Canada, Afghanistan and the blame game

Sean M. Maloney
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> *"Our position on the dictators of the earth and secular groups and others that resemble them is that there are innocents among them and unbelievers among them and that there will be continuing enmity until*

> *everyone believes in Allah. We will not meet them half-way and there will be no room for dialogue with them or flattery towards them."*
>
> *al-Qaeda document*

Once again, Canada finds itself at war with a totali- tarian ideology. This time the front line is in Afghanistan, not the English Channel or the Iron Curtain. As it was in the 1930s and the 1960s, people who should know better are burying their heads in the sand, tranquilized by suburbia and its discontents, lulled into a false sense of security. The state of denial among the Canadian people, its academics and the unelected leader- ship in the bureaucracy has crippled Canada's response to that threat and may affect the conduct of our war in Afghanistan. Conditioned by decades of moral equivalency, cultural relativism, a dysfunctional interpretation of history and a lack of real understanding of foreign cultures have taken their toll. The cosmetic policies of the "responsibility to protect," UN peacekeeping mythology and the Africanist tilt within the foreign policy and development elites have further distracted us from the primary problem our society faces: the challenge of radical Islam both internally and on the international stage, specifically in Afghanistan. Indeed, the current debate over Canada's role in Afghanistan tends to be deficient in facts and context even after five years of Canadian military operations there.

As it was with fascism in the 1930s, the evidence that we are dealing with a motivated, organized enemy that already is operating against our interests is overwhelming. As in the 1930s, there are many who seek to downplay or ignore the threat. Others conjure up CIA, Zionist or Big Oil con- spiracy theories to explain the threat away by blaming some- body else. A related school of thought asserts that the United States is a more serious threat than radical Islam. Some even believe that if we leave the radical Islamists alone, then they will leave us alone: the British already learned the folly of that thinking with the London bombings on July 7, 2005. Others want to believe that radical Islamists will somehow be converted to our way of life after having spent enough time in contact with our multicultural society. The uncovering of an alleged 17-man al-Qaeda network in Toronto this spring should dispel those notions.

Still others want to blame Canadian involvement in overseas operations, specifically Afghanistan, for radical Islamist attention directed toward Canada and naively think that if we refrain from such operations, the threat level will somehow be reduced. This is more wishful thinking, unbefitting the nation that successfully fought in the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War and resisted two equally insid- ious totalitarian ideologies. The main problem Canadian policy-makers face is explaining the global dimensions of the radical Islamist problem, how this affects Canadians and where Afghanistan fits into all of this.

For the most part, Canadians think in terms of countries: in school they learn geography, which teaches them to identify legal, territorial boundaries. Canadians think in terms of the Westphalian state system, and consequently believe that organi- zations like the UN, which is state-based, are the appropriate prism through

which to view international interaction. Little attention is paid to non-state groups, their influences or the detrimental effects they can have on the state system. In general, many Canadians believe that non-state groups who oppose the state system are underdogs with legitimate grievances and that these grievances can be addressed in a non-violent fashion, through compro- mise. Canadians love underdogs, no mat- ter what colour. But this is a 19th- and 20th -century mindset. It bears little applica- tion to our current circumstances in the 21st century, particularly when we address the problem of radical Islam and its relationship to Canada's role in Afghanistan. We are dealing with a multinational, transnational religious- political movement. It is not an under- dog: it is a dangerous organization with a dangerous ideology.

UN peacekeeping cannot be used against it in any fashion. In the UN peacekeeping mindset, two states face off, the UN mediates, a force is inter- posed and peace is achieved. One can- not impose international peacekeeping forces against something that doesn't recognize the UN state system and ignores borders. Our experience in dealing with ethnic conflict in the 1990s also has its limitations in our present circumstances. Canada looked to the fragmented micro-conflict in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Somalia. In the 1990s, transnational ideology was a thing of the past, apparently a relic of the Cold War. This led us to believe that conflicts were the result of ethnic and tribal differences limited to the fragmented portions of former countries and imperial borders.

