

Aid, Not War in Afghanistan

An Open Letter to the President from Religious Leaders

Dear Mr. President.

As your target date to begin U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan approaches, we are compelled by the prophetic vision of just peace to speak. We represent a diversity of faith communities - ranging from just war to pacifist traditions. As leaders of these communities, some of us initially supported the war in Afghanistan as a justified response to the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Others opposed the war, believing there were better ways than military force to address the al Qaeda threat. Today, however, we are united in the belief that it is time to bring the U.S. war in Afghanistan to an end.

After nine years, what began as a response to an attack has become an open-ended war against a Taliban centric insurgency—which itself is largely motivated to drive out foreign troops and has no designs beyond its own borders. The military operation has so far resulted in the deaths of over 2,500 Coalition troops, including 1,600 from the U.S. Estimates are that over 20,000 Afghan civilians have died. And yet, the security situation is deteriorating and Taliban influence is spreading. The military situation is at best a stalemate. Al Qaeda barely exists in Afghanistan, but it has metastasized into Pakistan and has established itself in Yemen, Somalia, and other places around the globe.

Relief and development aid, desperately needed after three decades of war, have been integrated into and are subservient to military operations. Civilian aid organizations that attempt to provide much-needed relief are often seen as part of the foreign military occupation and have faced increasing attacks. Additionally, this form of militarized aid has worked to undermine long term sustainability while proving ineffective in addressing immediate poverty concerns. As the faith community, we have experience doing this kind of work, and maintain relationships with partners on the ground. We see and hear the need for relief and development aid to be provided through these civilian aid organizations while untying it from a counterinsurgency strategy and involving and empowering local Afghan partners to the greatest extent possible.

Moreover, this type of aid is most effective - both in terms of the development in Afghanistan, and the cost of the conflict. The past ten years have shown that we cannot broker peace in Afghanistan by military force; it is time to transition toward a plan that builds up civil society and provides economic alternatives for Afghans. At a time of economic turmoil, as we are presented with difficult financial and budgetary decisions at home, we have an opportunity to invest in aid that both supports the people of Afghanistan, and saves our country much needed funds.

We recognize that legitimate ethical and moral issues are at stake in Afghanistan — U.S. national security, protecting the lives of Coalition servicemen and women, protecting Afghan

civilians, defending the rights of Afghan women, supporting democracy and, of course, saving innocent lives from the inevitable death and destruction that accompany war. We humbly believe there is a better way than war to address these important issues.

What is needed now is a comprehensive package of interlocking arrangements to enhance security and stability. This alternative path is not without some risk, but it is preferable to the known dangers of war. As you said in December 2009, the US should begin a responsible but accelerated withdrawal of troops, beginning with a significant number in July 2011 and continuing along a set timetable. This must be linked to a comprehensive security agreement, a regional multi-lateral diplomatic initiative, and increased public & private assistance for locally-based economic and social development programs. We must commit to proactively share the costs of war, which have been borne disproportionately by the veterans of these wars, their families and thousands of Afghan civilians.

We reaffirm our religious hope for a world in which "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid."

You remain in our prayers.

Respectfully,

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