

Afghanistan: NATO should go before it's too late

Interview with Ingrid Fiskaa

The Norwegian Peace Initiative (*Fredsinitiativet*) demands a complete withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan. IRINI has talked to the leader of the Peace Initiative, Ingrid Fiskaa, asking her why this would be a good step towards a more peaceful Afghanistan.

IRINI: Could you tell us a bit about *The Peace Initiative* and its impact on Norway's Afghanistan policy?

IF: The Peace Initiative is a political platform for organizations and individuals against aggressive warfare based on the UN-charter. It is not anti-imperialist per se, but this point of departure makes you end up with certain radical standpoints: It lead us to oppose the invasion of Afghanistan, as it ran counter to public international law, and also to oppose Norwegian participation in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Originally, we did not have a standpoint on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), since it originally was only a stabilization force in Kabul. Recently, however, NATO has taken over the command of all combat operations, making it necessary for us to decide on a common point of view: At our annual meeting in February we adopted a resolution stating that all NATO forces should withdraw completely. The Norwegian policy is obviously not completely in line with our views, but the government has taken steps we find positive, such as ending the Norwegian presence in OEF, and the decision not to send Norwegian ISAF-forces to Southern Afghanistan. This means that Norway does not participate directly in NATO's aggressive warfare.

IRINI: You mentioned that the invasion of Afghanistan runs counter to international law. This is somewhat controversial, as the invasion is often described as a part of the US's legal right to defend themselves after 9/11. Could you elaborate?

The attack runs counter to international law because Afghanistan never declared war on the US. The limited, though terrible, attack was made by a terrorist group comprised mainly of Saudi members. The US could therefore not claim self-defence as a legitimate cause for the war. Furthermore, the UN resolution of September 12th that was said to justify the war, does not mention military force in the operative parts of the resolution, much less military force against Afghanistan. The resolution stressed finding and bringing to justice the ones responsible for the attack,

but not military action. There were some unclear passages that could be used by those wanting a war, but they were not sufficiently unequivocal to give a mandate for war.

IRINI: In your resolution, you stress that one of the main negative points about NATO's presence is its cooperation with the warlords. Are there any alternatives to cooperating with the warlords?

IF: You have a point. NATO can't control Afghanistan on its own, there's a mutual dependency here. And you're also right that Northern Afghanistan is as calm as it is because NATO is cooperating with the local warlords. But we also see many negative consequences of this, like the new law on amnesty that lets every war criminal since the 1970s off the hook. The warlords could never have pushed something like that through without NATO's protection.

IRINI: The resolution focuses on how the Afghan civil society should be allowed to decide whether international presence should continue or not. With Afghanistan in such a chaotic state and civil society as weak as it is, how do you think this would work? Is it even possible to talk about an "Afghan civil society"?

IF: Of course, Afghanistan is a country ravaged by invasion and civil war. The structure of society reflects this –Afghanistan has a war-based economy, and is all in all a pretty old-fashioned, undeveloped country. It seems unfair to talk about a civil society with "western standards". Nevertheless, there are important regional and local social structures, popularly recognized power structures, which should be heavily involved in the formation of a post-war Afghanistan. The councils of elders could be especially relevant. We saw what kind of role they can play recently, when the council of elders in the town of Musa Qala facilitated a cease-fire between the Taliban and the British forces. Being a feminist, I am strongly against the conservative nature of these councils, but the point here is to build on what's left of Afghan civil society.

Additionally, Afghanistan does have an elected central government and a parliament,

even if there are a lot of problematic issues regarding these institutions: The election was not completely fair. The president was first installed by the Americans and only then elected. Also, the warlords that happened to be on the “right side” before the invasion have far too much power in the parliament and government.

IRINI: *But these regional and local authorities you mention as part of the solution, they will have to include the warlords you criticize NATO for collaborating with.*

IF: Yes, in some places these authorities will have to include warlords. But they should not get a decisive vote. This goes for the Taliban too – they are, after all, also just warlords. The difference is only one of geography and ethnicity. The size of the Taliban is at one level an expression of their popularity, so including them in discussions is in a way legitimate. But although one let these people participate, one must make sure to not only include people whose business is war in the decision making process. There’s also a difference between going into dialogue with people on the one hand, and protecting them on the other hand.

