

Afghan Military Policy "Barking Mad"

There have been critics enough of the US-led military actions under way in Afghanistan, but now military commanders, too, have begun to question just what they are doing in Afghanistan.

Most prominently, an officer who was an aide to the British forces in Helmand, the southern district of Afghanistan that has witnessed the strongest fighting between the Taliban and international forces, has come out with strong criticism of the British army in Afghanistan—and quit the army.

Captain Leo Docherty said the British campaign in Helmand province was "a textbook case of how to screw up a counterinsurgency". His statements came in an open letter that was reported in the British media—but not followed up in much public debate.

The officer raised the fundamental question of the development of Afghanistan arising from the campaign to capture Sangin town in Helmand, a military campaign in which he participated. Docherty says British troops managed to capture the Taliban stronghold, but then had nothing to offer by way of development.

"The military is just one side of the triangle," he said. "Where were the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office?" As forces sat back with little to offer, the Taliban hit back and British troops there were bunkered up and under daily attack, he wrote.

"Now the ground has been lost and all we're doing in places like Sangin is surviving," said Docherty. "It's completely barking mad."

And such action is only provoking greater support for the Taliban, he warned.

"All those people whose homes have been destroyed and sons killed are going to turn against the British. It's a pretty clear equation—if people are losing homes and poppy fields, they will

go and fight. I certainly would." He added that British troops had been "grotesquely clumsy" in their operations, and that the military policy was "pretty shocking and not something I want to be part of."

Development and rights groups have for long been critical of an exclusively military intervention. They have warned also that military action of this kind appears to local Afghans as part of a larger Western assault on the Muslim world.

"There were windows of opportunity for collaboration five years ago between the West and Muslim countries, but the window of opportunity is closed now, that is for sure," said Emmanuel Reinert, head of the Senlis Council, an independent group studying the effects of drug policies in Afghanistan.

"We can still reopen it, but we need to show that we are going to change our ways," he said. "There has to be a clear change in our approach, a change of management."

There is little promise that will happen. The United States has been struggling to get more soldiers into Afghanistan to bolster the international force. The emphasis on strengthening the military rather than raising resources for development is only getting enhanced.

The increased military presence is not always helping the military, either. Another British army officer said in a leaked e-mail that the air force was "utterly, utterly useless" in protecting troops on the ground in Afghanistan. The air force has been called in as ground troops face increased attacks from the Taliban.

Such military voices from the front in Afghanistan are in alarming tune with warnings from groups such as the Senlis Council. Some soldiers are talking the language of development now more than governments are.

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Truth in Hungary

It's hard to blame Hungarians for being furious with their prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, after learning how he confessed in a private speech to his Socialist party in May that "we lied, morning noon and night" about the economy in order to get re-elected. He also acknowledged that his government had done nothing to prevent Hungary's budget gap from swelling to 10 percent of gross domestic product, the highest level of any country in the European Union.

But trying to force Gyurcsany out through street demonstrations is not the right response. Popular uprisings like the so-called color revolutions of the last decade should be a last resort. Mass protests can dangerously backfire, as the Hungarians discovered when rowdies hijacked their demos. But more fundamentally, the place to punish politicians is at the ballot box.

It is also a fact that voters in former Soviet satellites have tended to routinely chuck out incumbents, often because people don't understand why the cradle-to-grave benefits they had under the Communists are being scrapped. (Gyurcsany's was the first Hungarian government since the fall of Communism in 1990 to be re-elected.) Poland is currently facing a similar crisis after Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski threw a populist firebrand out of his government for demanding more subsidies all around. The opposition promptly called for street demonstrations in October.

Whether Gyurcsany or Kaczynski should stay in office is for the Hungarians and the Poles to decide. But after 16 years of independence, East Europeans should understand that prosperity and security derive from hard work and discipline, not paternalistic demagogues. Neither Hungary, nor Poland, nor any for Communist-ruled country can sustain the kind of spending that the populists promise. As cynical as Hungarians find Gyurcsany's lies, it would be foolish for Hungarians and other East Europeans not to look closely at why he felt he had to.

