

**Richard Tanter,**  
**'Australia's Addiction to Alliance War',<sup>□□</sup>**

Korean War	1950□1953
Vietnam War	1962□1973
Gulf War	1990□1991
Afghanistan War	2001□present
Iraq War I	2003□2009
Iraq War II	2014–present
Syria	2015–present
Yemen	2014–present

Australia has an addiction to going to war with its US alliance partner, ‘our great and powerful friend’, whatever the strategic and human consequences. Australia’s armed forces have been at war in operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria—and now unannounced at sea in the Yemeni civil war—almost continually since November 2001, resulting in forty-three dead and several hundred seriously wounded. Many Australian service men and women have returned to combat zones repeatedly. The Afghanistan war has cost Australia more than \$10 billion in direct costs, and a great deal more indirectly. The experience of continuous high-tempo combat operations has strained both the personnel and the organisation of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Moreover, constant operations side by side with the US military have changed the culture of the ADF, including developing a tolerance of deeply confronting operational practices. This continuous engagement in the front line of major wars led by the United States has underpinned a shift in the role of the ADF from a largely self-reliant force centred on the defence of Australia to a niche role as an auxiliary force in US global operations. And at home, in this age of undeclared wars, there is now great concern from former prime ministers and defence chiefs about the manner in which Australian governments send troops to war without any serious consideration by parliament. Australia has become addicted to alliance war without serious national-interest assessments of strategic benefits and costs.

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<sup>□□</sup> *Arena Magazine*, 139 (December 2015), pp. 30-34. Parts of this article appeared in Japanese in 「有志連合の戦争に耽溺した豪州 日本が同じ轍を踏まないために」、『特殊：どうして？公明党、どうなる？自衛隊』、ジャーナリズム・Journalism, November 2015, No. 306, pp. 78–87.

Examining Australia's ongoing ground war in Afghanistan and the Australian air war now extended from Iraq into Syria provides a useful way of thinking about Australia's enthusiastic participation in America's wars.

### **Afghanistan 2001 □ 2015**

Australian troops were first deployed to Afghanistan in November 2001, just a few months after the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. At the height of Australian involvement in Afghanistan, the government deployed almost 2000 troops, and in October 2010, almost a decade after the first deployment of 1550 ADF personnel, the same number remained. Today, despite an announced intention to withdraw, more than 400 remain, mainly Special Forces, operating together with US Special Forces and training their Afghan National Army counterparts. More than 26,000 Australian soldiers have served in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

Australian forces were deployed at the invitation of the Afghan government under a UN mandate from Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001), which 'calls upon Member States to contribute personnel, equipment and other resources to the International Security Assistance Force'. Similar resolutions are passed annually to renew the UN mandate.

In October 2001, Prime Minister John Howard, who was in Washington at the time of the September 11 attacks, formally invoked Article VI of Australia's mutual security treaty with the United States when he deployed air, ground and naval forces to the Afghanistan theatre. The Howard Liberal-National Party coalition government deployed all three squadrons of the elite Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) to Afghanistan through 2002. By December of that year the basic job was done, and the Howard government withdrew almost all ground forces after the Taliban had been driven from power and from any substantial military presence, but it maintained the Australian air and maritime presence.

Less than three years later, as the Taliban recovered ground and US forces swelled once more, the Howard government redeployed Australian Special Forces and a support group in September 2005. The following year the Howard government's commitment expanded when it deployed a large Australian regular army force in Oruzgan Province, where it was to remain until late 2013. During that time ADF units based in the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt and numerous forward operating bases along the populated slivers of green valleys amidst the dust of impoverished and war-torn Oruzgan were engaged in frequent direct combat with Taliban forces; reconstruction efforts, including building schools and medical clinics; and training Afghan forces. Special Forces saw intense combat operating with US and other coalition members mainly in neighbouring provinces, including Helmand and

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Sheridan, 'Australia to be NATO partner, 200 troops may return to Afghanistan', *The Australian*, 2 September 2014, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/australia-to-be-nato-partner-200-troops-may-return-to-afghanistan/story-e6frg8yo-1227044445639?sv=28a0d5b4512458648deb06a2bcd83d34>.

