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Learning the Lessons of Military Interventions from Afghanistan?

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March 2002 was the first attempt to announce an end to the Afghan war. Twenty years on, Farah Karimi reflects on the "war on terror" in her new book, *In the Name of Freedom*. She recounts her many trips to conflict zones in Afghanistan and interactions with citizens as a development specialist, and later, as the director of Oxfam Netherlands. A staunch human rights advocate, she sees military interventions as a flawed cornerstone of the West's foreign policy that is desperately in need of repair.

Marieke Blekemolen: What drove you to write this book?

Farah Karimi: I follow developments closely due to my background as an Iranian refugee and my political and professional interests. The Trump years were terrible. In February 2020, he made an agreement with the Taliban. I don't think many people have read this agreement, even though it is only four pages long. But if you let the content sink in, you realise that the recent dramatic developments were inevitable. In the agreement, the US promised to withdraw, to release 5,000 Taliban fighters, and to lift all sanctions. The only thing the Taliban promised in return was to stop attacking Americans and NATO soldiers and to stop cooperating with al-Qaeda. They made no promises of a ceasefire or an end to terrorist acts against the Afghan people. This agreement was a surrender all but in name.

When I read this, my first thought was that it couldn't possibly be true. But a few months later, when the US released the Taliban prisoners and terrorist attacks against the Afghan population increased, it became clear to me that the Taliban had returned – 20 years after 9/11. That made me ask: what was the response to the war on terror for the past 20 years? How are they related? And above all, what can we learn?

In your book, you describe meeting with human rights activists and people living under oppression. Which meeting made the greatest impression on you?

I have met so many incredible people, it's hard for me to name just one. One person who comes to mind is a Palestinian woman, over 80 years old, living in a refugee camp in Lebanon. She had fled Syria, and it was the third time she had left her home in search of safety. What she had gone through was so inhumane yet she retained her dignity in an overcrowded refugee camp.

Or I think of Habiba Sarabi, who around the turn of the millennium worked clandestinely as a physician under the Taliban regime on behalf of Afghan women, while based in Pakistan. She later became a minister in the first government of President Karzai and Afghanistan's first female governor. She was a member of the Afghan delegation negotiating with the

Taliban. I spoke to her extensively when writing this book. She, her children, and grandchildren are, once again, refugees. There are many similar stories, demonstrating that the decisions we make in The Hague, Brussels, or Washington have major consequences for people of flesh and blood.

In your book, you are critical of military interventions. Did the encounters change your view?

I am not a pacifist; sometimes intervention is necessary. I also initially supported the mission in Afghanistan. I was there in 2000, under the Taliban regime, and saw with my own eyes how terrible the situation was. And I really wished for that to change.

But I was always critical of the power of military interventions to resolve situations. Admittedly, I have become even more critical not only about military interventions but also about major investments in building up armies and the security sector which have failed to bring security. What do you see happening in Afghanistan now? Who is standing up to the Taliban? Not the military. Not the police. Not the security apparatus that has been boosted with billions. No, it is women and young girls.

They were targeted with education and aid organisations invested in them. Such investments in people are permanent. But it is precisely these investments that are not considered sexy. That is why I really hope that politicians, and GroenLinks especially, will reflect on the effects of military missions and learn from them.

In retrospect, wasn't military intervention a mistake?
Indeed. The constant rhetoric of war since Afghanistan has led to the complete eradication of the autonomous reform movements that were underway in countries like Iran. The militarisation of counter-terrorism has only reduced the space for bottom-up civilian movements.

What I want to show in my book is how the war on terror has in fact resulted in less freedom. The number of organisations wanting to engage in the jihad, inspired by extreme Islam, has increased enormously and is much more widespread. For example, people in the Sahel region of Africa are now suffering enormously under these kinds of terrorist organisations. But also think about IS in Syria and Iraq, and the large number of terrorist attacks in Europe. All this shows that the military approach of the past 20 years is not only ineffective but counterproductive. The military path has only led to more – and more brutal – terrorism.

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movements.

You advocate diplomacy, peace initiatives and the strengthening of democracy and human rights. I quote: "Dialogue, dialogue and more dialogue. Permanently removing the ideological basis of the jihadists is the only way to win this war." Why would dialogue change the minds of fundamentalists?

