



The Failed War on Terror

The so-called War on Terror proved to be a War of Terror for several million people

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THE fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, almost 20 years after George W Bush's declaration on 20th September 2001 of the 'war on terror', is the final nail in its coffin. It was the longest ongoing armed conflict in the history of the United States, lasting longer than America's participation in both world wars and surpassing even the period that the US military was actively engaged in combat operations during the Vietnam War.

In Afghanistan the coalition led by America lost 3,500 lives and the Afghan police and military lost 69,000. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), nearly 111,000 civilians have been killed or injured since it began systematically recording civilian casualties in 2009. According to the UN, over the past five years 40% of civilian casualties from airstrikes have been children.

In Iraq the US-led coalition lost 4,804 lives, while the total number of Iraqi deaths has been variously estimated as between 500,000 and 1 million. We also know that the Coalition forces often used torture and other forms of 'terror' on detainees. They also caused massive human displacement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated in 2006 that 1.8 million Iraqis had been displaced to neighbouring countries, and 1.6

million were displaced internally, with nearly 100,000 Iraqis fleeing to Syria and Jordan each month.

We could certainly say that, while tens of thousands of so-called terrorists have been killed in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the so-called 'war on terror' proved to be a war of terror for several million people.

The human cost is more than these bare statistics. In Afghanistan alone, the land is contaminated with unexploded ordnance, which kills and injures tens of thousands of Afghans, especially children, as they travel and go about their daily lives. The Afghan Ministry of Public Health has also reported that fully two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems. The war has exacerbated the effects of poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, and environmental degradation on Afghans' health.

So the first question is: did the end justify the means? In international humanitarian law, *jus in bello* is a principle which refers to 'right conduct in war'. It includes: non-combatant immunity; proportionality; military necessity; fair treatment of prisoners; and use of 'evil' methods such as rape or biological weapons. There is no doubt that the US and UK breached many of these principles in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet what exactly was 'the end' anyway? The principle of *jus ad bellum* refers to the right to go to war. It includes just cause, competent authority, probability of success, last resort, proportionality, and self-defence. Were these wars in Afghanistan and Iraq just in these terms?

To be able to answer this question requires us to understand 'terror' in this context. Does it mean actions by 'terrorists'? Yes, thousands of so-called 'terrorists' were killed, including eventually the founder of Al-Qaeda Osama bin Laden (though in Pakistan not Afghanistan) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS. But how many were actually created by this war? There are now many more Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organisations than there were on 9/11.

In 2005 George W Bush stated that "by fighting these terrorists in Iraq, Americans in uniform are defeating a direct threat to the American people". But the National Intelligence Estimate is that "the Iraq war has become a 'cause celebre' for jihadists... and is shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives". One US study shows that the war generated a stunning seven-fold increase in the yearly rate of jihadist attacks, amounting to hundreds of additional terrorist attacks and thousands of civilian lives lost throughout the world.

Al-Qaeda has survived arguably the greatest onslaught in history directed against a 'terrorist' group. A new generation of recruits currently fights in a conflict that began before many of them were born. On the eve of the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden predicted that his martyrdom when it came "will create more Osama bin Ladens". He was correct. So if these were wars on 'terrorists' they failed because they had no real prospect of success and have instead been entirely counterproductive.

They had no prospect of success for other reasons. 'Terror' is not a characteristic of groups. It is a method, and is as old as civilisation. If we define terrorism as the use of violence to induce terror for political ends, then it is a war that can never be won while wars and other military conflicts exist because they all include elements of it. —>

It is especially true of organisations which exist in countries ruled by external powers. Terror becomes a key weapon of resistance when the ruling authority has military superiority. Independence movements throughout history have sought to remove foreign invaders by the use of terror tactics, and the Taliban in Afghanistan have clearly received support from the general population because they have fought to remove ‘foreigners’ from their country.

The attack on the Twin Towers 20 years ago was an awful atrocity, and Americans had every right to feel angry. They were also perfectly entitled to try to apprehend the planners and perpetrators. But this is a long way off going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and causing wanton death and destruction on a grand scale.