Kandahar. Forty-one Australian soldiers died in Afghanistan, most of them in Oruzgan and neighbouring provinces, and most in the heavy fighting of 2007-2013.<sup>2</sup>

### **War fighting and atrocity**

Throughout the Afghanistan conflict Australian forces have operated as part of the NATO-orchestrated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan mandated by the UN Security Council resolutions. At its height, ISAF was made up of contingents from almost fifty countries, with predictable organisational and operational limitations. But as far as the United States was concerned, Australia was one of the small number of allies it could rely on to conduct war as it ‘should be conducted’, unlike major European allies such as Germany and France, which it thought were too concerned with peace and reconciliation. Australia’s attitude to this divide among US allies in attitudes to war was confirmed by comments made by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to visiting US political figures in 2008, later revealed by WikiLeaks. He quipped: ‘In the south-east, the US, Canada, Britain, Australia and Dutch were doing the “hard stuff”, while in the relatively peaceful north-west, the Germans and French were organising folk dancing festivals’. In fact, contrary to the implication of Rudd’s borrowed bullying machismo, the French had by that time lost fifty soldiers in Afghanistan, the Germans forty-five, and Australia twenty-one.<sup>3</sup>

When the ADF arrived at Tarin Kowt in late 2005, the Netherlands was the lead ISAF nation in the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), with a large military, civilian and police presence. Both the Netherlands and Australia took heavy casualties in their proactive fight against the Taliban, but they also played a substantial role in constructing facilities to benefit the local civilian population, including schools and medical clinics. However, the approaches of the Dutch and the Australians to their shared task of combining ‘pacification’ and reconstruction were notably different.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning the Dutch PRT was extremely cautious about its relationship with the local warlord groupings, led by the feared Matiullah Khan, with whom the Dutch refused to work. While the Dutch had a strong and active military presence, with about 1750 troops in Oruzgan, their approach was at odds with the dominant US—and Australian—approach of ‘whatever it takes to win this war’. By 2010 opposition at home to the Dutch role in the Afghanistan war led to the withdrawal of Dutch

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<sup>2</sup> The Nautilus Institute’s online *Australian Forces Abroad Briefing Book* series <<http://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/>>, including *Australia in Afghanistan*, *Australia in Iraq*, and *Australian Bases Abroad* were established and maintained to provide the information resources necessary for effective public debate about the role and activities of Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police in Iraq, Afghanistan, Timor Leste, the Solomon Islands, and other regions. They provide detailed documentation of many of the matters discussed in this article.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Australian PM derided French Afghan war effort, WikiLeaks’, *rfi English*, 10 December 2010, at <http://www.english.rfi.fr/asia-pacific/20101210-france-role-afghanistan-limited-organising-folk-dancing-festivals-cables-show>; and Phillip Coorey and Kirsty Needham, ‘Smith forced on the defensive over folk dance faux pas’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 2010, at <http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/smith-forced-on-the-defensive-over-folk-dance-faux-pas-20101210-18sxd.html>.

<sup>4</sup> On the Netherlands approach see, for example, *The Netherlands in Afghanistan*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, Department for Communication, December 2006.

forces.<sup>5</sup> The command of the Oruzgan PRT was handed over to Australia and the United States, who were less concerned with human rights as a foundation of a state struggling with the concept of electoral democracy, let alone its practice. Almost immediately, the Australian PRT resumed cooperation with the warlord the Dutch had been so keen to avoid as an unindicted war criminal. Australian defence officials admitted their strategy was to ‘legitimise him over time...finding ways around his corruption’, and eventually allowed him to be appointed provincial police chief, until his assassination this year.<sup>6</sup>

The conduct of war is almost always brutal, and in modern war civilians are far more likely to be killed than combatants. There were a number of official inquiries into incidents where Australian soldiers in Afghanistan caused the deaths of civilians. Perhaps the most disturbing indication of the effects of the Afghanistan war on the culture and mindset of the ADF did not involve the death of a civilian, but rather the treatment of the body of a dead insurgent in 2013.

