

In Afghanistan, U.S. Replaces One Terrorist State with Another

By Sonali Kolhatkar | October 3, 2003

“If you harbor a terrorist, if you support a terrorist, if you feed a terrorist, you’re just as guilty as the terrorists. And the Taliban found out what we meant,” U.S. President George W. Bush told military personnel in Fort Stewart, Ga., on Sept. 12.

But now all Afghans have found out what it means, as U.S.-backed warlords keep alive the Taliban’s legacy: Two years after the start of U.S. bombing to topple the Taliban, the United States is replacing the former terrorist state with yet another of its own design.

Less than a year away from planned elections in Afghanistan, UN Rapporteur Miloon Kothari accused U.S.-backed Afghan warlords of demolishing homes and grabbing land. Kothari named Afghan Defense Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Education Minister Younis Qanooni as offenders, calling for their removal from office this Sept. 13. In a quick backpedal, however, the head of the UN in Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, said a day later that Kothari had gone too far in naming ministers.¹

U.S.-Backed Warlords Keep Alive Taliban’s Legacy

Still, Kothari’s accusation confirms what human rights and political organizations have been repeating for months. The Afghan Human Rights Commission, established by U.S.-backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai this June, also corroborates the demolishing, calling it a “clear abuse of human rights.” The BBC correspondent to Afghanistan said the accusation of bulldozing homes “has hit a nerve among Afghans, tens of thousands of whom are homeless after more than two decades of war. Many have just returned from refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran to find their homes occupied by commanders and their cronies.”²

But who are Qasim Fahim, Younis Qanooni, and the various other men, distinguished by the title of warlords? Many were commanders in the Northern Alliance opposition to the Taliban. Fahim and Qanooni are both successors to Ahmed Shah Masood, the charismatic warlord hailed by many as the probable future leader of Afghanistan in a post-Taliban nation, had he lived. Masood was the most powerful figure in the Mujahedeen party Jamiat-i Islami and was involved in the indiscriminate killing of thou-

sands of civilians during the civil war of 1992-1996. For example, according to the U.S. State Department’s 1996 report on human rights practices in 1995, “Masood’s troops went on a rampage, systematically looting whole streets and raping women” after the capture of Kabul’s predominantly Hazara neighborhood of Karte Seh.

The cooperation of warlords such as Fahim and Qanooni was central to U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom and in fact they were paid off by the United States and Britain in return for supporting Karzai and fighting against the Taliban. In July 2002, the UK Observer “learnt that ‘bin bags’ full of U.S. dollars have been flown into Afghanistan, sometimes on RAF planes, to be given to key regional power brokers who could cause trouble for Prime Minister Hamid Karzai’s administration. Paying the warlords for their services has triggered clashes among groups eager to win patronage from the United States. In some areas commanders have been told they will receive a top-of-the-range \$40,000 pick-up truck—a local status symbol—if they can prove they have killed Taliban or al Qaeda elements.”³

In addition to monetary and other bribes, former Northern Alliance commanders were rewarded with high positions in the Afghan government. Fahim and Qanooni won their posts as ministers of Defense and Education in the summer 2002 loya jirga council to select a transitional government, where U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad played a central role to ensure that Karzai and the Northern Alliance remained in power.⁴ But no sooner had the Taliban been defeated than Fahim’s men were busy looting cash and other equipment sent to the central interim government.⁵ Fahim has also been keeping the Taliban’s legacy alive. According to Human Rights Watch, in December 2002, troops loyal to Gen. Fahim, “have been enforcing Taliban-era ‘moral’ restrictions” such as “forbidding families from playing music at weddings and dancing, and in some cases arresting and beating musicians.”

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

Clearly the cooperation of these warlords has come at a price that the Afghan people are bearing. According to Brad Adams, executive director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, “Human rights abuses in Afghanistan are being committed by gunmen and warlords who were propelled into power by the United States and its coalition partners after the Taliban fell in 2001.”⁶

Afghans Suffering from Government Abuses

Loya jirga citizen delegate Omar Zakhilwal, in a *Washington Post* opinion piece on the naming of Karzai as president and the doling out of top posts to Northern Alliance commanders, asked the following question: “Will the new government be dominated by the same warlords and factional politics responsible for two decades of violence and impunity, or can we break with this legacy and begin to establish a system of law and professional governance?”

Unfortunately the answer to Zakhilwal’s question is the former scenario of domination by warlords in the government, assisted by U.S. policies. The expansion of the multilateral International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) outside the capital Kabul, which could have reduced the power of the warlords, has been stymied by the United States for over a year, despite warnings from the international community, nongovernmental organizations, ordinary Afghans, and even Karzai. The mounting insecurity in the countryside has left ordinary Afghans still desperate for relief, not simply from Taliban remnants and lack of resources, but primarily from members of a government foisted upon them by their so-called “liberators.”