Our involvement in Afghanistan has demonstrated the fallacious reasoning of that decade to Canadians. Yes, there are micro-conflict aspects of Afghanistan and they are important, but it is all linked to a larger global war. Afghanistan is one front in that war, yet many Canadians still see Afghanistan as an internal conflict within the confines of recognized international borders. They do not see it having a relationship to what goes on in North America or elsewhere. Afghanistan is "over there somewhere" and the same bleat from the 1990s can be heard again: "They've been killing each other for centuries: why is it our problem?" We heard this one before: was it Ethiopia, Spain, Manchuria and Korea, or was it Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo? This mentality is a symptom of our obsolete education system and the inability of previous Canadian gov- ernments to establish a clear set of pub- lic principles of who we are and what we stand for, particularly when we are dealing with the threat posed by the al-Qaeda movement.

For example, the Canadian strategic tradition of forward security is something that is not taught in Canadian schools: it is explained away as "imperialism" (and therefore "bad") or as Canada being "used" by the British or Americans for their nefarious purposes. It is rarely taught that our interests and value system are integral to and compatible with those of the ABCA (America-Britain-Canada- Australia-New Zealand) countries and opposed to them.

The reality is that anything that poses a profound threat to those interests and values needs to be countered before it can take root in North America. This was the reason we went to war in the 1940s and later established nuclear and conventional deterrent forces in Europe from the 1950s to the end of the Cold War. That should be

the historical basis for explaining what Canada is doing in Afghanistan, not the stifling lens of the current debate over casualties or what Jack Layton thinks he thinks. The al- Qaeda movement's belief system, its ide- ology, is in no way compatible with ours. We cannot negotiate with it. We have to keep it as far away as possible and aggres- sively challenge it. That is what we are doing in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, there are some dis- tractions. We are confronted with two blame games that are underway these days, and it is important that they be addressed because they have an effect on Canadian involvement in Afghanistan. The first is an American one, and it goes like this: if the Bush administration had not invaded Iraq, the resources would have been avail- able to rebuild Afghanistan and the Taliban would not be resurgent. The Canadian subtext of this assertion is that Canada would not be in Afghanistan if it wasn't for American bungling and aggressive international behaviour in Iraq. The second is a Canadian one: Canada never commit- ted itself to long-term military opera- tions in Afghanistan; it made a series of incremental and time-limited commitments, and the Harper government should withdraw at the soonest possi- ble opportunity because this is "war- fighting" and not "peacekeeping." Conflating the two gives us "Canada is war-fighting in Afghanistan as a proxy in an American military adventure and this runs counter to our traditions."

Canada's current role in Afghanistan is the result of a multitude of factors. Some of these factors are publicly deployed in isola- tion from their larger context during the pursuit of short-term political goals by opposition parties, or used in power games by factions within gov- ernment departments, or by the media. Too much focus on these pieces blinds us to the overall picture and what really matters.

First, the war against the al-Qaeda movement is fought on many planes but the most important is the psycho- logical plane. Without the will to fight, resistance will cease. If a country can be convinced that it isn't even at war, it can be easily neutralized. If it is at war and can be convinced to retreat, even better. We saw this with Spain. A series of attacks against civilian targets in Madrid led to a Spanish withdrawal from Iraq. Currently, the al-Qaeda proxy in Afghanistan has embarked on a suicide bomb campaign against Canadian troops with the express purpose of get- ting the Canadian population to pres- sure the Canadian government to withdraw from Afghanistan.

What would the withdrawal of the international community from Afghanistan mean? The impor- tance of Afghanistan in the larger war exists on the psychological plane. The removal of the Taliban regime and the destruction of al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan were the first major vic- tory over the al-Qaeda movement. They sent a psychological shock wave into the al-Qaeda leadership and its members. They disrupted ongoing and planned operations. They demonstrat- ed that we could get at them, that they were not immune because of geogra- phy, history or psychology. Success, however, has to be consolidated. One does not walk away from success: we didn't walk away from Germany or Japan in 1945, because we learned after 1918 that chaos will lead to even more dangerous things later on.

There is a case to be made that the withdrawal of the international com- munity, and

particularly American forces, from Somalia and Yemen in 1993-94 was viewed by al-Qaeda as evi- dence that it could undertake larger and more spectacular attacks against the United States and its allies. In al- Qaeda's view, the Americans are the "far enemy" who support the "near enemy," the governments of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The "near enemy" has to be removed before a new caliphate led by al-Qaeda can be established.

