

Afghanistan: Where now? Ending the Conflict and Addressing the Humanitarian Crisis

Green Party Conference 2010, Fringe Meeting
Friday 10 September 2010, 19.00 – 20.00, New Lecture Hall, Birmingham Conservatoire

Keith Taylor MEP, European Parliament Permanent Delegation to Afghanistan
Jeremy Corbyn MP, Stop the War Coalition
Stefan Wolff, Professor of International Security, University of Birmingham

Summary of Remarks by Stefan Wolff

There is no doubt that the situation in Afghanistan is very serious, that this is the result of many avoidable mistakes made by the US and ISAF forces in the country, and that the main victims of the current humanitarian crisis are Afghanistan's civilians. It is therefore right and proper that the Green Party should discuss its own policy on Afghanistan. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this discussion, but I do not share the Party's current position on troop withdrawal. Rather, I take the view that an international military presence in Afghanistan will be required for some time to come.

The military confrontation in Afghanistan is not only one between the Taliban (however loosely we may want to define them as a military and political force) and US and ISAF forces, but also one among different factions in an Afghan civil war that has been ongoing in different forms for more than three decades. Withdrawing the international troop presence would only remove one of the fronts in the current confrontation; it would, however, not bring peace to the country.

The result of an immediate troop withdrawal would, in my view, rather be an intensification of the Afghan civil war—violence would spread more widely across the country, it would cost more lives, and it would contribute further to the destruction of what little infrastructure still exists or has been rebuilt in Afghanistan over the past few years. The civil war could drag on for a few years, but, given the current balance of power between the government and the Taliban, in the end a Taliban victory is more likely than not and with it all the social and political consequences within and beyond Afghanistan that we still know from the pre-2001 era.

A more intense civil war would also aggravate the current humanitarian crisis. More widely spread violence would make it all but impossible for humanitarian relief to be delivered, let alone for any of the badly needed reconstruction programmes to make any progress. Not only would more people die as a direct result of the fighting, human suffering as a whole would increase, too, as a consequence of a lack of food, water, sanitation, healthcare, etc. In other words, human security would be all but non-existing.

But will a continued military presence have any positive impact or will it simply mean that there are in fact two wars ongoing at the same time with combined effects similar to those that a more intense civil war would have? I strongly believe that an international military presence will positively contribute to the future of Afghanistan. In the short term, it helps ensure that humanitarian relief can continue, that aid workers are protected, and that basic physical security is assured to an increasing number of Afghan civilians as the Taliban are pushed back. International support also gives the beleaguered Afghan government some breathing space to build its own military capabilities.

Afghanistan's future, however, is not just about the state's military might, it is also more generally about state capacity to deliver basic services to its citizens. This capacity is only poorly developed in Afghanistan right now, and it will require international support to build it. States that recover from civil war generally have low levels of human capital and low administrative capacity, and Afghanistan is no exception in this regard, nor should it be an exception in relation to the international support provided. The kind of civilian presence required to help Afghans build their state, however, needs, at the moment, military protection—protection that the Afghan state is yet not able to provide.

By abandoning its demand for immediate military withdrawal, the Green Party would not commit to an international troop presence either at current levels or for an indefinite period. The current US and ISAF approach to building up Afghan military and security capabilities, alongside humanitarian assistance and a renewed emphasis on building broader state capacity in Afghanistan can deliver both a more stable Afghanistan and a gradual draw-down of international forces. These two goals of Afghan stability and military withdrawal are not mutually exclusive, they can and must work in careful combination, setting realistic goals and assessing progress against benchmarks agreed with the Afghan government. Then, and only then, will it be possible in my view to end the conflict in Afghanistan and address the country's long-standing humanitarian crisis.