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A man walks past a tank carrying French peacekeepers patrolling a street in Bourj Kalaway Village, south Lebanon, Sept. 29. (Reuters File Photo)

Big Headlines, Small Results At UN

United Nations peacekeeping operations now under way in Lebanon offer a big opportunity for the UN to demonstrate its relevance and impact on the world stage in the 21st century. If only those member states who claim to be the UN's biggest supporters put their money where their mouths are.

Many world leaders, particularly those in Europe, decry the Bush administration's undermining of the UN, especially since 2003. Yet leaders in France, who expressed outrage when Washington sidedsteped the UN and invaded Iraq without the international community's blessing, stunned the world in August when they backed down from their promise to send 2,000 peacekeepers to intervene in Southern Lebanon, and instead committed only 200.

Fortunately, France later went back on its decision. Germany will provide limited naval assistance to the UN force, and Italy has stepped up to contribute 3,000 peacekeepers. But Europe's response, like the American response in other cases, only highlighted a critical issue for all supporters of the UN and international institutions generally. If states cannot do what it takes to make these institutions more effective, they will increasingly find that other nations will bypass them altogether.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701 on Lebanon "calls for Israel and Lebanon to support a permanent cease-fire." It thus set the stage for UN officials to set out "rules of engagement" (ROEs) for its peacekeepers, which dictate when and under what circumstances UN troops can fire their weapons to defend themselves. But as the current UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) well knows, defending yourself is not the same as protecting yourself from hostile fire in the first place.

In this context, the French are understandably worried about the fate of their soldiers—soldiers charged with supporting the Lebanese government in its efforts to establish control over the Hizballah-controlled South. The terrible French peacekeeping experience in Bosnia in the early 1990s, in which France lost 84 soldiers serving in a humanitarian capacity under restrictive ROEs, justifies their fears.

But ROEs are only the symptom of a deeper problem. The real issue is a yawning gap between paper and practice. In the heat of an international crisis, the Security Council passes resolutions to great public fanfare, establishing an official UN "mandate." But then the UN secretary general is left, resolution in hand, to ask UN member states for the actual, tangible resources necessary to implement what has been commanded. In the overwhelming majority of cases,

those resources fall far short of what is required to successfully intervene in a crisis.

A 2006 UN mandate review found that UN member states adopted hundreds of mandates each year, conferring "additional responsibilities with neither corresponding funds nor guidance" on how resources should be used. In American domestic politics, these kinds of commands from the US Congress to states are known as "unfunded mandates": ordering results without providing the resources necessary to achieve them. It's political theater—big headlines, small results.

The UN's experience in Lebanon is not encouraging. According to the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations, UNIFIL has operated on an annual budget of \$94 million and suffers chronic budget shortfalls due to unpaid assessments from member states.

Now consider what an expanded UNIFIL is mandated to do under Resolution 1701: peacekeepers must monitor the cease-fire between Israel and Hizballah; support and accompany the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy in Southern Lebanon; assist Lebanon's government in securing the country's borders and ports to keep illegal weapons from getting into Hizballah's hands; and "help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons." This is a Herculean task. To date, nowhere near the total UN force of 15,000 has made its way to Lebanon.

Even if all 15,000 UN troops could be found and deployed, the challenges in Lebanon will remain daunting. That is only the military aspect of the peacekeeping effort. Lebanon's infrastructure—especially in the South—has been decimated. Homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. The country is now rebuilding, but the success and momentum of that process will have a considerable impact on the environment in which international peacekeepers operate.

The mandate gap reflects the way the world has done business with the UN for decades—big promises, small payouts, much scapegoating if the UN then fails.

The UN provides the mechanism for a global response, but as Secretary General Kofi Annan often repeats, it does not exist apart from its member states. It is up to those members to provide the necessary will and the required resources. Otherwise the UN is nothing more than a mechanism for outsourcing political blame. A commitment to bring peace to the Middle East, Darfur, the Congo, Kosovo, or Haiti, is not measured by words but by wallets. The world gets what it pays for.

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On Torture

It's frightening that, at this time and in this nation, torture must be discussed as if it were a legitimate issue.

Even hawkish old warriors like Sen. John McCain and retired General Colin Powell say torture is counterproductive.