In Somalia, the Clinton adminis- tration didn't even know it was at war with al-Qaeda. It didn't see that a gen- eral retreat from Mogadishu after tak- ing 18 dead and pulling out support personnel from Yemen in the face of a mere threat were a loss of credibility, a psychological defeat. This defeat was, incidentally, exploited by others in Rwanda and Haiti, who then under- stood that the Americans and the international community would with- draw once the intervention forces started taking casualties. From an al- Qaeda perspective, the American fail- ure in Somalia, coupled with demonstratively skittish American behaviour elsewhere in the 1990s, even in the face of genocide in the Balkans and Rwanda, was a catalyst for action. We are reaping what the Clinton administration sowed.

Withdrawing from Afghanistan would be a major defeat for Canada and her allies in the eyes of the al-Qaeda movement, and it would be exploited by them for worldwide recruiting purposes. It would give the movement more and more credibility in other parts of the world, particularly in other regions that are important to Canada. It would embolden further attempts within Canada to support and conduct acts of terrorism by radical Islamists who would view Canada as weak and incapable of defending herself. Canada is already seen as the Liberia of immigration to a variety of extremist and terrorist groups.

Second, the war in Afghanistan is part of a regional problem that is not confined to the recognized borders of that country. There is signifi- cant support for the insurgency coming from Pakistan. Pakistan recognizes "A" areas and "B" areas: the Pakistani government admits that it does not exert control over "B" areas and it is from those areas that the Taliban/al- Qaeda insurgency is support- ed. The complexity of the political situation inside Pakistan also has a direct bearing on Afghanistan. The Pakistani state appears to be on the brink of violent fail- ure — and it possesses nuclear weapons. Clearly, we don't want those weapons getting into the wrong hands.

Additionally, we don't want India and Pakistan to wind up in an esca- latory situation in which nuclear weapons use becomes possible. Indeed, there is some suspicion that al-Qaeda was deliberately stimulating violence between Pakistan and India in late 2001 and early 2002 to get the Pakistani forces to move away from the Afghan border and redeploy to the Indian border so that the al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership could escape the Operation Enduring Freedom onslaught.

Moreover, Afghanistan stands at the regional crossroads of the "Stans," the Indo-Pakistani subconti- nent, Iran and by proximity the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan has a close relation- ship with the United Arab Emirates, for example, as does Pakistan. The impor- tance of the Straits of Hormuz is obvi- ous to

all. It is, as the tagline for the movie *Syriana* asserts, all connected.

From the macro to the micro: let us address the matter of Taliban "resur- gence" and the relationship of interna- tional community negligence in Afghanistan to this phenomenon. Many Canadian critics are caught up in the blame game and don't even realize they have fallen into a peculiarly American cultural trap. We know from the pletho- ra of cultural products like the television programs *American Justice, Law and Order* and *CSI* that American culture is legalis- tic: if something has gone wrong, it is the result of negligence on somebody's part, not of some external event or source that couldn't be scientifically controlled. Translated to our present circumstances: it is Canada's presence in Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force that allegedly prompted 17 Canadians to plan to behead the prime minister on television once they have seized Parliament, not the fact that the would-be perpetrators chose to believe in a violent ideology and indulge in illegal activities. This sort of logic has bled into the Canadian debate and has not been effectively countered by the government.

The current blame fad in Canada is that the Taliban are resurgent because the Government of Afghanistan and its international allies haven't done enough "reconstruction" for "the people," and "the people" are getting angry and siding with the Taliban. Oh, and it's all George W. Bush's fault. This sort of argument has the potential to negatively affect Canadian policy in Afghanistan and the region: it is not confined to uni- versity pub debating societies or union hall Friday evening socials.

Our present circumstances in Afghanistan are the result of deci- sions taken by the international com- munity in 2001 and 2002 and by Canadian policy-makers, and of deci- sions taken by the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership to embark on an insurgent campaign to destabilize Afghanistan. All of these decisions predate the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In a vague sense, there was a belief by American planners in the after-shock of the 9/11 attacks that Operation Enduring Freedom would collapse the regime and root out the al-Qaeda infrastructure and leadership: this would, it was thought, take six months or more, in their estimation. Some form of follow-on international coalition working with the UN would eventually handle reconstruction and reconstitute a legitimate Afghan gov- ernment and associated security forces. In the outpouring of international support for America after 9/11, that was a reasonable proposition. The 2001 campaign to take down the Taliban regime progressed so rapidly that American planners were caught off guard when resistance collapsed in December. They did not have time (within those 60-90 days) to formulate a detailed plan to stabilize the country while operations were still in progress.

