people have not shown the capacity to reach peace, or that we know better how to deal with the situation. Well-meaning as these arguments might be, they all say in essence: Ignore the will of the Afghan people and persevere as an unwanted foreign force.

There are situations when the will of people can be overruled, but in a civilized society such action requires justification in law. If I become aware of a family dispute in my neighbourhood – constant screaming, sounds of flying crockery, slamming of doors – can I barge in and take action to protect the children from harm? I can't; I have to notify the social services of the government, who will take action on the basis of family law. The social services may be incompetent, and I may find that I have to work towards changing that, but resorting to self-justice is the first step towards anarchy and chaos.

If the suggestion is to overrule the will of an entire people, it has to be based on International Law. The U.N. Charter provides that all member states must settle their international disputes by peaceful means, and no nation can use military force except when authorized by the Security Council or in self-defense, which must be "instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation." The USA deliberated for three weeks before starting to bomb Afghanistan, so the action was not in self-defense. The Security Council passed two resolutions (1368 and 1373) on Afghanistan. Both condemned the attacks but did not authorize military intervention because the attacks were criminal acts, not "armed attacks" by another country. Afghanistan did not attack the United States.

From the point of International Law the presence of foreign troops is illegal. Wahington knows this and has dropped the desertion charge against Lance Corporal Joe Glenton, a prominent speaker at anti-war rallies, who had planned to challenge the legality of the war as part of his defense.

RAWA's position on the presence of the foreign troops is clear. When the majority of Afghans still thought that foreign troops can bring peace to their country, RAWA already said that foreign troops are an obstacle to peace and progress. Anyone who still thinks otherwise will have to explain why more women commit suicide or burn themselves today than under the Taliban, and will have to show the evidence how the presence of foreign troops will change that to the better.

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Source: ABC News/BBC/ARD poll, analysis by Gary Langer, director of polling at ABC News Services