On the night of 28 May 2013 the ADF’s Special Operations Task Group carried out a joint night raid with Afghan National Security Forces in a village in the province of Zabul, southwest of Oruzgan, searching for a suspected bomb-maker, killing four insurgents. After the fight Australian Special Forces soldiers cut off the hands of one or more of the dead, allegedly to confirm their identities through biometric testing.<sup>7</sup> ISAF and the ADF launched an inquiry almost immediately but released no details of the matter. In August this year, the Australian Broadcasting Commission broke the story of the severed hands, pointing to the prima facie case that ‘the mutilation or mistreatment of the bodies of the dead’ constituted a violation of the Laws of Armed Conflict.<sup>8</sup> Today, more than two years later, the ADF has not released the results of its inquiry. Two months ago, the issue burst into national headlines after it was revealed that the officer in charge of the operation (though not present at the scene) was the Liberal Party’s candidate in a critical and highly publicised by-election in Western Australia.<sup>9</sup> While critics were rightly concerned with the ADF’s failure to release the report of the inquiry into the 2013 Zabul incident, many Australians were less concerned

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Dutch cabinet, Balkenende’s fourth, collapses’, AP, *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 February 2010, at [http://vorige.nrc.nl/international/article2488239.ece/Dutch\\_cabinet,\\_Balkenendes\\_fourth](http://vorige.nrc.nl/international/article2488239.ece/Dutch_cabinet,_Balkenendes_fourth), collapses.

<sup>6</sup> Rafael Epstein and Ben Doherty, ‘Afghan warlord promoted to police chief’, *The Age*, 9 August 2011, at <http://www.theage.com.au/national/afghan-warlord-promoted-to-police-chief-20110808-1ijby.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For a careful and detailed account of this incident and subsequent ADF investigation see James Brown, ‘A Disconnect between Policy and Practice: Defence Transparency in Australia’, *Security Challenges*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2015), pp. 29-38, at <http://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Documents/11-1%20-%20Brown.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Brissenden, ‘Australian special forces troops under investigation for cutting off hands of dead Afghan insurgent’, *ABC News*, 20 August 2013, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-30/claims-sas-troops-cut-hands-off-afghan-insurgent/4924694>.

<sup>9</sup> David Wroe, ‘Andrew Hastie, Liberal byelection candidate, was in charge of troop probed for chopping hands off Taliban’, *The Age*, 22 August 2015, at <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/andrew-hastie-liberal-byelection-candidate-led-troop-probed-for-chopping-hands-off-taliban-20150821-gj52lj>; and Jane Lee, ‘Liberal candidate Andrew Hastie says he has been cleared of wrongdoing in Afghan war incident’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 2015, at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/liberal-candidate-andrew-hastie-says-he-has-been-cleared-of-wrongdoing-in-afghan-war-incident-20150822-gj5b5h.html>.

about matters of international law than with the question of whether Australian elite soldiers had joined the ranks of barbarians from whom they were said to be saving Afghanistan.

### **The scars of war**

The return of Australian forces to Afghanistan after 2005 was the beginning of a continuous stream of ADF battle deaths. Only one soldier died in the first deployments in 2002, but of a total of forty-one combat deaths, the great majority occurred in the expanded phase following the Oruzgan deployment. Ten were killed in 2010, and eleven in 2011.<sup>10</sup> The fact that many more were not killed from the high tempo of combat operations was due in part to the huge ISAF investment in medical support for its soldiers, and in part to innovations in body protection, especially to the chest and head, made possible with Kevlar body armour and helmets. And yet, up to early 2014, 259 Australian soldiers had suffered severe physical wounds, including, according to the Australian government definition of battle wounds: ‘Amputations, Fractures, Gunshot wounds, Hearing loss, Lacerations/contusions, Concussion/traumatic brain injury, Penetrating fragments, and Multiple severe injuries’.<sup>11</sup>

The medical literature of war identifies what are called the ‘signature wounds’ experienced in particular wars, influenced by the predominant type of warfare, the terrain, weapons employed and bodily protection. Kevlar helmets and body armour have drastically reduced the number of head and thoracic wounds from blast and gunshot that have until now been so devastating in modern wars. In their place, the signature wounds among Australian and other coalition troops in Afghanistan concern the parts of the body that body armour does not protect: what military medicine graphically calls ‘mangled extremities’ on the one hand, and blast-wave injuries to fragile brains encased in skulls beneath those helmets—traumatic brain injury (TBI).<sup>12</sup>

These wounds have left physical, psychological and social scars on thousands of Australian veterans. The very high incidences among coalition troops of traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) syndrome epitomise the complex and still poorly understood interactions of physiological and psychological damage of modern warfare—in a

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Afghanistan, 2001–present’, *War History*, Australian War Memorial, at <https://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/afghanistan/>; and ‘Battle casualties in Afghanistan’, *Global Operations*, Department of Defence, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/operations/afghanistan/personnel.asp>.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Battle casualties in Afghanistan’, *Global Operations*, Department of Defence, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/operations/afghanistan/personnel.asp>.

