

Afghanistan: A morally corrupting catastrophe

To reach an acceptable outcome, the nation’s tribes must step forward and do the heavy lifting

ALON BEN-MEIR
NEW YORK
THE GLOBALIST

Sixteen years have passed and the United States is still fighting a war in Afghanistan. The war is not only the longest in American history (at a cost approaching \$1 trillion and the blood of thousands of brave soldiers), but one which is morally corrupting from which there seems to be no exit with any gratification but shame.

It was necessary to invade Afghanistan to destroy al-Qaida following 9/11, but once it was defeated we should have departed, leaving behind some residual forces to clean up the mess.

Instead, we decided to introduce democracy, a totally alien concept to a land historically governed by tribes, and which no foreign power has ever been able to govern or fully conquer for long.

Today, we are still discussing the best course of action to bring this war to some form of a satisfactory conclusion. Before we discuss prospective solutions, however, we should take a hard look at the real cost of the war and its implications that will startle many to their core.

The butcher’s bill

Nearly 2,400 American soldiers have been killed and 20,000 wounded, and over 33,000 Afghan civilians have lost their lives. A record number of civilians — 1,662 — were killed in the first six months of 2017 alone, and over 3,581 civilians were wounded.

Overall, Afghan casualties are estimated at 225,000, with 2.6 million Afghan refugees and more than 1 million persons internally displaced.

The cost of the war to date is approximately \$783 billion; the cost for each soldier is \$3.9 million per year.

If we were to divide the war’s cost among Afghanistan’s 30 million citizens, it would amount to \$33,000 per head. The ordinary Afghan has derived zero benefit from this in a country where the average annual per capita income was only \$670 in 2014.

While we are spending these sums of money on an unwinnable war, 15 million U.S. children live in households below the federal poverty threshold. Hundreds of thousands go to sleep hungry, and many



A British soldier lets Afghan children look through the sights on his rifle during a patrol through a neighborhood in central Kabul on July 15. BLOOMBERG

are living in squalid conditions, with infrastructure and homes on the verge of collapsing.

To understand the travesty of these expenditures on the war, just think of the cost to America, not only in human lives and money, but our moral standing in the world and the pervasive, corrosive thinking that the war can still be won with military muscle.

A naive strategy

It is naive to think after 16 years of fighting that dispatching an additional military force of 4,000 soldiers (as recommended by U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis) will change anything. At its peak, over 140,000 American soldiers were unable to win and create a sustainable political and security structure that would allow us to leave with dignity.

No one in the Trump administration, including the Pentagon, is suggesting that

additional forces would win the war. At best, they can arrest the continuing advances of the Taliban, which is now in control of more than one-third of the country — and then what?

After a visit to Afghanistan, U.S. Sen. John McCain was asked to define winning: “Winning is getting major areas of the country under control and working toward some kind of cease-fire with the Taliban.”

But as Robert L. Borosage of The Nation points out, “We’ve had major areas under control before, and the Taliban continued to resist, while corruption and division continued to cripple the Afghan government.”

Beyond this resurgent Taliban threat, al-Qaida is back in full force and is successfully spreading its wings far beyond the Afghanistan borders.

If anything, the situation today in Afghanistan is even worse both in the political and security spheres, and the prospects of developing sustainable conditions on the ground

and a functioning government in Kabul are next to zero.

Sadly, Mattis resembles a gambling addict pouring money into a slot machine, ending up depressed and frustrated for having lost every dollar while hoping against hope to win a jackpot that never pays out.

One might ask Mattis, “What is our goal now in Afghanistan, and what is our exit strategy?” For the past 16 years, no secretary of defense has provided a clear answer. Now we are asked to gamble again with the lives of our soldiers, with no hope of ever winning this debilitating war, which has now become a war of choice.

No military solution

To be sure, there will not be a military solution to the Afghan war. The sooner we accept this reality, however bitter it may be, the better. We can then focus on a practical outcome that can emerge only through negotiations with moderate elements of the Taliban.

To be sure, there will not be a U.S. military solution to the Afghan war. The sooner we accept this reality, however bitter it may be, the better.

