Britain uses “aid” to Afghanistan as a cover for imperialist domination

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According to the government’s own watchdog, much of the UK’s £3.5 billion aid to Afghanistan between 2000 and 2020 was spent not on “humanitarian aid” but on the police and other security agencies’ paramilitary operations. It served to entrench corruption and injustice.

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI)’s report, published last month, is a devastating indictment of the government’s aid and state reconstruction policy.

Far from providing humanitarian aid and relief in the aftermath of the NATO-led war and occupation, as publicly portrayed, these financial flows served first and foremost the imperialist powers’ broader geostrategic and military agenda. Moreover, all the international institutions such as the World Bank and United Nations and various NGOs were mobilized in this endeavour.

The ICAI’s report, scrutinizing the UK foreign aid budget, previously distributed by the Department for International Development and now subsumed under the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), criticized the use of the aid budget to fund the Afghan national police’s salaries as a “questionable use of UK aid.” This was because the police’s primary task was not civilian policing, but counterinsurgency operations.

Overall, the UK spent £252 million funding the salaries of the Afghan national police (ANP) and £400 million on the Afghan security services over the last six years of Britain’s operations in the country, the period of the ICAI’s review. The government overruled the efforts of UK aid officials to stop the funding. This was because London, despite misgivings on the ground, “chose to prioritise the transatlantic alliance,” meaning that it fell in line with US requirements, largely drawn up by the military, to crush the Taliban’s long running and intensifying insurgency against Washington’s deeply unpopular puppet government in Kabul.

The ICAI said that its discussions with senior officials revealed that while London disagreed with Washington over its refusal to include the Taliban in any political settlement, it was “unwilling to challenge the US approach.” It “became publicly committed into a narrative of imminent success” even though officials knew this had little chance of success.

The Afghan national police operated armed checkpoints across the country as it sought to suppress the Taliban. Its recruits, who had little training, suffered heavy casualties, leading to desertion and attrition rates of 25 percent a year. Theft of arms and equipment was widespread while the ANP’s payroll was inflated with “ghost officers,” amid “numerous reports from human rights organisations of police corruption and brutality, including extortion, arbitrary detention, torture and extra-judicial killings.”

The huge scale of the US, UK and international supportboth aid and military—for Afghanistan meant that this was the second largest American “aid” project after Iraq. In 2020, it accounted for most of Kabul’s national budget, under conditions where the government lacked the professional capacity to manage it. Instead, the aid was managed by a veritable army of well-paid management consultants. The report stated that in 2020, there were 585 consultants in the ministry of finance, down from 780 in 2017.

These consultants awarded contracts to the business elites close to the government that syphoned off most of the aid as they fought for contracts and sub-contracts to manage the vast flows of international cash. The report cited a survey by the Asia Foundation in 2021 that 98.7 percent of Afghans described corruption as a major problem, up from 76 percent in 2014.

The ICAI drew upon UK government documents, including some written as late as 2019, that “describe the situation as an extreme form of state capture, which benefited a narrow group of Afghan political elites at the expense of the population at large”. It added, “In these

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circumstances, there was little prospect of meaningful institutional development. One year on, in 2020, the Department for International Development assessed that central government institutions were largely unable to deliver on their mandates, despite years of financial and technical assistance. Afghan leaders saw them as fiefdoms for patronage, rather than mechanisms for promoting the public interest."

Britain's largest contribution of £668 million was to the US-dominated World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). This was supposed to fund basic services such as health and education, provide infrastructure investment, support for agriculture and jobs and finance the government's fiscal deficit. It was often administered by "multilateral delivery partners" including the international NGOs that constituted a parasitic industry in the impoverished country.

None of this made any material difference to the lives of the Afghan people. While the ICAI tried to make out that this "was likely to have made a significant difference," it could not but note that "The ARTF struggled to measure the development outcomes attributable to its interventions" and "overall poverty rates increased over the review period." The much-vaunted emphasis on developing girls' access to education and job opportunities for women "was limited by the [Afghan] government's lack of ownership and implementation capacity" and its practical impact "was still at an early stage."

The ignominious withdrawal of US and UK troops after two decades of proxy wars and occupation left the country brutalized and pauperised and facing a humanitarian catastrophe. Throughout the 20 years of occupation, the imperialist powers did nothing to develop Afghanistan. Its economy was shattered, with agriculture undermined by so-called aid. This, along with the insecurity, the most severe drought in 40 years, earthquakes and natural disasters, played into the hands of Afghanistan's warlords and drug dealers, as impoverished farmers turned to poppy cultivation and the opium trade.

According to the World Bank, Afghanistan is the sixth poorest country in the world, with a gross national income per capita of only $500. The United Nations estimates that 24 million Afghans, or more than half of the population, suffer from acute hunger. An estimated 8.7 million are at risk of famine, while 5 million children are on the brink of starvation. This is before the surge in the prices of basic commodities over the past months that sent wheat prices in September 37 percent higher than their levels a year ago.

This has been compounded by Washington's freezing of Afghanistan's financial assets, suspension of foreign aid and imposition of an economic blockade—tantamount to starving the country to death—after the Taliban took control in August 2021 amid the US military's humiliating withdrawal from its longest-ever war. According to the World Bank, this has led to a 30 percent contraction in the economy.

Afghanistan's decades-long US-orchestrated wars have produced one of the largest refugee populations in the world. At the beginning of 2022, before the war in Ukraine, about one in 10 Afghans—3 million people—were refugees, mostly living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Three in four Afghans have suffered internal or external displacement in their lifetime.

While the UK government pledged to bring out tens of thousands of Afghans who had worked with British forces and officials, along with their families, more than one year after NATO's withdrawal from the country, many thousands of vulnerable Afghans remain trapped in Afghanistan or neighbouring Pakistan, forcing them to turn to dangerous and unofficial routes to reach Britain. Thousands are stranded in hotels in Britain as their applications for resettlement are processed.

These disastrous conditions underscore the devastating impact of US imperialism's four decades of covert operations, war, and occupation—all justified with cynical rhetoric of humanitarianism and "building democracy"—on what was already one of the poorest countries on the planet. It must serve as a warning to workers throughout the world about what the US and NATO have in store for both their "allies" and their enemies, as they intensify their operations in Ukraine against Russia and prepare for war with China.

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