

Whose Enduring Freedoms?

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Because most people have been following the news closely since September 11, it is not necessary to recount the events. Suffice to say that the war against Afghanistan began on October 7. Let us be clear; this is a *war*, not a campaign. Indeed, “massacre” is an even better word. It is not any less of a terrorist campaign than the events of September 11.

What does this war mean to a war-ravaged Afghanistan? After 20 years of being bludgeoned by the Soviets and two Muslim governments, the land and people of Afghanistan have been destroyed. For the land, this war will largely be a shifting of the rubble; for the people it has the potential of being a genocide. And for what? For the sake of unsubstantiated accusations against one man and his organisation? One does not have to like Bin Laden to point out that there is no evidence presented that directly implicates him in the September 11 attacks. Nor has there been any direct evidence that the Taliban participated in or even acquiesced in these attacks.

From day one it seemed clear that what the US government wanted was revenge, not justice. And it mattered not whether that revenge was meted out against innocents. It is worth noting how quickly after September 11 Bin Laden was fingered as the culprit – before any substantial investigation was conducted. It must be iterated – lest it be misunderstood – that I condemn strongly the attacks of September 11. No Muslim, no peace- and justice-loving person, can condone the murder of 5 000 civilians as we witnessed on that day. It was a sad day for humanity.

But we are unsure whether the Afghan massacre is even about revenge for 11 September. The BBC’s George Arney reported that Niaz A Naik, a former Pakistani Foreign Secretary, after attending the UN Contact Group meeting on Afghanistan in mid-July, was told by a senior US official that America would attack Afghanistan by October to capture or kill Bin Laden and Mullah Muhammad Omar, overthrow the Taliban and install a government under former king Zahir Shah. In June, the US had already warned the Taliban to hand over Bin Laden or face the consequences.

This war, and the entire Bush-Blair campaign against “terrorism” is characterised by arrogance. That arrogance is most evident in Bush’s “dead or alive” statement and his assertion that “you are either with us or with the terrorists”. So without asking the world where it stands or what its options are, Bush has made the decision for us. There is really no need for us to even think about it; *he* has decided: you either shout “Viva America” or you are a terrorist! It is the kind of arrogance that has seen the downfall of dictators all through time. Because, all through time, the arrogant have been opposed by the oppressed. It is the cycle of history.

But we witness, with the arrogance, a strange kind of cynicism. The food drops of the US in Afghanistan reflect some of that cynicism. Aeroplanes are dropping these food parcels from very high up to prevent their being shot down. This means that food parcels are scattered over a large area. This in itself is a problem; it is even more so when one considers that Afghanistan is probably the most ‘landmined’ country in the world, thanks to the Soviet army. In such a situation, trying to get hold of a food parcel could be a death warrant. This is one reason why major aid agencies have criticised the food drops. Apart from their propaganda value, the food drops achieve little else.

In their arrogance and cynicism the US has forgotten the most crucial response to September 11. They have forgotten to ask “Why?” Why did such an attack against the symbols of American economy and military happen? Why is the US so hated that such a heinous act is not only contemplated but actually executed? The Americans seem keen *not* to learn! They should have learned some lesson after Vietnam; they should have learned some lesson after the Gulf Massacre; they should have asked how endearing they have made themselves to people of the Third World. It seems the only thing they are willing to learn is that they are able to attack and massacre foreign populations with impunity; and they will do it repeatedly – with no regard for the consequences.

If Americans were serious about the “why?” question they could easily find the answers. The answers are in the occupation and dispossession in Palestine; in the murder of one million Iraqi children; in the blockade of Cuba; in the carpet bombing of Colombia; in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba; in the terrorist dictatorships

supported by the US government: Saddam Hussain, Manuel Noriega, Mobutu Sese Seko, the Shah of Iran, Suharto, successive apartheid governments in South Africa and Israel... All of these, too, are acts of terrorism. The World Trade Centre slaughter was despicable. We can say it a million times. But on that same day (and every day recently), 35 000 children in the Third World starved to death because of a global capitalist system that comforts the rich and causes misery for the poor and dispossessed. These children do not get minutes of silence, lowering of flags or thousands of action replays on TV.

And now, eight million Afghans are at risk of starving to death by the end of winter. Will the US still not ask “why”? Will they just continue building their new alliance, this alliance that was supposed to promote “Infinite Justice” and is now supposed to promote “Enduring Freedoms”? What kind of enduring freedom does this coalition believe in? It includes Pakistan’s military dictatorship which took power through a coup; Russia, which has massacred thousands of Chechens with impunity; Uzbekistan, which destroys any political opposition; Saudi Arabia which doesn’t understand the meaning of the word “freedom”... And in the US itself, September 11 is being used as an excuse to erode basic civil liberties. These are the people that will establish “enduring freedoms” for the rest of us! It is not a coalition against terrorism; it’s a coalition of hypocrisy! It is worth noting that our own civil liberties are also under threat as the South African government prepares to again table its ridiculous Anti-Terrorism Bill.

