

Washington relies on a network of paid warlords in Afghanistan

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There is no shortage of reports in the international media describing the political and social chaos that exists in Afghanistan. It is a commonplace to refer to the anarchic situation in the country, where an array of feuding warlords, militia commanders and tribal chiefs, with only nominal adherence to Kabul, are intent on establishing their own domains—large and small—at the expense of their rivals.

Fewer articles refer to the appalling social conditions facing millions of Afghans as a result of the lack of international aid. The country, already one of the poorest in the world, has suffered two decades of war, which has destroyed much of Afghanistan's agriculture and limited infrastructure. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced either due to a lack of basic necessities or out of fear of persecution by the various militia groups. Health care, education and other basic services are in a shambles.

The only explanation offered for this state of affairs, either explicitly or implicitly, is that the Afghan people are to blame—as if warlords, poverty and civil war are engrained in the national psyche, rather than being the outcome of definite historical processes, including the massive CIA funding of the various Mujaheddin militias that fought the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s. In returning to Afghanistan, the US has taken up where it left off.

An article in the British-based *Observer* newspaper on July 21 makes clear that much of the current chaos is being perpetuated by the US policy of financing a network of regional warlords. Entitled “West pays warlords to stay in line,” the article points to a process that has been underway from the outset of the US intervention. The murky operations of the CIA and US Special Forces before and after the fall of the Taliban regime have been referred to, in passing, in a number of reports. But the *Observer* provides the first indication of the scale of the ongoing operation.

“The *Observer* has learnt,” the article explained, “that ‘bin bags’ full of US dollars have been flown to Afghanistan, sometime on RAF planes, to be given to key regional power brokers who could cause trouble for Prime Minister Hamid

Karzai's administration. Gul Agha Sherzai, governor of the southern province of Kandahar, Hazrat Ali, a commander in the eastern province of Nanagahar, and several others have been ‘bought off’ with millions of dollars in deals brokered by US and British intelligence.”

A British Foreign Office source confirmed that money was “circulated” to key Afghan warlords, and warned of the risks involved. “In any case, you do not buy warlords in Afghanistan: you ‘rent’ them for a period. The Russians discovered this to their cost. They would buy off a warlord and after a while he would come back and tell them: ‘My men won't wear this arrangement any more. You have to give me more money, or we will go back to attacking you’.”

Substantial sums of money are involved. Last November, the US paid Pacha Khan Zardran, a local commander in the Khost area, an estimated \$400,000 to train and equip his fighters to patrol the border with Pakistan. The arrangement came unglued when Karzai installed a rival as regional governor and armed clashes erupted between the two. According to the *Observer*, local militia commanders in the Khost area are vying with each other to 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”.

While millions of dollars are being lavished on chosen warlords, the promised international aid money for basic infrastructure and services has not been forthcoming. “Relief workers in Afghanistan have criticised the hand-outs because they come when funds for emergency help and reconstruction projects in the war-damaged country are running low. Cash for road building, irrigation and power projects is unlikely even to reach Afghanistan before 2003, and only 3 billion pounds [\$4.8 billion] of the estimated 10 billion pounds needed to rebuild the nation has so far been pledged,” the *Observer* commented.

The US is buying off regional warlords and militia commanders for a variety of reasons. Initially the purpose was to topple the Taliban regime and then assist in ongoing military operations. Increasingly, however, it is a means for stifling opposition not only to the Karzai administration but

to the US occupation itself. Resentment and anger has been developing for months in the Pashtun tribal areas in the south and east of Afghanistan, where the US bombing and military operations have been most intense.

In an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's program *Foreign Correspondent* on Wednesday, *Time* magazine reporter Michael Ware commented: "The tide has very much turned in the South. I am now hearing far too commonly a statement that though it is without some basis, it is very heartfelt. More and more you are hearing people say 'we were better off under the Russians'. As the Afghans say to me, 'in the first 12 months, the Russians were not bombing our families... however, that's what the Americans are doing.' At the same time, there's no sign of humanitarian assistance or roads and bridges and schools. So they're seeing nothing from the international community except American bombs."

To suppress the growing opposition, the US is relying on warlords and militia commanders, and their often brutal methods, rather than bolstering Karzai's transitional administration, which has little or no authority in many areas outside Kabul. Some sections of the Bush administration were arguing, as far back as last November, that such a situation would best serve US interests in Afghanistan.

The *Washington Post*, for instance, reported that US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage was advocating "a very loose central government with very little central authority" as part of a proposal to give "a very high degree of local autonomy" to tribal and ethnic leaders. By way of justification, another senior administration official commented to the newspaper: "History strongly suggests that Kabul will be the first among equals, but you're unlikely to have a strong central government that will dominate."

Whether Armitage's proposal was formally adopted or not, "a very loose central government" is what has been created in Afghanistan. The present army and police force, which are highly factionalised, are in no position to challenge regional warlords. Nor will the relatively small national army being trained by the US and British be able to do so in the future. The Bush administration has repeatedly opposed calls, by the European powers in particular, to extend the international peacekeeping force beyond Kabul—a move that would undercut the influence of the warlords.

While Armitage did not spell out the reasons for his proposal, the current chaos has obvious benefits for Washington. With no effective central authority, a countryside dominated by US-paid mercenaries and no international troops outside Kabul, other than those directly under US control, American military forces and the CIA have been able to roam at will and exert their influence

unchallenged. Moreover, the unstable situation has provided an added justification for a long-term US military presence—all in the name of "peace and stability" and the necessity of preventing the return of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

In his ABC interview, Michael Ware pointed out that the US military are already digging in. "I was in Kandahar when the marines first arrived in December shortly after the fall of the Taliban. At the time the marines were saying, 'this is an extremely short term mission'—however now you'll find that with the 82nd Airborne now in control in Kandahar, permanent facilities are being built. Concrete bunkers are being built, air-conditioned barracks are under construction, the tarmac is receiving more and more work, it is becoming an American facility... a permanent American facility. And the American spokespeople in Bagram Airbase [north of Kabul] three weeks ago, said we anticipate staying here for between 18 months and two years. So there's considerable creep in the time frame for the Afghan mission."

In the anarchic conditions that prevail in Afghanistan, no one in Kabul or anywhere else will be in a position to oppose Washington's transformation of the country into a military platform for its ambitions within the region. The consequences, however, have been devastating. Millions of Afghans live in conditions of squalour without access to basic amenities or, in many cases, adequate food, clothing and shelter, under the thumb of US-paid thugs who are renowned for their ruthlessness and brutality.

All of this demonstrates that the aim of the US invasion of Afghanistan was never to bring "peace and prosperity" to the Afghan people. It was to advance American plans for strategic domination in the region—in particular over the vast oil and gas reserves of Central Asia.



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