Several problems arose, however. First, the UN would not consider play- ing a reconstruction role under American command and wanted another security force on the ground before it would come in. The anti- Taliban Afghans were suspicious of the UN and any associated force, which they correctly believed would interfere in their post-conflict manoeuvrings for power. Some American command- ers were also concerned that a UN force would impose rules of engage- ment and other limitations

that would interfere with the hunt for sen- ior enemy commanders: they had seen the UN and NATO fail at this before in Bosnia.

The compromise was the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). ISAF was, how- ever, extremely limited in what it could do and where it could go. It had a restrictive mandate; it only had 1,500 “bayonets” and 3,000 support people and was outnumbered by 26,000 anti-Taliban Afghan forces in Kabul alone. Nobody really wanted to lead it and few wanted to contribute to it. In essence, ISAF was symbolic, designed to get the international com- munity to buy in to Afghan recon- struction under international, not American, auspices. There was also a vague notion in late 2001 and early 2002 that ISAF would someday expand throughout the country to perform a greater stabilization role.

The reality was that the outpouring of support for the United States after 9/11 was purely chimeric. Some NATO members contributed to ISAF, but their hearts were really not in it. The Americans, knowing that they were not really structured for nor inclined to “nation-build,” were in a bind. They planned on being out of Afghanistan in less than two years and having an inter- national force to replace them, but the possibility of interfactional civil war was high: indeed, al-Qaeda was deliber- ately stimulating tensions in Gardez and Khost provinces in order to get Afghan commanders to fight among themselves. Taliban and al-Qaeda forces were holed up in several mountain retreats in the east and these still need- ed to be reduced.

During this chaotic time, Operation Enduring Freedom commanders were also focusing on follow-on campaigns. They anticipated early on that al-Qaeda would flee Afghanistan and seek refuge elsewhere. The most likely course of action would have al-Qaeda making a run for a country or a zone where there was limited international scrutiny or influence. Pakistan at this time was con- sidered on side and was thought to be an unlikely haven. Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge were too far away, as was Algeria. The Stans were a possibility, but the most likely areas would be Yemen, Somalia and maybe Sudan. The priority was al-Qaeda, not the Taliban. Al Qaeda still had the means to attack the United States, while the fragmented, defeated Taliban were essentially a local problem. Al-Qaeda was a dangerously wounded fleeting target and quite correctly demanded the bulk of the available mil- itary and information collection resources.

Operations to go after what was left of the Taliban would contin- ue in 2002 until they were incapable of operating sizable military forces. Other operations were conducted to reduce tensions between Afghan factions. All of this was conducted under the aus- pices of Operation Enduring Freedom, while ISAF attempted to exert a pres- ence in the capital, Kabul, and protect the Afghan interim administration, led by Hamid Karzai.

Attempts by American planners to develop a follow-on force for ISAF, something that could operate through- out the country, continued in the win- ter of 2002. Germany and Turkey were cajoled into becoming involved with ISAF: Turkey was essentially bribed by the Americans to take the lead in the summer of 2002. Again, there was little interest from the international commu- nity in providing a stabilization force for

Afghanistan in 2002, just as the UN and others walked away from Afghanistan in 1993 after the defeat of the Communist regime. And as we know, without secu- rity there can be no development.

A 2002 American plan to fill the reconstruction and security gap result- ed in what we now call the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Given that the international community would not contribute significant num- bers of troops, and that it would take some time to build up an Afghan army, the Americans were forced to rely on the anti-Taliban militia forces for secu- rity in the provinces (and then the Americans were attacked in the press for getting into bed with "warlords"). The PRTs were originally designed to work with these provincial governors and their forces, to gather targeting and reconstruction information and coordinate governance as much as pos- sible in order to make a link between the provinces and the new interim government. The Americans attempted to get international community allies to assist with this program, suggesting that nations take the lead in a particu- lar province and assist with reconstruc- tion. It was over a year, late in 2003, before a handful of nations reluctantly came forward: almost all of them insisted that ISAF be expanded and that their PRTs work for ISAF.

Indeed, none wanted to commit to PRTs in the southern areas. Getting a nation to take the lead of ISAF and expand it was a serious problem which resulted in gridlock. Nobody wanted the ISAF lead, and few would commit to PRTs unless they were under ISAF.

