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[Front Page](#) | [National](#) | [Southern States](#) | [Other States](#) | [International](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Business](#) | [Sport](#) | [Miscellaneous](#) | [Features](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Employment](#) | [Index](#) | [Home](#)

[Features](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Go on, cowboys, surprise me

Bombing Afghanistan is an easy and arrogant way out for the West in the war against terrorism. Unless it becomes a war against inequality and poverty, says TABISH KHAIR, scepticism will continue to dog a 'campaign of imperialism and global military considerations'.

FIFTEEN bombers, 25 fighter planes and 50 missiles. That is all it took to launch the first phase of what Bush has promised will be a long war on terrorism. Evidently, the first phase is not an expensive one. According to my rough estimates, the weaponry used on this one short night did not cost much more than the entire national budget of Afghanistan for five years.

Osama bin Laden, on the other hand, has plans that are just as long ranging as Bush's. Describing it as a ``war on Islam'', he has urged all Muslims to back the Taliban's fight.

Well, I am a Muslim, and I have no intention of backing the Taliban's fight. In times like these it is important not to overreact — like the West has done in its reading of the nature and extent of the so-called ``terrorist threat'' and many in Muslim countries are doing in their inflation of the United State's bombings, which are largely motivated by petty domestic politics, venal global economics and strategic military interests, into a ``war against Islam''.

But I do not buy Bush's statements either. I do not consider the attacks merely a ``war on terrorism''. The ``war on terrorism'' is one side of the story; the other side is imperialism, global military considerations in an increasingly unequal world and the on-going attempt to throttle voices of dissent and leftist forces in the West.

The Taliban spokesperson had a technical point when he described the U.S. attacks as ``terrorism''. But even people like me, whose ears have not been stuffed with the cotton wool of American war propaganda, could only smile bitterly at the spokesperson's words. The Taliban has long lost any moral right to accuse others of terrorism — not because of the terrorist strikes in the U.S. on September 11, criminal as they were, but because of its longer and more brutal reign of terror against its own people.

Whatever we may think of Bush's Government, the Taliban is a cancer in the body of Afghanistan. Any attempt to surgically excise this cancer

ought to be welcome, provided that the surgery does not end up killing the patient. However, will the U.S. not only bomb Afghanistan but also go in and dismantle the Taliban regime? For if the Americans do so, they will have to fulfil a forgotten promise to the Afghan people — the promise, made in the 1980s, to rebuild a democratic Afghanistan.

Many of the Afghans who fought the "evil empire" (the former USSR) for the "free world" then, fought because they believed the West's promises of democracy and development. After the war was won, they waited in vain for the economic help that had been promised. All they got was intensified civil war. When the Taliban rose, it succeeded not because of the Islamic card — many other factions had also played that card. It succeeded because it provided a respite from that civil war.

So, what is it we want to do for the Afghans this time by bombing them? Does the West wish to enable the Northern Alliance to regain control of Afghanistan? Does the West want to wage another war by proxy?

But isn't this war the direct result of a war by proxy that the West waged against the former USSR and active Leftists all over Asia and Africa? Even the metamorphosis of Islamic Fundamentalist parties from marginal groups (like the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazis in the West) to political forces had to do with this undercover war. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Western governments actively encouraged autocratic governments in the Muslim world to clamp down on the leftist opposition. Many of these governments in Muslim countries also encouraged marginal Islamic groups in a bid to counter the "red threat" — again with Western complicity. Very soon the only opposition left in these lands was a religious opposition — and Islamic fundamentalists could offer a heady cocktail of demokrattiyya (democracy) and jihad. The problem of Islamic fundamentalism — not to mention the Taliban — is largely the result of that proxy war by the West.

Will the Northern Alliance provide a different conclusion to this depressing story of the West's proxy wars? Can it, when it contains people like Rasoul Sayaf, whose thugs tortured Shia families and used their women as sex slaves?

But then, say the Americans, let us bring back ex-King Zahir Shah. Aha, a monarch, ergo stability (like in Saudi Arabia, etc). So, what about democracy and civil rights? What about all those things for which the West made the Afghans fight in the past and for which it claims to be fighting the Taliban today?

No, the Taliban has no face to accuse others of "terrorism". But neither do the U.S. and its Western allies.

There is only one way out of this mess. Let the "West" go into Afghanistan and remove the Taliban, if possible, but then let it also economically and infra-structurally support the development of the country (under United Nations aegis). Above all, let it stand up strongly, now and forever, for the restoration of democracy not only in Afghanistan but in every other country that does not have at least some kind of democracy. In order to do so, however, the West (especially the U.S.) will have to overcome not only its largely racist bias, which makes

it suspicious of any mass movement in non-White countries, but also place its much-touted human ideals before its hidden business interests.

I, and many like me, Muslim and non-Muslim, shall retain our deep scepticism of the current attacks until and unless the "West" follows its "war against terrorism" with a "war against inequality, poverty and lack of national and international democracy". And the first step in this greater "war" would be the rebuilding of Afghanistan as a democratic nation state. Bombing the place is the easy and arrogant way out. Even getting rid of the Taliban will not be enough.

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Section : [Features](#)
Previous : [Make each moment count](#)
Next : [Plan that might derail](#)

[Front Page](#) | [National](#) | [Southern States](#) | [Other States](#) | [International](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Business](#) | [Sport](#) | [Miscellaneous](#) | [Features](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Employment](#) | [Index](#) | [Home](#)

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