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www.afgazad.com

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After bin Laden: Why Afghan war was flawed response to 9/11

By Kate Hudson

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In the sorrow and chaos which followed the criminal attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, voices of sanity were there to be heard. The most profound and eloquent of these were from some of those most humanly and directly affected -- those who had lost their loved ones on 9/11.

Just weeks after the attacks, some of these formed a group called [Families for Peaceful Tomorrows](#), rejecting the idea that their grief should be "a cry for war" (as one of their banners put it) and expressing the view that security cannot be built on violence and revenge.

The recent killing of Osama bin Laden by intelligence-led U.S. special forces in Pakistan gives cause to reconsider the views of those families. When asked what alternative they proposed, instead of an attack on Afghanistan, one option was clearly outlined: that the criminal attacks should be treated as such; that a criminal investigation should be undertaken, using police work and intelligence, and that the perpetrators should be apprehended and brought to trial.

I well remember similar arguments put against a war on Afghanistan in Britain at the time: that to wage war against a whole nation for the crimes of a few was not only wrong but illegal under

international law: collective punishment of a people is outlawed. Even assuming bin Laden was guilty and was hiding in Afghanistan -- and even if the Taliban government harbored him and his al Qaeda network -- that would not make it right or legal to bomb innocent civilians.

Many people in Britain and around the world shared the same view: if a murderer hides in a block of flats, you don't blow up the block of flats. You take all necessary steps to capture the murderer and bring him or her to trial. Yet George W. Bush was hell-bent on war against Afghanistan and the people of that tragically abused country have paid a heavy price for his utterly misplaced retribution.

Of course the irony now is that bin Laden was indeed located through the means recommended by Families for Peaceful Tomorrows and not through war. But unfortunately the U.S. administration has not seen fit to take the next step and bring bin Laden to trial for his crimes. Instead they chose summary execution of an unarmed man, not even able to claim that killing was necessary to prevent his escape. President George W. Bush had promised that bin Laden would be taken "dead or alive," and so he was. But one is left with the question, why dead -- why not tried?

Terror rather than a systematic attempt to hunt down the criminals, Bush gave the U.S. carte To answer that, perhaps one has to look at the wider context. In launching the so-called War on blanche to pursue specific foreign policy goals, primarily -- but not confined to -- the continuation of its post-second world war aims to dominate the Middle East and environs for strategic and resource reasons.

So far this War on Terror -- to which no limits were ever drawn -- has included not only the war on Afghanistan, but also the illegal invasion of Iraq, which had no links with al Qaeda and nil sympathy for Islamic fundamentalism. That war was undertaken without the support of the U.N., on trumped up charges of possession of weapons of mass destruction while the invading forces actually pursued regime change. It has included the embrace and promotion of foreign policy based on the torture and humiliation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere and the imprisonment -- continuing in many cases -- of hundreds without trial in Guantanamo.

When one considers the scale of the human tragedy -- the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, of many thousands of military personnel too, of injuries, trauma and amputations, of brutality and rape, of displacement and dislocation, of education and progress foregone, and thus the sorrow and catastrophe afflicting the lives of millions -- it is impossible to see how such a war can be justified.

By any reckoning the costs are enormous. According to the report "Cost of Major U.S. Wars" by the Congressional Research Service in July 2010, the [U.S. has spent an estimated \\$1.15 trillion on wars](#) since the 9/11 terror attacks. For [the UK the cost is £20 billion \(\\$32.7 billion\)](#), according to UK government figures from 2010. At a time of massive government spending cuts in the UK, this is not a popular expenditure.

And what of the reality of life in Afghanistan now? Violence and instability are increasing not diminishing. As [reporter Anand Gopal told The Guardian last week](#): "The US is really a fundamental force for instability in Afghanistan, allying with local actors - warlords, commanders, government officials - who've really been creating a nightmare for Afghans, especially in the countryside, [and with] the night raids, breaking into people's homes, airstrikes, just the daily life under occupation."

Respected international agency Oxfam has pointed out: "Several years since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest and least-developed nations in the world." [Average life expectancy is just 43](#), the agency says, and one in five children dies before their fifth birthday.

The supposed target of the war lies dead with a bullet in his head at the bottom of the sea but the "war" will continue, as [Hillary Clinton made abundantly clear](#) hours after the death of bin Laden: "The fight continues and we will never waiver."

In a sense, bin Laden -- the monster creation of the United States through massive CIA funding of the Mujahedeen in its intervention against Soviet forces in Afghanistan -- has been the perfect enemy for those in the U.S. leadership who have cynically used the terrible events of 9/11 to advance their own political agenda. They have manipulated the serious threat posed by terrorist groups to serve their own political and strategic goals, rather than addressing the fundamental injustices and sense of grievance in that region which have led to the desire to indiscriminately kill to seek redress.

Chalmers Johnson, an academic and consultant for the CIA from 1967 to 1973, was right when he spoke of "blowback" and the unexpected consequences of U.S. actions. The failure to recognize that decades of western intervention and plunder have resulted in a desperate and asymmetrical fight-back is not only a sanctimonious head-in-the-sand approach, but one that if not rectified, will lead to further tragedies.

There is no real alternative to a settlement for Afghanistan, and the region, based on justice and equality in international relations and the control of each country's natural resources by its sovereign government, free from outside intervention. Such a realization, and such a settlement, will have to come eventually. Every day it is delayed only adds to the senseless loss of blood and treasure.