The Taliban were not dormant dur- ing this period. The start of their insurgency was announced as early as February 2002. In March Mullah Omar was broadcasting propaganda to his followers. By April, somebody was dis- tributing AK-47s in the rural areas of northern Kandahar province. By August, reconstituted al-Qaeda groups were mounting their first raids against US and Afghan positions along the Pakistani border opposite Khost province, events which inaugurated the border campaign. Training camps were reopened in Pakistani "B" areas. Finally, in October 2002, Mullah Omar gave instructions to infiltrate small cells into each Afghan province to pre- pare for an expanded insurgency in the future. These moves were detected and operations shifted to observe and deal with them.

In 2002, some nations agreed to accept the nation- al lead on UN-coordinated reconstruction activities. Germany was to handle the creation and training of the police force; Italy agreed to build a justice system; the United Kingdom took con- trol of counter-narcotics efforts; while army training was handled by a combina- tion of French, British, Canadian and American military personnel. As of 2006, four years later, there has been little or no progress in the police and justice pil- lars. The Afghan National Army is of variable quality but is in marginally better shape than the police. The counter-narcotics effort works at cross-purposes to the counter-insurgency campaign.

The country that tried its best to turn all of this around was Canada. In late 2003-04, Canada played a major role in the NATO-ization of ISAF, leading the force and planning its expansion outside of Kabul. Canadian military leaders and diplomats

con- ceptualized plans to disarm Afghan militia factions and incorporate them into the new army or demobilize them. This contributed significantly to averting civil war between some of the more heavily armed factions. Canada also established a small advisory team to assist the Karzai government in develop- ing a plan to convince the IMF and World Bank to invest in Afghanistan: no money, no development.

Once Canada relinquished the ISAF lead in 2004, however, the new European ISAF commanders shut down the advisory team and placed stricture after stricture on ISAF so that once again few wanted to contribute to it. Tensions between the European com- manders and the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom increased during the Iraq War. It was not until 2005-06 that Canada's formally estab- lished Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan, operating independently from ISAF and the UN, was able to mentor the Afghan government so that an Afghan National Development Strategy could be formulated and become the basis of IMF "buy-in," also known as the Afghanistan Compact.

The al-Qaeda-supported Taliban insurgency was in its formative stages in 2002-03. It experimented with various tactics and organizations, learning what worked and what didn't. For example: there is a belief that suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were tactics learned from the Iraq insur- gent experience in 2004-05. The reality is that al-Qaeda and the Taliban were planning to use both in 2002 and commenced their use in 2003. Operation Enduring Freedom was successful at destroying any Taliban guerrilla sub- unit that could be identified in 2003, which forced even more adaptation onto the enemy. The suicide and IED attacks were tactics of desperation because they couldn't do anything else.

The situation, as we know, evolved. The Taliban and their supporters learned that spectacular suicide and IED attacks were of great interest to the media and realized after the initial American experi- ences with the Iraqi insurgencies that attacks could exploit media coverage to strategic effect. This suicide campaign started in the summer and fall of 2005 in Kandahar province. At the same time, the Taliban learned that operations in Afghanistan required careful planning and preparation. They started to develop strategic goals. They knew that if they were going to achieve these goals, they needed the support or at least the acqui- escence of the population. Thus serious mobilization of the rural populations in Pashtun-dominated southern provinces commenced sometime in 2005. This mobilization campaign plays on actual and perceived grievances among the population, particularly the presence of corrupt police, "Western" developmen- tal programs for women and the poppy eradication effort.

The enemy then ramped up guer- rilla operations in 2006 to work con- currently with its terrorist operations. This forced Operation Enduring Freedom and then ISAF to adopt a more robust counter-insurgency posture, which in turn annoys the "devel- opers" and provides fodder to critics who think that because we are engaged in military operations we are failing or have somehow regressed. We anticipated that the enemy would adapt. We have met them with our own adaptation. This is what happens in war: it is not an indicator of failure.

Is it the lack of "development" that has caused this state of affairs? No. The insurgents have chosen this path. They choose to kill doctors, nurses and teachers because they are an obstacle to their objectives. They choose to play on people's fears. They know that every time they kill a Canadian in a suicide attack, there will be those in Canada who will call for our withdrawal. The real problem is getting security and a legitimate government presence out to these rural areas. And we have been hindered in those efforts by slow, pon- derous, European-led programs or, in the case of national development plan- ning, outright interference by those jealous of Canadian success in this area. Canada can help turn all of this around: we have before. It only requires the national will to do so. We cannot afford to lose the Kandahar front of the al-Qaeda War.

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