<sup>12</sup> See Terri Tanielian and Lisa Jaycox (eds.), *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*, RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research, 2008. On wounds to the limbs, see the development of the Mangled Extremity Severity Score (MESS) assessment protocol developed during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars in Lucian Fodor and Yehuda Ullmann, ‘Tissue coverage after war trauma’, in Alexander Lerner and Michael Soudry (eds.), *Armed Conflict Injuries to the Extremities: A Treatment Manual*, Springer, 2011, pp. 195-6; see also <http://jmvh.org/article/trends-in-traumatic-limb-amputation-in-allied-forces-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/>. For a short introduction to the voluminous literature on traumatic brain injury, see David M. Lemonick, ‘Bombings and Blast Injuries: A Primer for Physicians’, *American Journal of Clinical Medicine*, Fall 2011, Volume Eight, Number Three, pp. 134-140. For a recent Australian assessment, see Jeffrey V. Rosenfeld, Alexander C. McFarlane, Rocco A. Armonda, Jamie B. Grimes, and Geoffrey S Ling, ‘Blast-related traumatic brain injury’, *The Lancet Neurology*, Volume 12, Issue 9, September 2013, pp. 882–893.

direct historical line from the experience of ‘shell shock’ a century ago in the First World War.<sup>13</sup>

In the summer of 2012, viewers around the world saw some of the human consequences of these wars for men and women in coalition militaries when they watched the extraordinary achievements of war-wounded amputee athletes taking part in the London Paralympics.<sup>14</sup> But Australians have been shocked by frequent reports of the suicides of war veterans, and reports of ‘thousands’ of homeless veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.<sup>15</sup> The memoir of former commander of Australian forces in Afghanistan, Major-General John Cantwell, *Exit Wounds*, courageously exposed the personal psychological consequences of command in such an environment. Even the government’s veterans’ mental-health handbook concedes there are large numbers of veterans suffering from complex mixes of physical and psychological wounds, generating depression, alcohol and substance abuse, family violence, and inability to cope with a return to civilian life. Government estimates suggest that at least 8 per cent of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan—some 2500 men and women—are likely to go onto develop PTSD.

In the Vietnam War, ground operations predominated in ADF actions, and the Australian government has recognised that 29 per cent of Vietnam veterans suffered from PTSD.<sup>16</sup> Veterans’ organisations insist that the PTSD incidence amongst ADF veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan is comparable to that for Vietnam—in other words, almost one in three recent veterans.<sup>17</sup>

In testimony to a parliamentary inquiry in August, Melbourne University economist Professor Philip Clarke emphasised the massive ongoing cost to the community as a whole, underlining that in the United States the total cost of its Iraq and Afghanistan wars, including a proper estimate of the future costs of caring for veterans, is now approaching the almost

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<sup>13</sup> The enduring impact of World War 1 shellshock was profound for Australian society, as it was for those of the European combatants. As a child in the 1950s and 1960s in rural Australia I can remember older men who were said to be ‘not quite right in the head’, or worse. There are anecdotal reports from Afghan community workers of similar lost souls in village today. The traditional English folk song ‘Here comes Shuffling Jack’ somehow came to Australia with its refrain of ‘Here comes Shuffling Jack, Went to the war and never came back’. For an English recorded version with slightly different lyrics see Doug Eunson and Sarah Matthews, ‘Shuffling Jack’, on their CD *Proper Swell*, at [http://www.cothrecords.co.uk/d\\_and\\_s/d\\_s\\_cd.htm](http://www.cothrecords.co.uk/d_and_s/d_s_cd.htm) and [http://www.cothrecords.co.uk/d\\_and\\_s/shuffling\\_samp.mp3](http://www.cothrecords.co.uk/d_and_s/shuffling_samp.mp3).

