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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## Obama's Afghan Trap

By **Amy Goodman**

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President Barack Obama on Monday night held his first prime-time news conference. When questioned on Afghanistan, he replied, "This is going to be a big challenge." He also was asked whether he would change the Pentagon policy banning the filming and photographing of the flag-draped coffins of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said he was reviewing it. The journalist who asked the question pointed out that it was Joe Biden several years ago who accused the Bush administration of suppressing the images to avoid public furor over the deaths of U.S. service members. Now Vice President Joe Biden predicts that a surge in U.S. troops in Afghanistan will mean more U.S. casualties: "I hate to say it, but yes, I think there will be. There will be an uptick."

Meanwhile, the Associated Press recently cited a classified report drafted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommending a shift in strategy from democracy-building in Afghanistan to attacking alleged Taliban and al-Qaida strongholds along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

And the campaign has clearly begun. Days after his inauguration, Obama's first (known) military actions were two missile strikes inside Pakistan's frontier province, reportedly killing 22 people, including women and children.

Cherif Bassiouni has spent years going back and forth to Afghanistan. He is a professor of law at DePaul University and the former United Nations human rights investigator in Afghanistan. In 2005, he was forced out of the United Nations under pressure from the

Bush administration, days after he released a report accusing the U.S. military and private contractors of committing human rights abuses. I asked Bassiouni about Obama's approach to Afghanistan. He told me: "There is no military solution in Afghanistan. There is an economic-development solution, but I don't see that coming. ... Right now, the population has nothing to gain by supporting the U.S. and NATO. It has everything to gain by being supportive of the Taliban."

**Bassiouni's scathing 2005 U.N. report accused the U.S. military and private military contractors of "forced entry into homes, arrest and detention of nationals and foreigners without legal authority or judicial review, sometimes for extended periods of time, forced nudity, hooding and sensory deprivation, sleep and food deprivation, forced squatting and standing for long periods of time in stress positions, sexual abuse, beatings, torture, and use of force resulting in death."**

I also put the question of the military surge to former President Jimmy Carter. He responded: "I would disagree with Obama as far as a surge that would lead to a more intense bombing of Afghan villages and centers and a heavy dependence on military. I would like to see us reach out more, to be accommodating, and negotiate with all of the factions in Afghanistan."

Carter should know. He helped create what his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, called "the Afghan trap," set for the Soviets. This was done by supporting Islamic mujahedeen in the late 1970s against the Soviets in Afghanistan, thereby creating what evolved into the Taliban. Brzezinski told the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?" More than 14,000 Soviet troops were killed, and the Afghan toll exceeded 1 million. Osama bin Laden got his start with the help of the CIA-funded Afghan operation.

Bassiouni suggests that a military solution is doomed to failure, noting that the Taliban "realized they could not defeat the American forces, so they went underground. They put their Kalashnikovs under the mattresses, and they waited. A year ago, they resurfaced again. They can do the same thing. They can go back in the mountains, push the Kalashnikovs under the mattress, wait out five years. They have been doing that since the 1800s with any foreign and every foreign invader."

As Carter told me, "To offer a hand of friendship or accommodation, not only to the warlords but even to those radicals in the Taliban who are willing to negotiate, would be the best approach, than to rely exclusively on major military force."

Have we learned nothing from Iraq? "When it comes to the war in Iraq, the time for promises and assurances, for waiting and patience is over. Too many lives have been

lost and too many billions have been spent for us to trust the president on another tried-and-failed policy.” That was Sen. Barack Obama in January 2007. With his Joint Chiefs now apparently gunning for more fighting and less talk in Afghanistan, President Obama needs to be reminded of his own words.