

**Draft Background Paper on Withdrawal from Afghanistan.  
Submitted to the Labour Representation Committee Seminar  
on Afghanistan by Gabriel Carlyle (Voices UK)**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The war in Afghanistan is being conducted using massive aerial bombing, torture, mass detention and death squads. It is not a “noble cause”.**

**Britain is not supporting a “sovereign democracy” in Afghanistan. Moreover, operations by British and other foreign troops in southern Afghanistan are helping to galvanise al-Qaeda.**

**Afghan public opinion overwhelmingly supports genuine peace negotiations with the Taliban, and the upper house of the Afghan Parliament has called for a military ceasefire, negotiations and a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.**

**A negotiated settlement appears to be possible, but a timetable for withdrawal remains a key Taliban demand.**

**1. NOT A “NOBLE CAUSE”**

*“Afghanistan is the noble cause of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”* – former Defence Secretary, Des Browne<sup>1</sup>

**The war in Afghanistan is being conducted using massive aerial bombing, torture, mass detention and death squads. It is not a “noble cause”.**

**Aerial bombing**

In 2006, US forces launched over 2,500 airstrikes against Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> In the same year US forces dropped 980 bombs and fired 146,000 cannon rounds, ‘more than was expended in both categories from the beginning of the American-led invasion in 2001 through 2004’, according to the New York Times.<sup>3</sup> In September 2006 the RAF dropped 500 rockets and bombs on Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Britain evokes ‘noble cause’ as Afghanistan death toll hits 100’, AFP, 8 June 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/6greo6>

<sup>2</sup> ‘Air Forces’ Role in Iraq Could Grow’, Los Angeles Times, 31 January 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/6mm9p9>

<sup>3</sup> ‘US Airstrikes Climb Sharply in Afghanistan’, New York Times, 17 November 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/5ew66u>

<sup>4</sup> ‘RAF bombing campaign is fiercest since Iraq invasion’, Sunday Telegraph, 30 September 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/63busf>

USAF figures show that '300 tons of bombs were dropped on Afghanistan [by fixed wing aircraft] during June and July [2008] alone – the same as the amount dropped on the country during the whole of 2006.'<sup>5</sup> (*Observer*, 10 August).

### **Civilian Deaths**

*"Suddenly, there were large planes above us. Then they bombed the house ... They bombed and fired from 1 a.m. to 8 a.m. All of my relatives were killed in this bombing -- my cousins, my uncles, nieces, nephews, two of my daughters and my son" - Afghan taxi driver Hajj Gul Ahmed, August 2008.*<sup>6</sup>

Based on its own field research, the respected (pro-war) think tank The Senlis Council has estimated that as many as 2-3,000 Afghan civilians may have been killed by US/NATO air strikes in southern Afghanistan during 2006.<sup>7</sup>

In a tally by Human Rights Watch, reported civilian deaths in Afghanistan as a result of aerial bombing tripled between 2006 and 2007.<sup>8</sup>

### **Death Squads**

*"They were foreigners, with special glasses fixed to their faces and powerful lights on the weapons. One lifted the blanket from the edge of Ghulam, put his gun against his temple and fired. The bullets came out of his cheek. I was sitting right in front of them with my two surviving sons" - Abdul Qarim, describing the execution of his son during a Special Forces raid in Kandahar province in 2006.*<sup>9</sup>

In December 2007, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the British Army was "'taking seriously" claims that children were shot and several adult villagers had their throats cut during a secret military operation by unidentified forces in Helmand province.'<sup>10</sup> Eyewitnesses said that eighteen civilians were killed 'during a night time raid by a mixed force of foreign and Afghan troops helicoptered into' the village of Toubé on 18 November 2007.<sup>11</sup>

In May 2008 the UN's Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, reported that international forces in Afghanistan had 'reportedly killed as many as 200 civilians, often in joint

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<sup>5</sup> 'UK denies money to wounded Afghans', *Observer*, 10 August 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/5rpv6o>

<sup>6</sup> 'Joint Inquiry Sought Into U.S.-Led Strike In Afghan Town', *Washington Post*, 31 August 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/3kmjje>

<sup>7</sup> Section B.2, Chapter 2, 'Hearts and Minds in Southern Afghanistan', Senlis Council, December 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/yqhs3m>

<sup>8</sup> 'Afghanistan: Civilian Deaths From Airstrikes', 8 September 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/4cx3ht>

