NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Alternatives to war in Afghanistan

David Cortright | Oct. 13, 2009

U.S. soldiers during a February patrol at Mullagora village, close to the border with Pakistan, in Kunar province, Afghanistan (CNS/Reuters/Oleg Popov)

ESSAY

The problems in Afghanistan cannot be solved by military means alone. Even General David Petraeus agrees with that. But what are the alternatives? The Obama administration has been re-evaluating U.S. policy in the region, but the discussion so far has been mostly about troop levels and military options. If the president is serious about developing more effective strategies, he needs to de-militarize the mission and prioritize political reconciliation efforts.

Rather than attempting to fight a prolonged counterinsurgency war against the Taliban, the United States should focus on countering global terrorism and attempt to separate the Taliban from al-Qaeda. It was al-Qaeda, not the Taliban, that attacked the United States on 9/11. True, the Taliban and al-Qaeda are closely intertwined, but important distinctions exist between the two movements. The Taliban is a network of disparate Pashtun militia groups in Afghan-istan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda, by contrast, is an Arab-based network with a global agenda of attacking Western interests.

As former *Washington Post* reporter Selig Harrison observes in ?Pakistan: The State of the Union,? an April report from the Center for International Policy, the Taliban movement transcends the Afghan-Pakistan border. Local tribal leaders have never accepted the 1893 Durand Line demarcated by the British that divides the Pashtun region. Many reject the authority of both Kabul and Islamabad. The Taliban is not a unified organization but a complex, diverse movement encompassing more than a dozen separate insurgent organizations in Afghanistan and dozens of Islamist groups in Pakistan. ?In contrast to al-Qaeda,? writes Harrison, ?most of the Taliban factions focus primarily on local objectives in Afghanistan and [northern Pakistan] and do not pose a direct threat to the United States.? The various Taliban elements are divided by ideology and purpose, but they are united now by one overriding objective: to rid their region of foreign forces.

The presence of foreign troops is the principal factor motivating armed resistance and insurgency in the region. A recent report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observed, ?The more military pressure is put on a fragmented society like Afghanistan, the more a coalition against the invader becomes the likely outcome.?

The presence of foreign troops is ?the most important factor in mobilizing support for the Taliban,? said the January report, ?Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War,? by Gilles Dorronso.

Counterinsurgency specialist and Pentagon adviser David Kilcullen makes a similar point in his new book, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford University Press). The foot soldiers of the Afghan insurgency are fighting to drive out foreign military invaders, not to reinstate the caliphate or advance al-Qaeda?s globalist agenda. The more foreign forces arrayed against them, the more intense the armed resistance.

In Pakistan as well, writes Harrison, U.S. military policies and air strikes are radicalizing the population ?and driving more and more Pashtuns into the arms of al-Qaeda and its *jihadi* allies.?

Policies of waging war in Muslim countries have the inadvertent effect of validating Osama bin Laden?s warped ideology of ?saving Islam from foreign infidels.? When the United States invades and launches military operations in Muslim countries, this tends to validate the false image of America waging war on Islam. Polls in Muslim countries have shown 80 percent agreement with bin Laden?s contention that American policy is intended to weaken and divide the Islamic world. The presence of such attitudes creates fertile ground for *jihadi* recruiters.

Rather than waging war against the Pashtuns and stoking the fires of extremism, the United States and its allies should pursue policies of co-option and reconciliation. Harrison urges American leaders to seek ?peace arrangements with Taliban and Taliban-related Islamist factions.?

South Asia experts Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid proposed in *Foreign Affairs* last year a ?grand bargain? strategy of luring reconcilable Taliban elements into political accommodation and power-sharing arrangements as a means of peeling away support from al-Qaeda -related groups. They called for ?a political solution with as much of the Afghan and Pakistani insurgencies as possible, offering political inclusion ? and an end to hostile action by international troops in return for cooperation against al-Qaeda.?

Elements of the Afghan and Pakistani governments have supported reconciliation efforts. A February 2009 opinion poll in Afghanistan found 64 percent of respondents support a policy of negotiating with the Taliban and allowing its members to hold public office if they agree to stop fighting.