A report released in July by Human Rights Watch entitled “Killing You is a Very Easy Thing for Us,” details the abuses of Afghan civilians at the hands of the U.S.-backed warlord-ministers. “The testimony of victims and witnesses implicates soldiers and police under the command of many high-level military and political officials in Afghanistan. These include Mohammad Qasim Fahim, the minister of Defense; Hazrat Ali, the military leader of the Eastern Region; Younis Qanooni, the minister of Education; Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former president of Afghanistan; and Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful former mujahedeen leader to whom many of the officials involved in the documented abuses in Kabul city and province remain loyal.”

The most vulnerable members of Afghan society have felt little relief since the toppling of the Taliban in 2001. Two million refugees have returned to Afghanistan, encouraged by the UNHCR (United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees) and their countries of residence. In some cases refugees were coerced to return.⁷ For most, the return home has been met with disappointment due to poverty, joblessness, and lack of housing. Afghan women and girls, while enjoying a certain measure of freedom since the Taliban’s reign ended, still feel threatened. HRW interviewed hundreds of women and girls and discovered that “on many occasions when Human Rights Watch asked women and girls if they were, in fact, studying, working, and going out without burqas, many said that they were not. This was especially true in rural areas. Most said this was because armed men have been targeting women and girls. Men and women told Human Rights Watch that women and older girls could not go out alone and that when they did go out they had to wear a burqa for fear of harassment or violence, regardless of whether they would otherwise choose to wear it. And in Jalalabad and Laghman, certain government officials have threatened to beat or kill women who do not wear it.”

Additional abuses of Afghan civilians include arbitrary arrests; torture; kidnapping; rape; armed robbery; home invasions; extortion of shop keepers, taxi drivers, truck and bus drivers; beatings; illegal seizure, and land occupation. There have also been political threats and arrests, press restrictions, and other violations of democratic and human rights. HRW summarizes,

“Although many observers have noted the harmful effects of chronic insecurity in Afghanistan, few have sufficiently appreciated the extent to which continuing insecurity, at its heart, is due to policies and depredations of local government actors. Human Rights Watch found evidence of government involvement or complicity in abuses in virtually every district in the southeast, ... [but] serious human rights violations of the kind detailed in this report are not confined to the southeast—they are taking place throughout Afghanistan... . Many prominent Afghan commanders, officials, and former mujahedeen leaders, including officials in the Afghan Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and the intelligence agency, the Amniat-e Melli, are responsible for or are implicated in many of the abuses... .”⁸

On the second anniversary of the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan this October 7, the status of the first target in the War on Terror is nothing for Bush and friends to write home about. To date, none of the warlords has ever been held accountable for terrorizing the Afghan population. They have instead been rewarded by the United States with high-level positions in the government. Bush, in his address to U.S. military personnel in Fort Stewart, Ga., on

Sept. 12, said: "In Afghanistan, America and our broad coalition acted against a regime that harbored al Qaeda and ruled by terror. . . . Thanks to our men and women in uniform, Afghanistan is no longer a haven for terror." But far from liberating the Afghan people, the United States has clearly ensured that terror remains alive in Afghanistan. Washington has empowered Karzai, a Pashtun leader representative of the demographics of the largest ethnic majority, and crippled him by simultaneously empowering warlords with ugly human rights records. These warlords have predictably returned to old practices with impunity.

Afghans Warned of Warlord Abuses

"We were happy after the collapse of the Taliban. . . . We thought there would be peace and stability. But nothing has changed. . . . [Afghan warlords] fight among themselves for their own goals. Their victims are innocent people. We are very angry," said 25-year-old Tajik Rasood, who was shot one year ago in the cross fire of resumed infighting between warlords.⁹

In its statement in November 2001, soon after the fall of the Taliban, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) said, "The world should understand that the Northern Alliance is composed of some bands who did show their real criminal and inhuman nature when they were ruling Afghanistan from 1992 to 1996. . . . The NA will horribly intensify the ethnic and religious conflicts and will never refrain to fan the fire of another brutal and endless civil war in order to retain power."¹⁰ Clearly, as Human Rights Watch and other organizations prove, RAWA's prediction has come true.

Only a few days before RAWA issued its statement, the U.S. Department of State released a fact sheet on the "Taliban's Betrayal of the Afghan People."¹¹ In it were listed in detail the crimes committed by the Taliban, and RAWA's documentation of Taliban crimes was cited, including its vast online database of photos, videos, and testimonies. Strangely, while the State Department found RAWA's documentation of Taliban crimes credible enough to cite, it has not made a single mention of RAWA's extensive documentation of the crimes of Northern Alliance warlords, such as Qanooni, Fahim, Masood, and others.

RAWA's position is bolstered by voices from among the Afghan public. A survey conducted by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) in May 2002 found that many Afghans "expressed concern that the UN had sanctioned the return to power of brutal and corrupt war-

lords, both in Kabul and at the local level. They insisted that without an international force to maintain peace, disarm warlords, oversee the transition to a more representative government, and establish mechanisms for human rights accountability, Afghanistan was likely to slide into renewed war once the world's attention shifted to the next global crisis."¹² That crisis came in the form of the war on Iraq and today Afghans' worst fears have been realized.