<sup>9</sup> 'Who are the Taleban? The question that is snaring Nato in Tribal wars', *The Times*, 21 October 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/2bz9lk>

<sup>10</sup> 'Claims of atrocity in Helmand province', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 December 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/5hax9k>

<sup>11</sup> 'Foreign troops accused in Helmand raid massacre', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 10 December 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/2emgtx>

operations with Afghan security forces, between January and April 2008.<sup>12</sup>

Noting that there had been a number of raids ‘for which no State or military command appears ready to acknowledge responsibility’, he claimed to have ‘received credible information that armed Afghan men were working with armed international personnel in certain areas’, and that ‘[a]t least some of these units are apparently led by personnel belonging to international intelligence services.’<sup>13</sup>

According to the *Independent*, a western official close to Alston’s investigation ‘said the secret units are still known as Campaign Forces, from the time when American Special Forces and CIA spies recruited Afghan troops to help overthrow the Taliban during the US-led invasion in 2001. “The brightest, smartest guys in these militias were kept on,” the official said. “They were trained and rearmed and they are still being used.”’<sup>14</sup>

### **Torture and mass detention**

Since 2001 ‘[t]orture and ill-treatment of detainees in US custody in Afghanistan is alleged to have included the following methods: sleep deprivation; stripping and forced nudity...prolonged solitary confinement; ...stress positions...death threats; threats of torture; threats of rape; light deprivation; use of dogs to inspire fear...kicking, punching and other physical assault; hooding, including for days at a time ...electric shocks; immersion in water, cigarette burns; and soldiers urinating on detainees.’<sup>15</sup>

The US is now building a new \$60m 40-acre detention complex at Bagram, where currently it typically holds over 600 prisoners.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. THE “SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY”**

*“We are there to support a democratically elected Afghan government – very important to stress that the Afghan government wants the support of the international community. Those who talk about a British or an international colony are quite wrong: Afghanistan is an independent country with its own government and we are supporting it” – David Miliband, July 2007*

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Preliminary Note on the Mission to Afghanistan’, 29 May 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/55w5dy>

<sup>13</sup> More recently Alston has described the three choices open to Afghans subjected to night-time raids by special forces: “They can either stay in their home and run the risk of being shot in their bed. Secondly, they could try and run, in which they would be shot, or thirdly, they fire back in which case they are treated as a terrorist and shot” (‘Army told to switch its Afghan tactics’, *Observer*, 31 August 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/3ftb34>)

<sup>14</sup> ‘Afghan death squads ‘acting on foreign orders’’, *Independent*, 16 May 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/5q9oau>

<sup>15</sup> ‘USA: US detentions in Afghanistan: an aide-mémoire for continued action’, *Amnesty International*, 7 July 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/ys8ro9>. According to a recent in-depth investigation by McClatchy Newspapers, the US base in Bagram airport became ‘a center of systematic brutality for at least 20 months starting in late 2001’ (‘Day 2: U.S. abuse of detainees was routine at Afghanistan bases’, *McClatchy Newspapers*, 16 June 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/6rrk9r>).

<sup>16</sup> ‘U.S. plans \$60 million Afghan prison on military base’, *New York Times*, 17 May 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/5cvod8>

**Britain is not supporting a “sovereign democracy” in Afghanistan. Moreover, operations by British and other foreign troops in southern Afghanistan are helping to galvanise al-Qaeda.**

### **Warlords**

Following the 2001 invasion, militias with horrific human rights records were 'brought to power with the assistance of the United States' (Human Rights Watch<sup>17</sup>), and the political process was manipulated by the US in order to install a weak leader (Hamid Karzai), who was dependent upon foreign backing and the appeasement of these warlords.<sup>18</sup>

According to renowned (pro-war) journalist Ahmed Rashid:

The unstated US strategy was to leave Karzai ineffectual in the capital, protected by foreign forces, while relying on warlords to keep Pax Americana in the countryside ... By following such a strategy, the United States left everything in place from the Taliban era except for the fact of regime change.<sup>19</sup>

### **Elections**

The two elections that have been held since the invasion were both deeply flawed:

- In the 2004 Presidential elections, voters in many rural areas told how to vote by warlords<sup>20</sup>; and there were significantly more “registered voters” than eligible voters.<sup>21</sup>
- In the 2005 Parliamentary elections, Human Rights Watch documented 'pervasive intimidation of voters and candidates, in particular women.'<sup>22</sup> Over half of the members of the Afghan parliament are linked to armed groups or have records of past human rights abuses.<sup>23</sup>

