

## **Don't Bomb Afghanistan**

By Stephen Zunes

It appears that the United States is preparing for a major military strike against Afghanistan. There is no question that the United States needs to respond forcefully to bring the perpetrators of last week's terrorist attack to justice and to prevent future attacks. A large-scale military action against that country, however, would be a big mistake.

We are not fighting a government with clear fixed targets, such as command and control centers, intelligence headquarters, or major military complexes. A loose network of terrorist cells does not have the kind of tangible assets that can be seriously crippled by military strikes.

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan has given Bin Laden and his supporters sanctuary, but this is not a typical case of state-backed terrorism. As a result of Bin Laden's personal fortune and elaborate international network, he does not need and apparently has not received direct financial or logistical support from the Afghan government. Destroying government resources in Afghanistan, therefore, will not in any way cripple Bin Laden and his cohorts.

The Afghan people are the first and primary victims of the Taliban, perhaps the most totalitarian regime on Earth. It would be a tragedy to victimize them still further through a large-scale military operation that would almost certainly lead to widespread civilian casualties. The Taliban's lack of concern for their own people is already evident—as is the Afghan people's hatred for but inability to challenge this reactionary theocracy.

Mass military action would not only fail to change their policy but it would punish the wrong people, who have already suffered through a 23-year nightmare Communist dicta-

torship, foreign invasion, civil war, competing war lords, and fundamentalist rule. Indeed, attempting to destroy the country's infrastructure would do little good. It has already been done.

Should the U.S. bomb Kabul or other Afghan cities, Taliban leaders would likely escape harm in their bunkers or in remote mountain outposts. The deaths of civilians would likely strengthen support for the regime and even for Bin Laden himself, as people under attack tend to rally around their flag.

A ground invasion, as the Soviets learned all too well in the 1980s, would put the U.S. in an unwinnable counter-insurgency war in a hostile terrain against a people with a long history of resisting outsiders. In addition, large-scale military strikes would put America in violation of international law, since the use of military force is legitimate only for self-defense, not for retaliation.

A limited attack against suspected terrorists— involving small commando units, Special Forces, SWAT team-style operations—could bring those responsible to justice and break up the terrorist cells that could commit attacks in the future, yet not create the backlash a more blunt use of force would create.

To fight international terrorism requires international cooperation. The U.S. needs the active support of Muslim countries to track down and break up Bin Laden's terrorist cells, which exist well beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Precipitous military action could threaten the unity needed to deal with this very real threat. A large-scale military response would distract world attention away from the crimes of this past Tuesday where it belongs and onto the

appropriateness or inappropriateness of the American attack.

There is an enormous irony if the U.S. goes to war against the Taliban government of Afghanistan, given that the U.S. played a major role in bringing these Islamic extremists to power. Indeed, the Central Intelligence Agency trained Bin Laden and many of his followers in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s. One of the reasons

that he has such a far-flung multinational network is that the CIA actively recruited radical Muslims from throughout Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa to join the Afghan mujahadin in their fight against Soviet forces and their puppet regime in Kabul.

If there is any logic to the terrorists' madness, it is to have the U.S. overreact and turn large segments of the Islamic world against the West. To

launch a major military operation against Afghanistan would play right into Osama bin Laden's hands.

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