Of course, there's little point in talking to people who are totally radicalised. I'm not advocating that either. I propose to focus on those groups that have not yet crossed that line. You are not born a terrorist. But military interventions create insecurity. This reduces economic activity and makes it increasingly difficult for civilians to sustain an existence. Young men in countries like Niger, Mali, and Nigeria in search of an income and ways to survive end up with terrorist organisations. Waging war only makes things worse. First, it deprives civilians of a future, and second, it reduces the space for civilian reform movements. Iran is a case in point. It is specifically the bellicose rhetoric (depicting Iran as the axis of evil), the threat of war, and the US sanctions that have strengthened the revolutionary guard.

So where to begin? You need to look for opportunities for civilian investment. This does not mean that you should not invest in a strong police force and a good justice system. This is also important. But above all, you need to invest in education and employment so that people have perspective and are not attracted to terrorist groups. However, this takes a long time.

What could the Netherlands do in Afghanistan?

This is enormously complicated, of course. Evacuating people who have worked for us is extremely important to consider, not so much because they worked for the Netherlands but because these are people who believed in change and worked for it with their hearts and souls. These people are now being taken from their homes and killed. They really need protection. It is truly awful how the Netherlands has failed to offer this protection.

Back in September 2020, I spoke with Dutch diplomats in Afghanistan for this book. They said that the Taliban were at the door in Kabul. All the politicians who now say they didn't see it coming are simply not credible. It was already quite clear last year that the Taliban were coming back.

But the evacuation of people doesn't address the broader humanitarian crisis in the country. This country of 30 million people has been set back in time. There is hardly any economic activity left, and there is a huge drought. Humanitarian aid is the first step. It is essential; you cannot leave people there to die. The aid must however be organised so that it doesn't go through the Taliban.

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It is interesting that although the Taliban really haven't changed much, the population has. In the last 20 years, around 10 million new people have been added to the population. The majority of these Afghans are under the age of 25. The Taliban will have to offer them education, health care, employment, but they can't deliver it. The economy is in shambles. Afghanistan needs the international community. As the international community, we must use this information and exert pressure. For example, there are massive campaigns underway to get girls back to school, and these are having an effect in certain areas.

You also need to exert diplomatic pressure to establish a government with some legitimacy. Whether it is elections or the country's traditional Loja Jirgas [meetings of community representatives], it must be more inclusive. Large groups, such as followers of the Shia faith, minorities like Hazara and other ethnic groups, are now excluded. That is unacceptable. As long as this is the case, you cannot recognise the Taliban. Finally, the international community must also exert diplomatic pressure on countries such as Pakistan, the patrons of the Taliban.

You end with a letter to your grandson. One of the life lessons you give is to "learn from history". Do you have the impression that something has been learned after 20 years of the war on terror?

I have the impression that everyone has become more critical about going to war. The only thing I fear is that people are now turning more and more to killing people suspected of terrorism with drones. We are waging wars from a distance and further closing the borders to refugees, trying to protect ourselves in this way. But you need to make long-term investments in people and the development of countries.

What I really hope is that the current wishful thinking in foreign policy stops. There was a kind of blueprint mentality: we are going to bring democracy. There was no regard for the existing conflicts between population groups and the destabilising effect that intervention has on the relations between these groups.

Is that just from a lack of knowledge?

When politicians are asked, "What has been the benefit of intervening in Afghanistan?" their answer is: "The Netherlands has shown itself to be a good ally." That makes me wonder if that is what this is all about? Military interventions have cost thousands of people their lives and set the Middle East on fire! The human suffering is immeasurable. And all of this to show that the Netherlands is a good ally?

We need to take decisions much more autonomously from the US, and that requires a stronger European foreign policy with its own vision. After all, one of the consequences of the war on terror and the developments in the Middle East is the refugee crisis here in Europe.

Decision-making should also be based on much better analyses of the local situation. For instance, what are the autonomous movements in those countries? It is best to act as a catalyst for positive developments. But then you have to know what those positive developments are.

None of this is hopeful…

I certainly have hope. I have a grandchild, and I want him to grow up in a better world. So of course I have hope! What I want to say with the letter to him is that no matter how bad it is, you always have a choice. Look at people I spoke to for my book: human rights defenders who choose change through peaceful means, who persevere, who do not give up fighting for freedom and democracy despite prisons, torture, and hardship. Those people, those movements – they are our hope!

This is an edited version of an interview originally published by *De Helling*.

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