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## The Phases of War: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Israel

By Phyllis Bennis

It certainly doesn't look much like what we're seeing in Afghanistan today. A feckless, corrupt, incompetent government kept alive and in place (we can't really say "in power" since its reach doesn't extend much beyond Kabul) by billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars and tens of thousands of U.S. and allied troops. Escalating, not diminishing violence against civilians. More frequent and more deadly incidents involving U.S. troops out of control, from burning Qurans to urinating on the bodies of dead Afghans, to the most recent war crime, the murder of 17 civilians including 9 children in Kandahar.

No surprise that the number of Afghan soldiers turning their guns on their U.S. and NATO "trainers" is rising too. Fox News is reporting that "U.S. troops in Afghanistan now have far-reaching new protections against rogue killers among their Afghan allies, including assigned 'guardian angels,' fellow troops who will watch over them as they sleep... In several Afghan ministries, Americans are now allowed to carry weapons. And they have been instructed to rearrange their office desks there to face the door, so they can see who is coming in, said the official." To paraphrase my colleague Steve Burns at the Wisconsin Network for Peace & Justice, is this changing deck chairs on the Titanic or what?

### The phases of war

I was at a conference a couple of days ago with the great antiwar military scholar Andrew Bacevich. He described wars like that in Afghanistan coming in phases – Chapter 1 is liberation – or in this case domination, since liberation lost. Chapter 2 is counter-insurgency, and that one didn't do so well either. Chapter 3, he said, has moved to targeted assassinations, the drone war

and beyond (actually WAY beyond Afghanistan...). Bacevich also reminded us that wars don't end when one side proclaims victory – they end when the defeated admit that they lost. That reality speaks volumes to the current U.S. interest in negotiating an end to the war with the Taliban – and what face-saving in Washington might have to do with it.

The killing of U.S. troops by their ostensible allies in the Afghan military now make up 20 percent of all the U.S. combat deaths this year. Somehow, though, we never hear that the Afghan soldier who turns his gun on a U.S. soldier has "snapped" – that maybe he has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that maybe he was so enraged because he saw his baby daughter killed in a drone strike the night before and he lost control. No, we only hear that "the Taliban must have infiltrated" the Afghan army or police. PTSD is apparently only for trained soldiers on our side. Except that in a 2009 UN-backed survey, the Afghan government's own Ministry of Health estimated that 66 percent – a full two-thirds – of the Afghan population, suffers from a variety of mental illnesses, most of them stress-related and including PTSD.

There's a great deal of talk about Sgt. Robert Bales, the apparent gunman in the villages in Kandahar, and whether he had PTSD or other impairments. And we're right to be concerned about the still-inadequate care U.S. veterans get when they come home – soldiers can be simultaneously victim and war criminal. (Iraq Veterans Against the War have mobilized their [Operation Recovery](#) campaign to defend soldiers' right to heal before being redeployed – a campaign that also denies the Pentagon access to these young instruments of battle for illegal wars.) But we shouldn't forget that those 2/3 of Afghans – something like 20 million people – face PTSD or other mental disorders with only FORTY-TWO psychiatrists and psychologists in the entire country. I talked about this reality on NPR's [The Diane Rehm Show](#) last week, as well as the potential consequences for U.S. policy and decisions about ending the U.S. war in Afghanistan. You can follow the link if you want to [listen or read the transcript](#). (And it would be great if you comment too...)

## **War crimes and the public**

That most recent massive U.S. war crime in Afghanistan, the murder of 17 in Balandi and Alkozai villages in Kandahar, may have been part of the reason for the continuing rise in public opposition to the war. On March 26 the *New York Times* reported that 69 percent of people in the U.S. think we should not be at war in Afghanistan – that's 16 percent higher than just four months ago. That's huge.

We know how difficult it's been over these years to change public opinion about Afghanistan. When the U.S. began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, 88 percent of Americans supported it. It was the "good war." President Obama said Iraq was the "dumb" war – but within weeks of his inauguration he sent 22,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, before even beginning high-level discussions about what the future of that war should be. Then of course he ordered a 30,000 troop surge later that year. So 69 percent opposition is huge.

The question now is how to turn that shift of public opinion into a shift in public policy. We know from Iraq how hard that is. Opposition to the war in Iraq was up in the 69 percent area years ago – and yet only now we're seeing a more-or-less end to most of the direct U.S. military

role in Iraq. (Not entirely ended, of course, but still certainly a victory for antiwar forces here at home, in Iraq, and around the world.)