Afghanistan's Future Appears Doomed

Afghanistan was a test case for the U.S. war in Iraq, hailed as a success story by Bush, U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and other U.S. warlords. But clearly the lessons learned have not been how best to stabilize a country to pave the way for democracy, rather on how best to create havoc through purposeful negligence and criminal government actors with the prime losers being ordinary, war-weary civilians. In the CESR survey, only 20% of Afghans thought that Afghan authorities, either central or local, should be primarily responsible for reconstruction efforts to ensure human rights. "These results reflect deep distrust of government authorities but also high hopes that the international community will follow through on public commitments to assist Afghanistan."¹³

Unfortunately the high hopes of the Afghan people have been dashed. In a Tokyo meeting in early 2002, donor countries pledged \$4.5 billion in aid to Afghanistan over 2.5 years. This translated into \$40 to \$80 per capita, and is a pittance compared with the \$200 to \$300 per capita pledged to victims of conflict in the Balkans, Occupied Palestine, and East Timor. In fact, the World Bank and UN have estimated the war-ravaged country's reconstruction needs at between \$13 billion and \$19 billion. Additionally, much of the original \$4.5 billion from the pledges made in Tokyo has not come through, with donors citing security concerns, hampered of course by U.S. refusal to expand the ISAF. Recently, in response to growing criticism, the Bush administration pledged \$1.2 billion to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Contrast this number with the \$11 billion allocated for the military operation in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Aside from reconstruction and other serious physical needs, an Afghan dream of peace and democracy remains unattainable, clashing with the interests of the world's only super-power-empire. Efforts to draft a new constitution and preparations for elections in 2004 will be seriously deterred in the current climate of fear generated by U.S.-backed Afghan warlords—unless there is an immediate disarmament or intervention by the international com-

munity. Already Karzai has postponed the approval of a new Afghan constitution by two months, and the current draft has not even been made public.

As it did in Iraq, Washington has clearly thwarted any attempts to bring stability or democracy to the country it claims to have liberated. An engineer from the Ghazi province reflected on the future of Afghanistan, a future that is doomed unless U.S. policies are drastically changed: "In the loya jirga, 85% of the elected were with the warlords, or were warlords. If the international community takes no action to correct this situation, those elected in the [2004] elections will be 100% warlords."

The same engineer also asked some crucial questions: "Will warlordism end, or will it grow stronger? Will ISAF and the United States deal with warlordism, or let it strengthen? What assurances can we have for future elections?"¹⁵ The answers to these questions will determine whether the Afghan people are destined for peace and democracy or for continued devastation engineered by their so-called "liberator," the United States.

(Sonali Kolhatkar <sonali@afghanwomensmission.org> is a founding director of the Afghan Women's Mission, a nonprofit organization that works in solidarity with Afghan women on political and social issues. She is also the host and producer of KPFK Pacifica Radio's daily prime time morning program "Uprising," which airs Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m.)

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ BBC, "U.N. U-Turn on Afghan Land Grab," September 14, 2003.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ J. Burke and P. Beaumont, "West Pays Warlords to Stay in Line," *UK Observer*, July 21, 2002.
- ⁴ J. Ingalls, "The United States and the Afghan Loya Jirga: A Victory for the Puppet Masters," *Z Magazine*, September 2002.
- ⁵ News International, Pakistan, "Tons of Money Grabbed by Northern Alliance," 01/31/02.
- ⁶ AFP, "U.S. General Myers to Visit Afghanistan," July, 29, 2003.
- ⁷ Physicians for Human Rights, "Iran Coerces Afghan Refugees to Return to Afghanistan," August 8, 2002..
- ⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Killing You is a Very Easy Thing for Us," (July 2003) <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/afghanistan0703/>.
- ⁹ Wiseman, P., "Lawlessness Still Rules in Afghanistan," *USA Today*, July 8, 2002.
- ¹⁰ RAWA, "The People of Afghanistan Do Not Accept Domination of the Northern Alliance!" www.rawa.org, November 13, 2001.
- ¹¹ U.S. State Department, "Fact Sheet: Taliban's Betrayal of the Afghan People," November 6, 2001 <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/01101712.htm>.
- ¹² Center for Social and Economic Rights, "Human Rights and Reconstruction in Afghanistan," (May 2002) <http://www.cesr.org/Emergency%20Response/Afghanistan%20Reportfull.pdf>.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ AFP, "Afghanistan to Get \$1.2 Billion for Reconstruction under Bush Plans," September 8, 2003.
- ¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, op cit.

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpiif.org.

Recommended citation:

Sonali Kolhatkar, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Replaces One Terrorist State with Another," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, October 3, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2003/0310afghan.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Sonali Kolhatkar

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