An important new book on the subject offers a blueprint for how to pursue dialogue and negotiation with elements of the Taliban. Written by Michael Semple, former deputy to the European Union?s special representative in Afghanistan, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (United States Institute of Peace Press) explores both the perils and promise of attempting to reach a political settlement with insurgent forces.

Reconciliation programs have been part of the new Afghan government since it was first installed. The results of these efforts have been meager, however, because of a lack of sustained commitment from political leaders in Kabul and their Western backers. From years of direct experience and interviews with 200 Afghans who took the initiative to join the process, Semple concludes that U.S., Afghan and international officials have been ?singularly ill-equipped and often disinclined to take the needed steps to enable Afghans to reconcile and reintegrate peacefully back into society.?

Taliban groups attempting to reintegrate with the new government have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, seizure of assets and general harassment. The chronology of nearly every regrouped Taliban network, writes Semple, includes the tale of how ?their commanders were driven out of southern Afghanistan before they

launched the insurgency -- not after.? As the insurgency has grown, Taliban leaders have gained personal and political advantages in continuing the hostilities, and the prospects for reconciliation have dwindled further.

In recent months unofficial talks have occurred, with the support of Saudi Arabia, to facilitate dialogue with Taliban representatives. During these discussions Taliban interlocutors have offered to halt their attacks against foreign and government troops in return for the removal of outside forces. Some have asked for a security agreement, similar to the one negotiated with Iraq, which would establish conditions and a timeline for military withdrawals. They have proposed replacing U.S./NATO troops with an international peacekeeping force drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, pledging not to attack such a force. They have also demanded an end to U.S. drone attacks, in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.

U.S. officials have rejected these terms and have asserted that official negotiations should occur only after the American military has inflicted greater pain on the Taliban in order to extract better terms, and when the militia groups have agreed to lay down their arms.

Semple argues for direct talks with the Taliban leadership council in Quetta, Pakistan, to seek an agreement on renouncing international terrorism and integrating reconciled insurgents into the Afghan political system. The goal would be to obtain commitments from militia leaders and tribal chiefs to cooperate in isolating al-Qaeda and prevent their territory from being used for global terrorist strikes.

This is a bargain Taliban leaders may be willing to accept. Former Taliban ambassador Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef said in an interview last March, ?The United States has a right to guarantee its own security.? Former Taliban foreign minister Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil acknowledged in the same interview that Americans have the right to ?ensure there is no danger to them from Afghanistan.? An agreement for local cooperation in preventing global terrorist strikes would ?constitute a strategic defeat for al-Qaeda,? according to Rubin and Rashid. It would help to achieve the priority U.S. security objective of countering terrorist threats.

The alternative to prolonged counterinsurgency war is the pursuit of dialogue to achieve negotiated political solutions. This is the approach recommended in the Carnegie Endowment report. It would reverse the logic of current U.S. strategy, using the presence of U.S. and NATO troops not in the pursuit of military victory but as a bargaining chip to induce political agreement and conciliation. In exchange for cooperation in isolating al-Qaeda, U.S. forces would end combat operations against the Taliban and begin a gradual military disengagement. This would undercut extremist propaganda and neutralize appeals for jihad against foreign invaders. Under this scenario the mission of remaining foreign troops would focus more on civilian protection and the training of local security forces. Some military and special forces operations could continue, but these would be narrowly targeted against al-Qaeda.

Demilitarizing U.S. strategy would not mean abandoning the people of Afghanistan. The reduction of military operations should be linked to a greatly increased commitment to development assistance and democracy-building programs for local groups willing to uphold human rights principles.

In March the Obama administration announced a civilian surge for the region, but the resources devoted to these efforts have been inadequate, dwarfed by the enormous expenditures for war. The U.S. and its allies should greatly expand their level of assistance for locally-managed civilian assistance programs that advance social development, education and human rights. These efforts, combined with political reconciliation strategies, are likely to be more effective over the long run in stabilizing the region and reducing insurgency and terrorism.

David Cortright is director of policy studies for the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/26/2014 - 11:24*): http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/alternatives-war-afghanistan