A war for which we are not prepared to sacrifice the life of a soldier for a worthy cause must never be fought.

Afghanistan’s tribes

In a series of conversations I had with Ajmal Khan Zazai, tribal leader and paramount chief of Paktia province in Afghanistan, he spoke with deep frustration about the American military approach that has never had a chance of succeeding.

He said, “Afghanistan is a tribal country, the tribes are the past, present and the future. To win this hard fight against the Taliban and their associates (including al-Qaida and Islamic State) without the support and backing of the tribes would be a miracle and I doubt a miracle is happening these days.”

He was emphatic about the naivete of successive American administrations, saying that government officials in the State and Defense departments going back to the Bush era appeared to be “either obsessed with their version of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ or believe only in a U.S. military solution. They don’t believe in homegrown or Afghan local solutions led by the tribes, or even winning hearts and minds.”

It is time for the United States to realize that the long-term solution lies, as Zazai said, with the full backing and support of the tribes.

He told me he is prepared to gather the chiefs of all the tribes to seek commitment from top U.S. officials to empower them by providing \$400 million to \$500 million a year, over a few years (which is a fraction of what we spend today).

The purpose would be to recruit and train their own militia to fight their own battles — not mercenaries for hire, who want to prolong the war only to enrich themselves.

The solution to the Afghanistan debacle lies with the Afghani tribes, who must take the lead in fighting the insurgency. The tribes will be fighting for their country because they want an end to outrageous foreign interventions that did nothing but cause havoc in the name of pursuing an illusionary democracy.

In the end, the solution lies in peace negotiations with moderates in the Taliban, who are Afghan nationals and will not be dislodged from their own land, and no one is better equipped to achieve that than the tribal chiefs. They want to take matters into their hands and end the decadeslong suffering, death and destruction they have and continue to endure.

Alon Ben-Meir is both a senior fellow at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs and a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute.

Japan’s struggles are hardly unique

DANIEL MOSS
NEW YORK
BLOOMBERG

Victory in Japan’s battle with too-low inflation looks as elusive as ever. On Thursday, the Bank of Japan pushed back its estimate of when it will hit its 2 percent inflation target; the goal now won’t be reached until the year beginning April 2019, according to Gov. Haruhiko Kuroda.

The delay would seem to confirm that Japan remains subject to a unique “deflationary mindset” that’s nearly impossible to eradicate.

In fact, what’s interesting isn’t how singular Japan’s problems are, but how common. While they may vary in degree, they’re increasingly shared by policymakers across the developed world.

With no one predicting a change in interest rates at the conclusion of the BOJ’s two-day Policy Board meeting, the quarterly forecasts were always going to be what garnered attention. The stickiness of anemic inflation must be especially galling to Kuroda and other officials, given that Japan’s economic recovery is picking up a little bit of steam.

Consumer prices are now in positive territory — rising 0.4 percent in May — and gross domestic product has grown for five quarters, the longest uninterrupted spell since the global financial crisis. The unemployment rate, helped by a shrinking population, has hovered around 3 percent for a year.

Even the BOJ projections that kick the 2 percent inflation target into the long grass expect the current economic expansion to continue for a couple more years.

Surely then, the models suggest, wage pressures must kick in meaningfully at some point, especially given how tight the



Japan is far from alone. All across the developed world, the problem of sluggish inflation is confounding central bankers. ISTOCK

labor market is. And that, in turn, should push inflation back to 2 percent.

But the models have been wrong to this point — and not just in Japan. In the euro-zone, where things are looking better economically than they have in years, the rebound hasn’t translated into a surge in inflation. While the European Central Bank is likely to reduce its stimulus accordingly in coming months, it’s likely to do so very gradually.

In the U.S., where the Federal Reserve has increased interest rates twice this year, a string of inflation misses is similarly giving some policymakers pause over how fast to proceed. Lael Brainard, an influential

Fed governor, told an audience at Columbia University recently she wants “to assess the inflation process closely before making a determination on further adjustments to the federal funds rate in light of the recent softness.” Charles Evans, president of the Chicago Fed, has discussed the need to assure Americans that the Fed isn’t just a bunch of “conservative central bankers who view our inflation target as a ceiling.”

