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Afghan Civilians Keep Paying the Price for the So-Called War On Terror



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One of the stated objectives of coalition forces led by the U.S. to invade Afghanistan in 2001 was to overthrow the Taliban from power and help Afghans form a democratic and relatively stable government. The main objective of getting rid of the extremist group – the Taliban, was to defeat terrorism spearheaded by Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda network, blamed for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda was purported to have bases in Afghanistan.

Since the main focus of the coalition forces was eliminating terrorism, it is worthwhile to analyze this objective after this 17-year campaign and find out what progress has been made in achieving this goal. I will talk about civilian casualties – the aim of this article – and its impact on Afghans and the American strategies of winning hearts of minds and defeating terrorism. The importance of talking about civilian casualties is relevant because the campaign to fight terrorism continues to produce significant civilian casualties. Recently the Taliban [attacked](#) Kabul's downtown killing 105 people. Reuters [reported](#) the U.S. military authorities are opening an investigation about a widely circulated video in which an American soldier is firing into a civilian truck in Afghanistan. Afghan civilians are being targeted by its sworn enemy the Taliban. And ironically by its partner, the U.S., who should be helping their government to protect them and defeat the Taliban. It is truly a cath-22 situation for the Afghan people.

The Afghan war is now America's longest in history. It just entered its 17th year. With President Trump's announcement that he will increase the number of American forces in Afghanistan, the war will be protracted for years to come. There seems no end in sight. To help us understand the progress made by the American forces in defeating terror in Afghanistan, the Watson Institute in Brown University has done an exhaustive [study](#) of the campaign and produced a detailed report. According to study, the so-called war on terror has not yielded the desired result of eliminating terrorist threats. When former U.S. President George W Bush launched the "War on Terror" to much fanfare and cheers, the target country was only Afghanistan. Now, after 17 years of war in Afghanistan, the conflict has expanded. In fact, it has spread to 76 more countries touching 39 percent of this planet.

In Afghanistan, the so-called war on terror has wreaked havoc. It has turned the entire country into a battle field where killings, explosions, and bombardments have become the norm. Air [strikes](#) are ramping up without any end, causing painful collateral damage in the process. Despite America's 17-year campaign, the Taliban has gained more territory in Afghanistan. Now, about [43](#) percent of the country's districts are either under Taliban control or being contested by the group. Overall, the Taliban threaten [70 percent](#) of Afghanistan. Very sadly, ISIS – while defeated in Syria and Iraq, is spreading fast in the [eastern](#) part of Afghanistan. This brutal terror group is a serious danger to the safety of religious minorities in Afghanistan who adhere to the Shiite sect of Islam. The group has already proved its cowardice and brutality by targeting Shiite places of worship, and by killing large numbers of Shiite Muslims. The group is a threat to the stability, religious

tolerance and social fabric of the country. Up till now, except warnings about the group and its intentions from security officials, we have not seen any clear or effective strategy from the government in combating it. What is more worrisome is the mushrooming of more terror groups in the region. According to a latest [report](#) from the Pentagon there are “more than 20 terrorist or insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” These outfits will surely further push both Afghanistan and Pakistan toward instability and chaos.

The so-called war on terror has been detrimental for the U.S. too. It is extremely [costly](#) with a staggering price tag of \$ 5.6 trillion. The cost has fiscally strained American tax payers and has contributed to a federal [debt](#) that has reached \$ 20 trillion. This cost is increasingly unsustainable at a time when American infrastructure is crumbling and in a desperate need of renovation, inequality is on the [rise](#), and with student loan debt crossing one trillion dollars. Health insurance premiums are going up, putting the health of many Americans in danger. Incomes are stagnating and every fiscal year there is a budget deficit. In the light of these developments, the price tag for the so-called war on terror seems illogical and wasteful. The money spent on the failed war on terror could have been used to improve the standard of living of Americans by taking care of their education, health and job security. Militarily, the war has been costly as well. Those soldiers who return from battle-fields are experiencing mental and psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This mental health condition, which is triggered by the horrifying experiences of war, has become a huge challenge for the families of the veterans with PTSD and for the Veteran Administration (VA). The VA is in disarray. Its bureaucracy is [ineffective](#) and is ranked the least attractive place to work in the federal government. The VA not only has to cope with the flood of patients who seek treatment and sometimes die because of long waits, but also with 20 suicides per day among veterans.

The Tragedy of Civilian Casualties

For Afghans one of the drawbacks of the so-called war on terror has been the significant rate of civilian casualties. This tragedy cost former Afghan President Hamid Karzai his relationship with the Americans. The issue put Karzai in confrontation with American/NATO military operations. American/NATO forces were claiming they were targeting militants and terrorists hiding among civilians. But collateral damage was unavoidable. Karzai has countered U.S. anti-terror claims by pointing out that terrorists are not hiding among Afghan civilians. Terror is coming from beyond Afghanistan’s borders. Countering American Islamophobic stereotypes, he famously declared that anyone

wearing beard and turban was not automatically a terrorist. Civilian casualties also dented Karzai's image as he was seen as soft and compromising before American/NATO forces. Afghans thought he was not as tough as he should be in addressing the issue of civilian casualties. Undoubtedly, it has also made Afghans quite angry and frustrated. How long are they supposed to pay the price of the so-called war on terror? And the price has become extremely costly. Last year alone there was a 50 percent rise in civilian casualties from American air strikes compared with same period in 2016. According to a U.N. investigation, in 2017, at least 205 civilians were killed and 261 wounded by air strikes. Afghan air forces were also involved in the strikes. Terrorist groups such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and ISIS have targeted Afghans. Their objective is to spread terror and kill. But coalition forces are supposed to target terror groups and protect civilians. Instead the coalition forces kill Afghans too. This dichotomy is incomprehensible for Afghans. The label of a war on terror does not represent the reality on the ground. This unjust killing does not help win the hearts and minds of Afghans. They need protection and support, particularly intelligence support. They want their country to be free of proxy war, regional competitions, and warfare. They need political support to fight terrorism, which stems from outside of Afghanistan.

By skimming through the 17-year-old "war on terror" in Afghanistan, any observer can easily conclude that the strategy was defective. It has not achieved its stated objective. On the contrary, the objective has become blurred. After all these years, any critical observer will pose this question: what is the war in Afghanistan all about? If the strategy was achievable, and with all the resources at the United States' disposal, the stated objective of dismantling terrorism should have been achieved by now. But terrorism has not declined. It has become more deadly, leading to more casualties and destroying more lives. The U.S. military strategy of pacifying the Taliban and eliminating terrorism has not worked. It has killed more civilians than terrorists.

The only way to solve the menace of terror in Afghanistan is to look for a political solution. Terrorism is a tactic used by terror groups to achieve their political objectives. So, one needs to address the basic cause of the tactic, identify the causes driving terrorist violence, understand them and come up with more effective solutions. Political will, strong resolve, and honesty are needed to succeed. Sadly, these factors are missing from the onset from the so-called war on terror.

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