IRINI: *If NATO left Afghanistan wouldn’t that make things worse for the Afghan civil society you see as necessary for getting the country out of its unfortunate situation?*

IF: That is a possibility, but the situation is already getting worse now, because NATO is in Afghanistan. The way they are behaving - bombing civilian villages, strengthening the position of the warlords – is making the opposition towards them increase, and by extension also the opposition to the current regime in Kabul. The international think-tank “Senlis Council” reported at least 4000 civilian casualties during NATO’s operations in 2006 alone. To give just one example, Operation Medusa in the fall of 2006 killed an unknown number of civilians and forced at least 20.000 people to flee from their homes as their villages and crops had been destroyed, reportedly by white phosphor. In this way, NATO is actually creating new recruits for the Taliban among

the Afghan people. The question of whether NATO should have a phased withdrawal or pull out immediately depends on how rapidly the resistance towards them will grow. It is entirely possible that within a year or so, the situation will be so intolerable that NATO simply has to get out quickly.

IRINI: *But who should take over when NATO leaves? Whose job should it be to keep Afghanistan from collapsing even more?*

IF: The role of the Peace Initiative is not to sketch out detailed political solutions. We are a broad network of activists who focus on concrete demands. Also, I have to stress that I am not an expert on Afghanistan, so I can’t sit here at the University of Oslo and solve Afghanistan’s problems over a cup of coffee. Therefore, I can’t provide any thorough step-by-step plan for what should happen when NATO leaves. Nevertheless, in my personal opinion, I agree with those who say that pulling NATO out without doing anything else would create a bad situation. I doubt that this situation would be worse than if NATO stays – but it would not be an optimal solution. I think a scenario where NATO is phased out and the UN is phased in would be the least unhappy solution. One should first facilitate a cease-fire between the warring factions, followed by a process run by the UN, where regional authorities with popular legitimacy together decide on a plan for phasing out the NATO-forces from the country. Then there should be elections for a new parliament. These parliamentarians, together with regional and local authorities, could decide on the matter of continued international presence.

There could be a military presence to safeguard the creation of an institution that can decide on whether the international presence should stay or go – and decide what shape this international presence should be in. But everything should happen as democratically as possible, and NATO would be the completely wrong hand on the steering wheel in such a process, as they are a part of this conflict. As such, they could not function as a stabilizing, peacekeeping force. The UN is the only organization that could fulfil

such a role, I don't think there is any other possibility.

IRINI: Onemight say, as Colin Powell purportedly told President Bush, that "if you break the cup, you own it", and should have, consequently, a responsibility to fix it. Why should the UN, whose troops usually consist of soldiers from the Third World, be given the task of solving a problem created by the West?

IF: The point is not that the UN should clean up after the US all the time. The point is that NATO is only adding to the problem, not solving it. It is dominated by the US, which obviously has strategic aims in the region. Furthermore, the NATO forces are too attached to the warlords to have any credibility when it comes to fixing the problem. NATO is seen as an occupying force in many regions, an attitude that is spreading to other regions as well: They're becoming increasingly unpopular. As long as NATO is in the country, dropping bombs on the civilian population in the South, they will only add new recruits to the resistance and turn the populace away from the central government, over to the Taliban.

A UN operation would be in Afghanistan on completely other grounds than OEF and ISAF: They will not be there as an occupying force. That means, among other things, that one needs to have a decisive change of troops - not just give the same soldiers blue hats. A peacekeeping UN force would not have the same military capabilities as the NATO forces, but the point is that the UN would not have to use that kind of firepower, anyway. They would be a purely defensive force, not seen as an enemy by the population. I agree that the problem with purely defensive peacekeeping forces is that they are vulnerable if someone wants them out, but a UN force should be accompanied by a democratic process and a truce with the Taliban - they should not be a foreign element and hence not seen as a threat.

IRINI: What is your attitude to the Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan?

IF: The soldiers themselves, out from the mission they have been given, are doing as best they can. The decision to send them there

was taken at a political level, so they're just doing their jobs. I won't criticize those who are there, putting their lives on the line. Much of what they are doing is also being received well by the locals, and in some regions people feel safer because of their presence. Such positive work increases the possibility that NATO can be phased out instead of just leaving instantly. I would like to make clear that Peace Initiative is not against a Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan per se. In the event that there would be a UN peacekeeping force on the ground in Afghanistan, there would be an entirely different situation. In such an event I personally would be in favour of sending Norwegian troops on a defensive UN mission.

The interview was conducted in Norwegian by Ruben Røsler and Mikkel Berg. Translated by IRINI.