Few policymakers around the world would claim to have a handle on what’s happening here. It’s not a uniquely U.S. or German or Japanese phenomenon. Some Fed officials have mused in recent months about whether changes to cellphone pric-

ing and the cost of prescription drugs help explain inflation’s retreat since hitting 2 percent in February. But even if they’re right, that doesn’t explain how widespread the problem is globally.

The trend could reflect the lingering aftereffects of the global financial crisis. Or perhaps consumers outside Japan have succumbed to what one might call a “disinflationary mindset.” Some people blame cheap imports resulting from expanded global trade, although that’s been a process underway for decades.

That’s not to say Japan doesn’t face some unique challenges. Its rapidly shrinking population, coupled with technological advances that keep retail prices in check, may be too big a hurdle for Kuroda, or any BOJ governor, to overcome. BOJ officials feel let down by labor unions that, they complain, haven’t been anywhere near aggressive enough in annual wage negotiations with employers — hardly a problem in the West.

Kuroda also has to contend with a national psychology that can’t seem to shake the idea of ultralow inflation or, even worse, the notion of a return to deflation.

At least policy doesn’t need to be loosened again anytime soon, Kuroda said at Thursday’s news conference after the Policy Board meeting. And he may not have to wrestle with this conundrum much longer. His term ends in April and no BOJ leader has been reappointed since the bank gained independence in the late 1990s. Given how widespread and intractable these challenges are proving to be, he may well find that statistic a relief.

Daniel Moss has been the executive editor of Bloomberg News for global economics. He has led Bloomberg News teams in Asia, Europe and North America.

There’s no brain science to college free speech

RAMESH PONNURU
NEW YORK
BLOOMBERG

Can science, which has given us so many blessings, also help us settle disputes about free speech on campus?

Lisa Feldman Barrett, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University, thinks so. She argues in The New York Times that science can “provide empirical guidance for which kinds of controversial speech should and shouldn’t be acceptable on campus and in civil society.” It’s a point that she doesn’t prove, and that poses dangers to which she seems blind.

Barrett writes that science has shown that “abusive” speech damages listeners’ bodies, especially their brains, and should therefore be considered a form of violence. But it has also shown that “merely offensive” speech does not have this effect. So campuses should let Charles Murray speak, since he is offering “scholarly hypothesis to be debated,” but is not “a provocateur and hateronger like Milo Yiannopoulos.”

While I am not very familiar with the latter’s work, it certainly seems correct that a speech by Murray (a colleague of mine at the American Enterprise Institute) would be much more likely to generate an intelligent discussion.

Colleges, and collegiate organizations, should take that fact into account when deciding whom to invite. If that’s all that Barrett wants to establish, she does not need to invoke science. Thinking through the mission of a university ought to be enough.

The science that Barrett cites does not really help her case. Her judgment about Murray and Yiannopoulos may be correct, but it is not obviously scientific. It’s hard to

see how she overcomes this problem.

I suppose universities and colleges could run tests in which random samples of undergraduates were exposed to prospective speakers and before-and-after comparisons of the fine structure of their brains were performed.

Even then, though, we might have to take into account that some undergraduate brains are more susceptible to damage than others.

But it’s worse than that. Her factual assertions undermine her conclusion. She emphasizes that it’s “chronic stress” that affects the brain and nervous system: “If you spend a lot of time in a harsh environment worrying about your safety, that’s the kind of stress that brings on illness and remodels your brain.”

That seems like an argument for, not against, tolerating a one-off speech by Yiannopoulos.

Nor does Barrett reckon with the fact that her rationale for keeping abusive speech off campus sweeps wider than her objective. If anything that causes “long stretches of simmering stress” is violence, then any professor with a reputation as a tough grader has a lot to answer for. So do traffic engineers, wedding planners and mortgage lenders.

Come to think of it, can an op-ed be sufficiently annoying to rewire a reader’s neurons for the worse? If so, is it too “literally violence”? It might be time for a citizen’s arrest.

Ramesh Ponnuru is a senior editor of National Review and the author of “The Party of Death: The Democrats, the Media, the Courts, and the Disregard for Human Life.”