Having asked the “why?” question on their behalf, we should also ask what this episode means for us and our responses. We cannot be just if we do not also examine ourselves. The first element that should make us pause is the fact that many Muslims actually expressed some degree of joy at September 11. Indeed, we do not have a monopoly on such feelings; across the Third World there were people who did the same. This is unacceptable. Can we be pleased when 5 000 families have lost loved ones in as brutal a manner as that?

Then there are those of us who have suddenly become pro-Bin Laden and pro-Taliban without necessarily understanding what that means. Muslims must recognise goodness wherever it is and deficiency wherever it is. Ibn Taymiyyah – a great

inspiration for Bin Laden and his followers – said: “Allah will uphold a just state even if it is not Muslim, and Allah will destroy an unjust state even if it is Muslim.” We extend our support to those who deserve it. In this case we extend our unqualified support to the Afghan people who have been victimised for more than two decades. But what about the Taliban? They who have given Islam a bad name; whose intolerance against people of other faiths is legend and whose intolerance against other Muslims is often violent. We need to be wearier in this regard.

Some Muslims in South Africa have responded with a call to jihad. I support that call. Jihad is the only option to end the slaughter in Afghanistan and I regard myself as a mujahid. But why have we bought in to the media misrepresentation of jihad? Where in the Qur’an or Prophetic tradition is jihad translated simply as “holy war”? Jihad is a struggle, a striving. Its purpose is to establish justice and peace. And it has many dimensions. Can we suggest that the Prophet (SAW) was not a mujahid when he wrote inviting rulers to Islam, or when he made treaties with various tribes in order to isolate and neutralise his enemy, or when he worked with Muslims within Makkah to undermine the Quraish, or when he sent poets to rouse people against the Quraish? Can we suggest that the Prophet was a mujahid only when he had a sword in his hand? Can we suggest that the Prophet’s objective was war and not peace?

We need to ask what our task is now, what is our jihad, and what is its purpose? Its purpose is, quite simply, to protect the lives of the ordinary Afghan people who are the real victims of this massacre (and the Iraqi people, the next target?), to – at least – see a return to the level of security they enjoyed two months ago, to allow aid agencies to return so as to prevent large scale starvation.

I do not believe this can be achieved by sending people to Afghanistan to fight; it can most effectively be achieved by developing a cadre of mujahideen for peace and building an international coalition for peace. In this context (and I say this because I am *not* a pacifist; uprising and fighting have their place), promoting war will only lead to increasing the misery of the miserable, starvation of the starving, poverty of the poor. It will result in numerous deaths of innocent people. Only a movement for peace, I believe, can assist in preventing this from happening.

Having asked these questions of those baying for Afghan blood and of ourselves, let me say that the ultimate cause of terrorism – whether it be by individuals or groups or whether it is state terrorism like that visited on Afghanistan today – is that people have removed Allah from their lives, selves and hearts. In this we are all together – western and eastern, Muslim and non-Muslim, north and south, rich and poor. I do not mean that we do not *believe* in God. Nor do I mean that we don't *pray* to Him. To understand what I mean, we should ask, "Who is Allah?", "How do we know Allah?". We know Allah through his attributes. And our ultimate purpose in life – as human beings – is to approach those attributes. We succeed the closer we get to them, we fail the further away we get from them. What are the attributes that we have abandoned? Allah as Mercy, as Compassion, as Justice, as Grace, as The Generous, as The Inspiring, as The Shaper of Beauty, as The Peace, as The Forgiving, as The Light, as The Loving. These attributes are all latent within us. Our task is to ensure that the Light is allowed through so that we approach and attempt to become as He is.

When you see George Bush on TV calling for someone's head, "dead or alive", then you see an absence of these attributes. When you hear someone – Muslim or not – call for the murder of innocent civilians, then you see the absence of these attributes.

In summary, there is no way that we can allow the massacre of innocent Afghan civilians to go on. The terrorism being perpetrated against them requires a strong response, a jihad equal to the task. But the jihad needs to be carefully assessed, and I have argued, the most effective jihad in favour of the Afghan people is the building of an anti-war/pro-peace movement.

I will conclude by quoting Shaikh Tosun Bayrak: "The *wadud* (Allah's attribute which means The Loving) among men is he who loves for others that which he loves for himself. Indeed, he prefers the needs of others to his own. Such a blessed one has said: 'I pray that I be stretched over the whole of hell so that the feet of the sinners do not burn'."