News



Ali Ahmad, 4, sits with his father and relatives at their house after he survived a suicide attack at a mosque in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 27. (Newscom/Reuters/Omar Sobhani)



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September 7, 2017

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After nearly 16 years of armed conflict in which three surges of foreign troops have failed to end the violence, one strategy has never been tried in Afghanistan: robust peacemaking.

President Donald Trump promised that the plan he announced Aug. 21 would dramatically change the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia. But experts in peacebuilding say he is continuing an approach that has failed miserably for more than 15 years while ignoring alternatives that are backed by research and evidence.

Refusing to specify numbers of troops or time frames, Trump committed the U.S. military to continued involvement in Afghanistan, postponed consideration of a political settlement until "after an effective military effort" and said the U.S. would focus on "killing terrorists" rather than "nation-building."

Trump also promised to pressure Pakistan to stop harboring terrorists, planned to develop the U.S. partnership with India, and pointed out he had already lifted restrictions on military commanders in the field.

The announcement was discouraging for those who have watched the U.S. reliance on military might repeatedly fail to end this longest conflict in American history, while strategies based on diplomacy, negotiation and collaboration with Afghan civil society are barely attempted.

"What's really striking to me is that the news articles have said the Taliban is stronger now than in 2001," said Lisa Schirch, a research professor at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. "So after 15 years of war, of trying a military solution, we have strengthened the group that we were trying to tackle."

"In five years, we'll look back and we'll look at how many more billions of dollars have been wasted instead of going to U.S. schools and hospitals and roads," Schirch said. "We're pouring money into dropping bombs that create more Taliban."

Since the U.S. invaded Afghanistan with an international coalition in the wake of the bombing of the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, the war has cost the nation $1.07 trillion including direct costs (like the cost of troop

deployment) and indirect costs (like decades of medical services to veterans), according to the website The Balance.

The human toll, too, has been tremendous: more than 100,000 deaths. More than 2,400 American soldiers have been killed in the war and more than 20,000 wounded, while over 4,800 Afghan soldiers died in 2016 alone. Over 11,000 Afghan civilians were killed in 2016.

Schirch wrote her own detailed strategy to end the conflict, "Designing a Comprehensive Peace Process for Afghanistan," in 2011. The plan, which Schirch says is still relevant today, offers an especially thorough outline of a tactic that every person interviewed for this article advocated: bringing civil society groups into negotiations.

Schirch says a "robust peace" requires "engaging with a lot of the diverse stakeholders in Afghanistan because the split between the Taliban and the government is only one of the divisions there."

Schirch said a robust peace would "address some of the real injustices and traumas of the past," including conflicts between ethnic groups, leading to the creation of a coherent society that will not quickly revert to violent conflict.



Afghan officials inspect outside the German embassy after a May 31 bombing in Kabul. At least 90 people were killed and more than 400 were wounded in one of the worst extremist attacks since the drawdown of foreign forces in 2014. (CNS/Reuters/Mohammad Ismail)

Her strategy is based on studies of what has worked in other countries — such as Colombia, the Philippines, and Guatemala — and Schirch has been invited to present at conferences by the Departments of State and Defense. However, she has not seen her ideas implemented.

"We know from research and history what works," Schirch said, "and I can't figure out why none of that is being applied in Afghanistan."

David Cortright, director of policy studies at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, said he is frustrated at the lack of a "serious diplomatic push" in Afghanistan.

Trump's plan "continues the war without any prospect for actual 'success' or 'victory,' " Cortright said, pointing out that casualties are now higher than ever for civilians and Afghan forces. "I think one of the things that's not been mentioned enough about this is that it's essentially asking the Afghanis to die for the sake of our lack of strategy and vision. ... There's really a humanitarian urgency, I believe, that no one seems to even pay attention to."

He said negotiation would take a lot of work but could be much more effective than continued military action.

Cortright suggested it would be possible to arrange for a ceasefire and negotiate a stable peace if other countries, such as Pakistan, India, China and Iran, as well as the U.N., would sponsor the process. A third-party peacekeeping force, preferably Muslim-led or Muslim-majority, would also be essential.

Cortright says the U.S. must commit to providing continued economic, social and political support; otherwise, the peace will collapse and the Taliban will take over.

Aref Dostyar, a former fellow* at the Center for International Policy and the founder of Afghans for Progressive Thinking, also supported a strong role for the U.S., especially until a peacekeeping force can be established.

Dostyar praised aspects of Trump's plan, including its focus on the South Asia region as a whole and its emphasis on pressuring Pakistan to close down "terrorists' sanctuaries." Like Trump, Dostyar also advocated a conditions-based approach rather than a time-based approach in a recent article.

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However, Dostyar was concerned that Trump's plan continued to emphasize a military solution.

He identified a lack of "discourse about steps that would prepare us to negotiate," caused by an understanding of peace as the military defeat of the enemy in both Afghanistan and the international community.

To remedy this, Dostyar suggested the Afghan government follow a "people-centric" strategy, not ruling out military action, but prioritizing the people's welfare over

killing insurgents.

Eli McCarthy, peace and justice representative for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, listed several ways the people's welfare could be improved. He said the needs Afghans have include trust, participation in politics, self-determination, healing, and respect for their religion.

Any negotiations should "integrate elements of trauma healing," McCarthy said, and the U.S. and NATO members should "comprehensively acknowledge the harm they have caused in Afghanistan" and provide "substantial compensation."

However, hopes for healing are dampened by the Trump administration's lack of emphasis on diplomacy.

Schirch said that even during the Obama administration, the Defense Department often left State Department diplomats out of major decisions. Today, State Department positions are being cut or left unfilled.

"I think the U.S. needs more humility," Schirch said, explaining that she has seen great capacity in Afghan civil society groups that have "been completely ignored" by the U.S.

Some of her university colleagues in Kabul, for example, not only had advanced degrees in peace studies from Western universities but understood the languages and the religious, economic and political context of their country and had decades of experience mediating between tribes, Schirch said.



A displaced Afghan woman arrives with her child July 16, 2016, at a U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees camp upon their voluntary return to Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province from neighboring Pakistan. (CNS/Reuters/Ghulamullah Habibi)

Kathy Kelly, a peace activist and co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence who has spent time in Afghanistan, also pointed out Afghans' potential to promote peace in their own country.

Kelly envisions a program of action where foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan and grassroots activists call for the nations that have occupied Afghanistan to pay reparations that are devoted to rebuilding agricultural infrastructure.

A step in the right direction is the Afghan Peace Volunteer community, a group of young people from various ethnicities who are dedicated to serving the most vulnerable in their country and helping create a "green, equal and nonviolent world without war."

An international coordinator of the Afghan Peace Volunteers, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told NCR that nonviolent options to end the conflict

in Afghanistan include "restorative justice, negotiations, conversations, reconciliation, compensation and agreements among the people at the grassroots level, not negotiations and deals among known perpetrators of war and crime."

Their projects include a permaculture garden, the Borderfree Afghan Street Kids School, which includes nonviolence classes, a women's tailoring cooperative and a campaign to abolish war called #Enough.

"I would encourage elites that govern Afghanistan to learn from the Afghan Peace Volunteers," Kelly said.

* ***Editor's note:*** *This article has been updated to reflect Aref Dostyar's current position.*

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This story appears in the **Making Peace** feature series. View the full series.