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Afghanistan: Whose war?

05/14/10 at 12:00 AM

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KABUL, Afghanistan—The easiest way for an American to fly into Afghanistan is on Kam Air from Dubai. But it appears that only Americans fly into Afghanistan on Kam Air from Dubai. Almost, anyway.

The vast majority of passengers on my flights into and out of Kabul were white males, many with military-style haircuts and several with military tattoos. A few may be on active duty. Most probably are private security consultants. As in Iraq, contractors have come to play an increasing role in the way America fights wars.

More significant, though, is the appearance that this is America's, not Afghanistan's, war. Afghans are doing most of the dying, of course. But the conflict is what it is because of American (and Western) men and money.

As a city of several million, Kabul is most definitely Afghan. Nevertheless, the city's organization—to the extent that it exists—is Western. Traffic, commerce, government, and much else revolves around foreign soldiers, diplomats, consultants, aid workers, journalists, and other outsiders who typically show up during war.

Taliban attacks in the capital are few, but no one feels safe. The airport is ringed by barbed wire; the road leading in is filled with concrete blocks and checkpoints. Travelers face multiple bag and body checks. Humvees topped with machine guns stand guard.

Police with AK-47s, barriers, checkpoints, and armed police pick-up trucks sit on street corners and in traffic circles throughout the city. Virtually every street contains at least one de facto fortress. Worst are Western embassies and military installations, which can take up entire blocks. But hotels, banks, lodgings for foreigners, and even offices of humanitarian organizations hide behind tall walls topped by barbed wire and watched by armed guards.

The Afghan government exists, and it is not without talent. Some ministers are well-thought of, but honest officials find it hard to survive politically—and sometimes literally. Few Afghans, other than those dependent on government money, have much good to say about the ruling elite, led by President Hamid Karzai.

Indeed, Kabul is in some sense the ultimate vampire city. For instance, the Afghan government does far more taking than providing. People speak of political, economic, and drug "mafias," the most of important of which are headed by the Karzai family.

But many Afghans profit from the war. Corrupt government officials, influential businessmen who win profitable contracts, employees of Western governments and agencies, drug producers, family members and friends of the influential, and the usual sort of human flotsam drawn to money and power in a conflict. The symbol of corruption is the many "poppy palaces," oversize homes surrounded by high walls which continue to sprout throughout Kabul.

Moreover, foreign consultants and businessmen come from all over to feed off the aid provided by the West.

Some arrive as idealists and depart as cynics. Others skip the first phase. The money will buy most anything, including alcohol, in this Muslim nation.

The greatest failure is that of the Afghan government. The central authorities raise little money and provide even fewer services on their own. Thus, most Afghans lack even the often-tenuous relationship between Americans and the denizens of Washington.

The most pervasive representative of the Afghan national government may be the Afghan National Police. Which is not to Kabul's advantage. Alas, the ANP has a reputation for extortion and intimidation. Inserting the police after clearing out the Taliban generally causes people to forget the latter's abuses.

The reputation of provincial governors, judges, others appointed by the central government is little better. Afghans tend to expect the worst of those sent by Kabul to govern.

None of this suggests that the Taliban is particularly popular. Most Afghans dislike rule by officious outsiders, wherever they are from.

Moreover, the Taliban is not monolithic. Some are Afghan religious fundamentalists; others are backed by al-Qaeda or Pakistan. Many are locals resisting the corrupt central government and its foreign backers. A number view the insurgency as a form of employment in an economy that doesn't work.

One disillusioned consultant suggested to me that Westerners should imagine how they would feel if someone from afar showed up to change their leaders, replace their traditions, and reconstruct their social mores. Then the same people funded "development" projects designed for rather than by residents, all the while arresting and killing locals, based on undisclosed and unreviewable "intelligence." Finally, the nominally Afghan government which showed up in the invaders' wake to rule them was pervasively incompetent, corrupt, and threatening.

Afghans deserve far better.

Most have tired of decades of war and oppression. Contrary to conventional wisdom, conflict is not in their blood. Afghans enjoyed a time of relative peace and stability under their king, whose forcible ouster in 1973 set off the violent chain of events including the Soviet invasion, Mujahedeen resistance, Taliban triumph, and allied intervention. Today Afghanistan is the ultimate proxy battlefield, including the U.S., Europeans, Pakistan, India, and others. Afghan weariness is pervasive—and understandable.

There might have been an opportunity to "get Afghanistan right" in 2002 and 2003. The Taliban had been ousted, the Afghan government's reputation had not yet collapsed, the allies had not yet created a debilitating military-industrial-development-consultant complex. But the Bush administration, committed to its unnecessary and counterproductive invasion of Iraq, redeployed troops who might have been used against both al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

That time seems far away today. New plans and strategies from Washington abound. But many of these seem far removed from the needs of the Afghan people. After all, argued a disillusioned American aid worker, top U.S. officials, whether military, diplomatic, or humanitarian, were unlikely ever to meet average Afghans.

The American elite rarely leave their fortified headquarters and go no where without an extensive security escort. They employ, but rarely query, Afghan interpreters and drivers. Foreigners only rarely attempt to learn the native language or culture. If Western executives meet or socialize with Afghans, the latter are most likely to be politicians and businessmen seeking favors.

Not every foreigner acts this way, of course, and even some hardened observers believe Westerners have gotten better at promoting projects actually desired by Afghans. But building roads and schools is at best an imperfect remedy when allied military strikes still kill civilians; allied military raids still humiliate families; allied financial assistance still creates illicit millionaires; and allied military intervention supplants local with central control.

Perhaps the greatest failing of the campaign in Afghanistan is the inability to foster anything approaching a serious local partner in Kabul. Ultimately only Afghans can create a system that survives an allied military withdrawal. Virtually no one believes the Karzai government could stand on its own: the only disagreement is over how long he could hang on and what likely would follow.

This is after more than eight years of war. World War II lasted only six years. World War I ran four years. So did the Civil War. There is little to suggest that U.S. officials have finally gotten it right. If not, how many more lives and how much money is Washington prepared to toss into the Afghan black hole?

Afghanistan is one of the world's great tragedies. Decades of war have ravaged this once peaceful land. The landscape is still beautiful, yet much of it is poisoned by wars present and haunted by the remains of wars past.

Brutal fundamentalism has replaced liberal tolerance in cities like Kabul. Local self-government today is achieved only at the point of a gun. National self-government remains only a theory. Ambitious Afghans try to emigrate. Wealthy Afghans send their families abroad. Despite it all, many educated and humane Afghans stay, risking their lives fighting for a better life for their fellow countrymen.

To want to help them do so reflects the best of impulses. To believe that one can do it for them reflects the worst of illusions.

America has achieved its objectives in Afghanistan: al-Qaeda has been dispersed, the Taliban has been punished, an anti-terrorism message has been sent. But Washington's broader attempt at nation-building has been far less successful, despite the expenditure of nearly 1,000 American lives more than \$220 billion. For all this, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, calls the situation in Afghanistan "deteriorating."

There is no better time than the present for Washington to learn humility. The U.S. cannot impose liberty, prosperity, democracy, and stability on Afghanistan. The Obama administration should focus on protecting Americans from terrorism while leaving nation-building in Afghanistan to the Afghan people.

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