<sup>14</sup> Ian Stuart Brittain, ‘The military and the modern Paralympic movement’, *The Conversation*, 7 September 2012, at <https://theconversation.com/the-military-and-the-modern-paralympic-movement-9366>.

<sup>15</sup> Cathy Van Extel, ‘Thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans homeless’, *Radio National Breakfast*, ABC, 6 March 2015, at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/thousands-of-iraq-and-afghanistan-veterans-homeless/6285252>.

<sup>16</sup> David Dunt, ‘Vietnam and Iraq: lessons to be learned about mental health and war’, *The Conversation*, 6 August 2012, at <https://theconversation.com/vietnam-and-iraq-lessons-to-be-learned-about-mental-health-and-war-6661>.

<sup>17</sup> Liz Hannan and Erik Jensen, ‘Wounds of war - when the human fallout goes beyond the battlefield’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 2012, at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/wounds-of-war-when-the-human-fallout-goes-beyond-the-battlefield-20120420-1xcgo.html>.

unimaginable figure of \$6 trillion. In Australia, there is a need, Clarke said rightly, 'for the community to understand the resources that are required to care and compensate veterans for war-related disability over the rest of their lives'.<sup>18</sup>

So serious and widespread is the issue that there have been several parliamentary inquiries, including the current parliamentary inquiry into the mental health of recent veterans.<sup>19</sup> Going further, based on their personal experiences and their observation of the failings of the official mental-health machinery concerning PTSD, former assistant secretary of defence Allan Behm and former chief of the defence force Admiral Chris Barrie have formed the organisation Fearless 'to create a co-ordinated network of outreach and support services to help sufferers and their families regain control over their daily lives'.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, while there are official efforts to recognise the war-induced suffering of veterans, the Australian government says nothing about the same range of combat wounds to Afghans, whether received fighting against the Kabul government and its foreign allies like Australia, or as civilians caught between opposing forces.<sup>21</sup> Australia has serious obligations to both groups of Afghans under the Geneva Conventions as an occupying power, but the reality is that while there is a superb military medical system to care for wounded ADF and other coalition troops, the Afghan medical system is almost non-existent for civilians, and off-limits for wounded anti-government fighters. The medical and psychosocial burden to come for whatever postwar Afghanistan that eventually emerges will be enormous, yet it is a matter of little interest to the Australian government that has eagerly contributed to it.

### **The unconvincing rationales for war in Afghanistan**

There is a puzzle about the Australian deployment to Afghanistan, in what became Australia's longest war. Why has Australia stayed so long? Once the Taliban had been driven from power by early 2002, there was no convincing strategic rationale for an Australian military presence in Afghanistan, a fact recognised by Prime Minister Howard when he withdrew the SASR contingent at the end of that year. The rationales offered after the return of a substantial and expanding presence after 2005 by Howard, and by his successors Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, were to help establish democracy in Afghanistan, to

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Cleary, 'Trauma surge likely as war-zone veterans return', *The Australian*, 31 August 2015, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/trauma-surge-likely-as-war-zone-veterans-return/story-e6frg8yo-1227505194539?sv=79568929ee5fb7cde66f090ed953f49f>.

<sup>19</sup> *Care of ADF Personnel Wounded and Injured on Operations*, Defence Sub-Committee, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, June 2013, at

[http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/house\\_of\\_representatives\\_committees?url=jfad/wounded\\_injured/report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=jfad/wounded_injured/report.htm).

<sup>20</sup> *Fearless: Restoring Control to Victims of Traumatic Stress*, at <http://www.fearless.org.au/>.

<sup>21</sup> See the work of Neta Crawford in the Brown University *Costs of War* project, updated to 2014 in Neta C. Crawford, *War-related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001-2014*, Costs of War Project, Watson Institute for International Studies, Boston University, 22 May 2015, at <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20Related%20Casualties%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%202001-2014%20FIN.pdf>.

prevent a re-emergence of the country as a base for terrorism, and to prevent the country becoming a narco-state.