### **Iraq war – Nine years on and almost ending**

Last week was the 9th anniversary of that war. And looking back, it's clearer than ever that the U.S. failed to achieve any of its goals. I don't mean the lying goals, the fake goals, of finding weapons of mass destruction or bringing democracy to Iraq. I mean the real goals, the ones that kept hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops and hundreds of thousands of Pentagon-paid mercenaries in Iraq for so many years:

- Consolidating U.S. control over Iraqi oil – nope, U.S. oil companies are just some among many of the myriad of foreign interests in Iraq's oil fields.
- Leaving behind a pro-U.S. government in Baghdad – hardly, Prime Minister Maliki is barely on speaking terms with anyone in Washington.
- Permanent access to U.S. bases across Iraq – not even close, every one of the several hundred bases was either closed down or turned over to the Iraqi government; even the giant 5,000-person embassy, biggest in the world, had to be scaled back when Iraq refused to guarantee immunity to enough U.S. troops to protect it.
- Creating a government and military more accountable to the U.S. than to Iran – oops, seems we got that one wrong too; despite continuing billions of dollars of our tax money to prop it up, Baghdad today is allied more closely to Iran than to the U.S.

So the U.S. lost in Iraq too. Iraq hasn't been "liberated" – violence is rampant, the sectarian violence resulting from early U.S. policies after the 2003 invasion continues to escalate. And U.S.-paid contractors (paid by the State Dept this round, instead of the Pentagon, that's the technical difference) are still there. Thousands of them. What's not there, so far, is one dollar for reparations or compensation. That's the battle that lies ahead. The U.S. war in Iraq may be over, but our responsibilities are not.

The Washington Peace Center hosted a wonderful commemoration of the anniversary on the night of March 19, with veterans of both the war and the antiwar battles telling stories, talking about how the war itself and the antiwar mobilizations that tried to stop the war affected them. Here's the [link to video](#) of the event. Andy Shallal and I talked about what we face today, Andy focusing on the continuing crisis affecting ordinary Iraqis, I talked about why I think the end of the war, uneven and ragged as it remains, really is a victory for our global movement, and what's different between the Iraq war and the looming threat of a new war in Iran.

### **Iran: New war looming?**

That threat isn't over. The big difference this time around is that people in power – in the White House, in the Pentagon, in all of the U.S. intelligence agencies, even most of the security and intelligence people in Israel – all agree that

- 1) Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon;
- 2) Iran is not building a nuclear weapon;

- 3) Iran hasn't even made the decision of whether or not to build a weapon in the future.

And yet. The risk of a war "against Iranian nuclear weapons" continues to rise.

### **This time, it's all about Israel**

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu continues to ratchet up the rhetoric and the threats against Iran – knowing that in an election year, the likelihood of a U.S. president or Congress refusing to back/support/participate in an Israeli military strike, regardless of how dangerous, is virtually non-existent. What does Israel get out of it? (Hint: it's not safety from some "existential" threat). Israel gets to preserve its nuclear weapons monopoly in the Middle East – losing that monopoly is the real danger Israeli officials worry about. That's why the call for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East is so important – to make sure no one in the region has a nuclear weapon. That certainly includes Iran, which doesn't have one and isn't trying to build one. And it would include Israel, whose uninspected and unacknowledged arsenal of 200-400 high density nuclear bombs remains the biggest cause of arms racing in this arms-glutted part of the world.

It's also true that Netanyahu desperately wants a different president in the White House next year. Despite Obama's actual history of giving Israel more military aid, greater protection in the UN, tighter military ties, and fewer consequences for expanding settlements than almost any other president, Netanyahu knows that any Republican in the White House would represent an even greater gift to Tel Aviv. And only Israel and AIPAC, the most powerful part of the pro-Israel lobbies that now represent the most right-wing extremist elements of Israeli politics, stand to benefit.

And oh by the way. Does anyone really think that as long as Israel can play the "we face an existential danger" card, anyone in Washington is likely to even consider putting serious pressure on Tel Aviv to end its occupation and apartheid policies towards Palestinians? Let's see hands...

I've been talking about that a lot lately, including at the Occupy AIPAC teach-in that paralleled AIPAC's annual convention. My piece in Salon.com was called "[Obama Goes to AIPAC: A Scorecard](#)." My assessment is that despite President Obama's and assorted congressmembers' craven speeches and obeisance to AIPAC, Netanyahu left Washington without achieving his biggest goal: a clear U.S. commitment to support war in Iran. So far, rationality has won out; the danger is, today's rationality may be trounced by tomorrow's extremism running amok. I talked about the Obama-Netanyahu dangers on [The Real News](#) – it's a scary story.

### **Who does not want war with Iran?**

One of the most useful tools in mobilizing opposition to war in Iran comes from the statements of top U.S. and Israeli officials themselves:

- Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta [asked and answered](#) his own Iran question: "Are they trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No."
- Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, Jr. [admitted the U.S. does not even know](#) "if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons."

- The latest 2011 National Intelligence Estimate makes clear [there is no new evidence](#) to challenge the 2007 conclusions; Iran still does not have a nuclear weapons program in operation.
- According to [the Independent](#), "almost the entire senior hierarchy of Israel's military and security establishment is worried about a premature attack on Iran and apprehensive about the possible repercussions."

Dangers continue. Syria remains catastrophic – I talked with [Voice of America](#) about how dangerous it would be to repeat a Libya-style U.S.-NATO campaign to arm the opposition and further militarize the situation. That doesn't look likely right now, but the resistance movement in Syria still faces huge challenges, made even more difficult by militarization.