

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In Afghanistan, Escalate Development and Diplomacy, Not War

In a national address on December 1st, 2009, President Barack Obama detailed his strategy to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan and to thereby escalate the war.

As an organization committed to the application of psychological knowledge and expertise in promoting peace, social justice, human rights, and sustainability, Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) received this news with great concern. While acknowledging the President's careful thought and deliberation, we believe that his decision is ill-advised and counter-productive because it fails to adequately recognize the following key considerations:

- Military escalation will almost assuredly stimulate heightened armed resistance. Psychologically, military escalation supports the images of the U. S. as the occupier and the dominator of Muslims that the Taliban and other radical elements use to gain the support of the Afghan people. The increased violence and destruction that result from the escalation will undercut our aims by turning new generations to jihadist extremism, multiplying the terrorist threats facing the U.S. for decades to come.
- In embracing further militarization to promote the welfare of the Afghan people, we overlook the catastrophic toll that war brings to the civilian population, including the tragic loss of innocent life, the destruction of now fragile communities, and the grievous suffering borne by women and children -- a far cry from the lofty goal of advancing human rights. At the same time, this state of continuous war inflicts severe psychological trauma on many of the Afghan people, adults and children alike, rendering the creation of a peaceful society all the more difficult.
- Especially after their years of repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, escalation will further compound the enormous burden borne by our men and women in uniform. The dreadful consequences are already apparent, not only in lives lost and life-long debilitating injuries, but also in deeply troubling rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide among our service members.
- Sending additional troops epitomizes the destructive effects of psychological over-commitment, whereby the investments we have already made and the losses we have already suffered perversely compel us to "follow through" so as not to "waste" the efforts we have already expended -- even while we acknowledge that in fact there is no military solution in Afghanistan.
- The escalation decision appears to be the result of a too familiar psychological process whereby only a narrow set of alternatives receives serious consideration. In this instance, the additional deployment of troops likely emerges from the excessive influence of a bloated defense budget, experts with vested interests, defense contractors who benefit from endless war, and an unbending ideology glorifying American exceptionalism and military prowess.

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Instead of the proposed military escalation, we believe progress can be achieved by building the resistance of Afghan communities to extremist takeovers through concerted work on human security. The heart of this work is an immediate and robust development effort that enables Afghan communities to make visible, rapid gains in meeting their basic needs for necessities such as food, health care, shelter, and education.

This non-military approach should empower communities and help to develop the civil society processes that are essential components of a healthy political system. Promoting and protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls should be a key priority of this effort for both the U.S. and Afghan governments. Meeting basic needs will also weaken radical influences over the population and undermine the image of the U. S. as the enemy of Muslim people.

This alternative strategy for success and for a stable Afghanistan that respects the rights of all its citizens depends upon a reduction -- not an escalation -- in U. S. military operations. It should include a transfer of physical security responsibility to Afghan forces and the commencement of multi-level diplomacy to reach a ceasefire and negotiated settlement among contending parties.

Therefore, for the long-term welfare of the people of Afghanistan and the United States, Psychologists for Social Responsibility calls upon the U.S. government to urgently change course from its current path of war to a principled path of peace and development.

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