All three justifications were to be undermined and dissolved by the brutal realities of what was in fact a strategically pointless involvement in an internationalised civil war.<sup>22</sup>

Today Afghanistan is effectively a narco-state, but one in which, by a process of Darwinian selection, the longstanding artisanal production of opium crops for export by small farmers has been replaced by sophisticated networks of heroin export around the world, controlled by powerful transnational criminal networks. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported last year that opium production reached record levels in 2013, with the crop worth US\$3 billion, a 50-per-cent increase on the year before.<sup>23</sup> In Oruzgan and other parts of the country, the destruction of opium crops by foreign police (including the Australian Federal Police) and military was accompanied by unrealistic or locally irrelevant technical advice to poor farmers on how to plant alternative cash crops, with the predictable political consequences of anti-government feeling. The strength of US prohibitionist attitudes to narcotics prevented any acceptance of alternative recommendations to sponsor even pilot schemes of village production of medical opiates. Money from heroin production financed all sides of Afghan politics as a result.

Hopes of democracy withered early. The writ of the Karzai government, which was in power for almost the entire time of the Australian deployment, never ran much beyond the capital, Kabul. Real power lay in the hands of local warlords, whether pro- or anti-government, and the various groupings that made up the far from unified entity that the West labelled ‘the Taliban’. UN-auspiced national elections were so blatantly manipulated that senior UN officials resigned in protest. By 2009, the Taliban had effective administrative operations under shadow governors in all parts of the country.<sup>24</sup> All arms of the Karzai government were deeply corrupt—or, more honestly, had been corrupted by the massive inflows of foreign military spending and aid into Asia’s poorest country—just Google images of ‘narco palaces in Kabul’.

While there was little democracy there were signs of a surprisingly vibrant civil society emerging, especially in large cities. Internationally, the most prominent parts of this civil society were led by women such as campaigner for women’s rights Malalai Joya, who was forced from her position in the national parliament after criticising the government’s policies towards women, a move supported by warlords whose attitudes could only be described as feudal. No supporter of the Taliban, Joya and her colleagues called for both an end to what

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<sup>22</sup> The most respected recent Australian Minister of Defence, John Faulkner, though only in the role briefly during 2009-2010 provided the most impressive – if sometimes reluctant – defence of the Afghanistan deployment in his *Ministerial statement on Afghanistan*, Senator John Faulkner, Minister for Defence, Transcripts, Department of Defence, 23 June 2010.

<sup>23</sup> John Reed, ‘The War in Afghanistan is Far from Over’, *Just Security*, 22 October 2015, at <https://www.justsecurity.org/16643/war-afghanistan/>.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Shaping the War in Afghanistan: The Situation in the Spring of 2010*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 April 2010, p.16.



was by then clearly the puppet government in Kabul and the foreign forces propping it up. Little changed with Karzai's replacement in late 2014 by a US-orchestrated power-sharing arrangement between the two rival candidates for the September 2014 national election, each of whom credibly accused the other of election fraud.

And over a decade and a half, the war, which originated in a short and effective US-led campaign to destroy al-Qaeda's terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and drive from power the Taliban government that had—somewhat reluctantly—accepted them, turned into an efficient machine for generating large numbers of Afghans and Pakistanis so hostile to the regimes in Kabul and Peshawar that they were willing to become suicide bombers in the service of the Taliban.

For coalition forces in Afghanistan, including the ADF, the two most feared enemies were the innocent-looking civilian willing to die in order to kill foreign invaders, and the 'green on blue' insider killings of ISAF soldiers by their nominal allies in the Australian National Army and National Police. On 29 August 2012, an Afghan guard named Hekmatullah used his US-supplied M16 rifle to kill three ADF soldiers at Patrol Base Wahab in Oruzgan.<sup>25</sup>

None of the three justifications offered by a series of Australian governments are supportable: there is no democracy in Afghanistan; there is a clear narco-state fostered by the conditions of an internationalised civil war; and there has been a continuous process of generating large numbers of Afghans so hostile to the US-auspiced government in Kabul they are willing to die in suicide attacks.

By the end of the 2000s it was an open secret among Australian political commentators and security analysts that there was only one rationale for Australia's Afghanistan war: alliance maintenance. This was the price, so the argument went, for being sure that the United States would remain Australia's ally. That this price included not only large numbers of battle deaths, hundreds of seriously wounded, significant numbers of ex-soldiers with psyches deeply damaged by their experiences, and, most seriously, strategic consequences that were not only not beneficial but seriously counter-productive—all this counted for nothing against the need perceived by both sides of mainstream Australian politics to support the US alliance above all else. As former Deputy Secretary of Defence Hugh White said, what needs to be explained is why Australians were so silent for so long about a war that brought few benefits and great costs.