Numerous are the reasons—both expedient and moral—for eliminating torture:

- * Torture degrades and dehumanizes the torturer. That may be his problem, but that torturer comes home and becomes a husband, a father, a neighbor, a politician....

- * Torture undermines the moral stature of those who condone it. Torture loses "hearts and minds" and allies—huge strategic mistakes.

- * Torture embitters the tortured and those who care about them. Like invasion and bombing, torture recruits "terrorists."

- * If enemy soldiers face torture upon being captured, they are less likely to surrender. Their determined resistance causes more casualties on both sides.

- * Torture is utterly inconsistent with New Testament Christianity. Jesus, who was himself tortured by invaders occupying his country, urged, "Love your enemy."

The case against torture is irrefutable. What more need be said? Why is the torture issue still alive?

The issue keeps coming up because torture keeps being exposed at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo or wherever. The issue keeps coming up because the Bush administration keeps pushing torture as a "legitimate" response to "terrorism"—a terrorism it's doing its utmost to generate. Bush Inc.'s war on Iraq is just terrorism with a bigger budget and bigger bombs.

The Bush administration didn't pioneer torture. Invaders, almost by definition, use torture. In the 20th and 21st centuries invaders favor air wars. Bombing cities—Baghdad and Fallujah for example, is megatorture.

The U.S. Army used torture in Viet Nam. Those techniques were secretly taught at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas in Panama and then at Ft. Benning, Georgia years before Bush became Commander-in-Chief.

Domestic torture—or internal terrorism as it might be called—is business as usual for certain U.S. allies and other authoritarian states seeking to squash dissent and intimidate opposition.

The Neo-cons who have captured our government know they cannot succeed in conquering the world if they don't first finish conquering the U.S.

Ed Kinane COMMONDREAMS.ORG

Amid the setbacks inflicted on democratic progress in the Middle East as a result of recent or ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, and the threat of religious extremism, heartening news about homegrown democratic initiatives is worth celebrating.

During the triple elections held in Yemen on September 20, a group of reform-minded Arab activists, of which we were part, organized an election observation mission that is bound to become a precedent for anchoring similar inter-Arab democratic practices, and for fostering collective work on democracy.

Yemen

Arabs Observing An Arab Election

Representing four different countries with a recent tradition for timely elections, Palestinian, Egyptian, Moroccan and Lebanese observers launched the first initiative to observe an Arab election by other Arabs.

Working in parallel with international observers, the Arab delegation received high acclaim from Yemeni civil society and election officials alike, and was shown a warm welcome by the Yemeni authorities. Natives to the region, the Arab observers displayed cultural sensitivity and a wide understanding of the local context as well as the intricacies and nuances of the local language—critical elements missing in outside observers.

The trip also allowed the various electoral actors to discuss their experiences and compare notes on various election processes in the region. Members of the delegation worked in tandem with highly capable Yemeni observers, who displayed unflinching courage and ironclad commitment to ensuring a transparent voting process.

To dispel notions of anti-regime bias, members of the delegation held meetings with a variety of political and civil society actors belonging to pro-regime and to opposition parties. They also listened carefully to assessments by Yemeni and international civil society organizations.

The delegation was part of a growing critical mass of Arab reformers who insist on blazing the trail and moving forward despite regressions in processes of reform across the Middle East. Members of the Arab delegation were all experienced election monitors and most, if not all, belong to civil society groups and have a long track record of election observation in their own countries and beyond.

Their action in Yemen testified to the coming of age of Arab civil society and its increasing capacity to undertake pro-democracy work in neighboring countries.

The presence of the Arab observers in Yemen was also a strong indication that observation missions need not be foreign-inspired or concocted in Western capitals, nor do that election observation missions pose a threat to a country's sovereignty.

Such initiatives will always benefit from outside help and assistance, however, and in Yemen's case the delegation was supported by the National Democratic Institute, an American institution. This did not, however, preclude the fact that similar such initiatives are now locally developed and "owned"—as was the Yemeni one—and can be added to serious ongoing inter-Arab initiatives such as capacity-building training, advocacy and promotion of good governance programs.

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