If the 9/11 attack was organised in that country (none of the hijackers were Afghan but 15 of the 19 were Saudis), then a covert ‘police’ action should have been attempted to capture or, if necessary, kill the suspects. After all, IRA Bombers from Dundalk were not met with British bombs in Dublin. But to launch full-scale wars of aggression and occupation against two independent, historically proud countries in which possibly a million or more have died is a gross overreaction and the US and UK have paid the price in a loss of any moral influence they may have had.

As the Taliban tightens its hold on Afghanistan, let us not forget that the so-called war on terror began in that country but was extended to Iraq, so the ‘war’ had a two-pronged focus. It is here where the justifications for the invasions are clearly seen as fraudulent.

As former Secretary General Kofi Annan said, the invasion of Iraq violated international law because it was conducted against a sovereign state and a full member of the UN that represented no threat to the US or UK. It set a serious precedent in world affairs in its undermining of the United Nations. It also gave democracy a bad name. Thus the crusade of Bush and Blair boosted terrorism, caused more suffering, fuelled religious hatred and undermined international law.

The central pretext urged by Bush and Blair for the Iraq invasion was to rid it of its weapons of mass destruction. Also, Bush misled the American people into believing that there was direct complicity between the Hussein regime in Iraq and the Al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for 9/11. This was entirely false. In truth, Saddam Hussein was distrustful of al-Qaeda and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime. And if Iraq really had such weapons, it would have been dangerous to attack the country. Instead, there was confidence that Iraq was ‘doable’, i.e. it could be easily defeated militarily precisely because it had no such weapons... Yet it did have large supplies of oil.

US and coalition troops used weapons of mass destruction on a devastating scale in ‘searching’ for non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

In the UK, intelligence was ‘sexed up’, while in America the administration fabricated stories about Iraq’s WMD. In 2004, Charles Duelfer, leader of the Iraq Survey Group, reported that Saddam Hussein had destroyed most of his chemical and biological weapons after 1991 and that his nuclear programme had ‘progressively decayed’. US and coalition troops used weapons of mass destruction on a devastating scale in ‘searching’ for non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Why then did America, blindly supported by the UK and others, fight a war on terror by invading two sovereign states? Two factors are particularly relevant. The first is revenge and the second is money. When a bully is hit, he (it is usually a ‘he’) retaliates in spades. His anger means that he knows no limit to the ‘punishment’ he metes out, and he is not worried who suffers. In terms of power politics, America has been a bully in the world stage since the Second World War. It has intervened with deadly effect in more countries than any other state.

Being a military industrial complex, America’s arms industries benefit

from war. Trillions of dollars have flown through its war budgets in the last two decades of fighting in these countries. And, of course, there is also the oil. Take just two comments. In 2008, Chuck Hagel, the former United States Secretary of Defense, stated: “People say we’re not fighting for oil. Of course we are”. General John Abizaid, CENTCOM commander from 2003 until 2007, said of the Iraq war: “first of all I think it’s really important to understand the dynamics that are going on in the Middle East, and of course it’s about oil, it’s very much about oil and we can’t really deny that”.

It is tragedy for Afghanistan that the Taliban are back in power. Last time, from 1996 to 2001, they effectively turned the country back to the 7th century. They were notorious for their misogyny, sexism, and violence against women, who were forced to wear the burqa at all times in public, on the grounds that the face of a woman is a source of corruption for men. Women were not allowed to work, they were not allowed to be educated after the age of eight, and until then were permitted only to study the *Qur’an*. Despite Taliban assurances, commentators are sceptical that there will any change from the past.

There is injustice and cruelty everywhere in this world, especially in countries where fundamentalist religion rules, but liberal democracies cannot save them all. The US cannot continue to act as the world’s policemen, especially when it performs the role so badly and persists in putting its own interests first. The UK cannot continue as America’s lapdog and then complain when it abandons its commitment. Ultimately, the Afghan people have to do the job themselves. Surely they have savoured progress long enough to demand it from their rulers?

Of course, the West should help in every way it can, short of violence. But ‘humanitarian military intervention’ has been abused and besmirched by the behaviour of both the United States and Britain in these two unfortunate countries. The only conclusion is that the ‘war on terror’ has proved to be a total sham and a complete disaster. □