NATO auspicing of ISAF was a fig leaf for US direction of the war, and a vehicle for the wider US post-Cold War strategy of rebooting NATO as the foundation of a global alliance. Today, the list of NATO's 'Global Partners' is headed by Australia and Japan, together with

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<sup>25</sup> John Taylor, 'Soldiers' inquest: Systematic failures contributed to deaths of three Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, inquest told', *ABC News*, 24 June 2015, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-24/inquest-into-the-deaths-of-three-australian-soldiers/6569438>.

South Korea and New Zealand.<sup>26</sup> But the political effect of the Afghanistan connection was shown when Australia was given membership of NATO's 'Enhanced Partnership Program', while to Washington's annoyance and Tokyo's dismay, Japan was not, on the grounds that the Japanese military had not played a substantial combat role in NATO out-of-area operations.<sup>27</sup>

In September 2013, Prime Minister Tony Abbott signalled the end of the principal Australian deployment in Afghanistan by saying, 'Australia's longest war is ending. Not with victory, not with defeat, but with, we hope, an Afghanistan that is better for our presence here'.<sup>28</sup> There was certainly no victory, and there is a strong case that despite the lives lost, the billions of dollars committed, and the efforts of some 26,000 ADF members in the region over more than thirteen years, Afghanistan is in a worse position than before the war began. Yet more than 400 Australian military and civilian personnel remain there under the rubric of Task Group Afghanistan, centred on Kabul in the north of the country and Kandahar in the conflict-ridden south. Some are force-protection, headquarters-support staff, coordinating the dispersed task-group elements, organising logistics and providing communications. Others are training Afghan counterparts. And an unspecified 'small contingent' of Special Forces soldiers do what their comrades have been doing since 2001: special operations with other ISAF elite forces, through the NATO Special Operations Component Command Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) and the Special Operations Advisory Group.<sup>29</sup>

The war in Afghanistan goes on. Australia is addicted to alliance war, apparently whatever the cost. Within hours of President Obama announcing on 15 October that the withdrawal of US troops in Afghanistan was to be delayed, at least until the end of his presidency, Malcolm Turnbull signalled that Australia would follow suit.<sup>30</sup>

Last year, Australia's second war in Iraq commenced, with little strategic rationale. This year, in a feat of almost optimal strategic incoherence and indifference to Syrian suffering, Prime Minister Abbott exceeded himself by sending RAAF bombers, refuelling aircraft, and air warning and control aircraft into Syria.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Relations with partners across the globe', *NATO A-Z*, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 7 September 2015, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49188.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49188.htm); and Interactive Map, 'Nato on Duty', North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, at <http://www.nato.int/nato-on-duty/index.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Greg Sheridan, 'Australia to be NATO partner, 200 troops may return to Afghanistan', *The Australian*, 2 September 2014, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/australia-to-be-nato-partner-200-troops-may-return-to-afghanistan/story-e6frg8yo-1227044445639?sv=28a0d5b4512458648deb06a2bcd83d34>.

<sup>28</sup> Phillip Coorey, 'Long war ends with hope, says Tony Abbott', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 2013, at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/long-war-ends-with-hope-says-tony-abbott-20131028-2wc4j.html>.

<sup>29</sup> 'ADF elements in Afghanistan', *Global Operations*, Department of Defence, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/Operations/Afghanistan/factsheets/kabul.asp>.

<sup>30</sup> 'Aust set to extend Afghan mission', *SBS News*, 16 October 2015, at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/10/16/aust-set-extend-afghan-mission>.