### **Galvanising al-Qaeda**

According to the head of the UN's al-Qaeda monitoring unit, Richard Barrett, the operations of British and foreign troops in southern Afghanistan are helping to galvanise al-Qaeda:

The presence of foreign forces provides a glue and [al-Qaeda] have been quite clever to exploit fears of an outside force ... You could say that the threat of foreign

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<sup>17</sup> 'Overview of human rights issues in Afghanistan', 31-12-04, <http://tinyurl.com/59ptyo>

<sup>18</sup> For a thorough account see p. 117 – 166 of Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 'Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords and the Propaganda of Silence' (Seven Stories Press, 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed Rashid, 'Descent into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia' (Allen Lane, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> 'The Rule of the Gun: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in the Run-up to Afghanistan's Presidential Election', Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, September 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/2azshm>

<sup>21</sup> 'Afghan voting number puzzle', BBC, 27 August 2004, <http://tinyurl.com/6ym6k6>

<sup>22</sup> Country Summary: Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/2easpz>

<sup>23</sup> Country Summary: Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/2easpz>

occupation is giving them oxygen in the region with tribal leaders leaving aside local differences to unite against foreign forces.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

**Afghan public opinion overwhelmingly supports genuine peace negotiations with the Taliban, and the upper house of the Afghan Parliament has called for a military ceasefire, negotiations and a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.**

#### **Afghan Opinion**

According to available polls, ordinary Afghans overwhelmingly back real negotiations with Taliban.

In a September 2007 poll<sup>25</sup>:

- 74% of Afghans supported negotiations with the Taliban
- 54% supported the idea a coalition government with the Taliban

#### **The Afghan Parliament**

In May 2007 the upper house of the Afghan Parliament called for a military cease-fire, negotiations with the Taliban, and a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, Britain's official line has been to oppose such negotiations. In December 2007 Gordon Brown told the House of Commons:

Our objective is to defeat the insurgency by isolating and eliminating its leadership. I make it clear that we will not enter into any negotiations with these people.<sup>27</sup>

### 4. THE NECESSITY OF WITHDRAWAL

**A negotiated settlement appears to be possible, but a timetable for withdrawal remains a key Taliban demand.**

In his 2007 book *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, Antonio Guistozzi - an expert on the Taliban insurgency at the LSE's Crisis States Research Centre

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<sup>24</sup> 'UK campaign in Afghanistan 'aids al-Qaeda'', Observer, 14 September 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/6xwdbv>

<sup>25</sup> '2007 Survey of Afghans', conducted for Environics by D3 Systems Inc. and the Afghan Centre for Social and Opinion Research, 18 October 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/ytt2yj>

<sup>26</sup> 'Afghan lawmakers call for ceasefire', Associated Press, 9 May 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/39lmtq>

<sup>27</sup> Hansard, 12 Dec 2007: Column 303, <http://tinyurl.com/6cq6rg>. As of October 2008, Britain still officially rejects talks except with "those within the Taliban who are genuinely prepared to leave the path of violence and engage in the legitimate political process (Foreign Office minister Bill Rammell, Hansard, 7 October 2008, Column 129, <http://tinyurl.com/69jsvw>).

– writes that:

For all their image as an extremist movement, there are some indications that the Taliban might have always been aiming for a negotiated settlement ... The option of ending the war through negotiations still existed in 2007.<sup>28</sup>

In late 2007, senior Taliban commanders in Helmand province – including a key aide to Taliban leader Mullah Omar – sent a list of demands to the Karzai government as part of tentative back-channel talks to bring a peaceful end to the conflict. They included: control of 10 southern provinces, a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops, and the release of all Taliban prisoners within six months.<sup>29</sup>

More recently, in talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban for which Britain allegedly provided logistic and diplomatic support, the Taliban has submitted a list of 11 conditions for ending the war, 'which include demands to be allowed to run key ministries and *a programmed withdrawal of western troops*.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Antonio Guistozi, 'Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007' (C Hurst & Co, 2007)

<sup>29</sup> 'Taliban sets out demands to Afghan president', Guardian, 15 October 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/5wc4ua>

<sup>30</sup> 'Revealed: secret Taliban peace bid', Observer, 28 September 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/3nlsux> (emphasis added)