And now, we are learning, Australian naval assets deployed with the thirty-nation Combined Maritime Forces in Middle Eastern waters are being drawn into the disastrous internationalised civil war in Yemen. HMAS *Melbourne* is part of Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) operating in the southern Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb strait and Gulf of Aden. CTF-150's primary mission is the interception of narcotics and smuggled weapons.<sup>31</sup> The RAN's frigate HMAS *Melbourne* replaced HMAS *Newcastle* in CTF-150 in September, as US, Saudi and Pakistani forces in the region step up their interdiction of Iranian weapons shipments to Houthi forces in Yemen's civil war, in support of Saudi-supported Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.<sup>32</sup> On its first deployment to CTF-150 in 2010, HMAS *Melbourne* hosted an on-board conference of the Combined Maritime Force and Yemen's coast guard.<sup>33</sup> As Houthi forces and Saudi-supported pro-government forces battle for control of islands in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait between Yemen and Djibouti, the chokepoint that makes up the exit from the Suez Canal and the Red Sea for huge amounts of shipping is becoming a critical objective. Australian and other coalition warships in CTF-150 have been cooperating with Yemeni, Saudi and Djibouti vessels to patrol the strait since at least 2013, now with the added strategic element of US and Saudi determination to prevent arms for Iran reaching Houthi forces, while facilitating Saudi materiel and military support to their Yemeni allies. And just to round off the regional instability into which Australian naval forces are being drawn, the Egyptian dictatorship, secure with competing political support from both the United States and Russia, has threatened military intervention in the strait unless Houthi control of the islands is not reversed by Saudi-supported forces.<sup>34</sup>

The Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iraq again, Syria, and now Yemen: the evidence for Australian addiction to American wars absent any Australian vital strategic interest is all over the map, written in blood red.

All of this strategic irrationality is framed by our place in the imperium – as much as culturally as politically. As the public grief about the Paris killings demonstrates yet again and the shrugs of indifference to the latest Beirut killings of innocents confirm, our map of moral community remains imperial and racist in character. As Judith Butler would put it, some lives are grievable, others are not. All Islamist politics are framed as one – there is no need for further moral reflection, or even a modicum of access to the face of the adversary.

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<sup>31</sup> 'Commander CTF 150 visits HMAS Melbourne', *Combined Maritime Forces*, 23 September 2015, at <http://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2015/09/23/commander-ctf-150-visits-hmas-melbourne/#more-5219>.

<sup>32</sup> 'HMAS Melbourne arrives for encore performance', *Combined Maritime Forces*, 7 September 2015, at <http://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2015/09/07/hmas-melbourne-arrives-for-encore-performance/>; Dion Nissenbaum, 'U.S. Moves to Stem Iran Arms Flow to Yemen', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 April 2015, at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-wants-to-block-iran-from-arming-yemens-houthi-rebels-1428868461>; and Ahmad Al Omran and Asa Fitch, 'Saudi Coalition Seizes Iranian Boat Carrying Weapons to Yemen', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 September 2015, at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-coalition-seizes-iranian-boat-carrying-weapons-to-rebels-in-yemen-1443606304>.

<sup>33</sup> 'Combined Maritime Forces' Frigate Hosts Yemen Conference', *Combined Maritime Forces*, 17 December 2010, at <http://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2010/12/17/combined-maritime-forces-frigate-hosts-yemen-conference/>.

<sup>34</sup> Arafat Madabish, 'Yemen: Houthis withdraw half their forces from Ma'rib to Sana'a border', *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 4 October 2015, at <http://english.aawsat.com/2015/10/article55345317/yemen-houthis-withdraw-half-their-forces-from-marib-to-sanaa-border>.

Here be monsters, pathological monsters as John Kerry put it after Paris. That's all you need to know about all matters Islamist.

It was ever so in Australia. In 1885, the colony of New South Wales sent Australia's first overseas expedition to the Sudan to avenge the death of General 'Chinese' Gordon, killed by the forces of Muhammad Ahmad, the 'Mad Mullah' leader of the Mahdist rebellion that retook Sudan from Turkish-Egyptian rule and dispatched the invading British.

We don't want to know, but, surprise, surprise, there are Islamists of many hues. In his foreword to *My Life with the Taliban*, (London: Hurst, 2011) the remarkable autobiography of the Taliban leader Abdul Zaeef, the American analyst Barnett Rubin concluded:

'For me this book poses one question above all: do I need to be this man's enemy? Politics and war may, alas, give their own answers, almost independent of our will, But a world where Mullah Zaeef and I cannot live in peace is not a world I want to inhabit.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, (London: Hurst, 2011), translated and edited by Felix Kuehn and Alex Strick van Linschoten. See also the website for the book at [http://www.mylifewiththetaliban.com/My\\_Life\\_With\\_The\\_Taliban/Home.html](http://www.mylifewiththetaliban.com/My_Life_With_The_Taliban/Home.html).