



## Afghanistan: The Longest U.S. War is Deadlier Than Ever

*NOTE: This transcript may not be 100% accurate.*

**Aaron Maté:** It's "The Real News," I'm Aaron Maté. The 16-year war in Afghanistan is deadlier than ever. A new US government report says, "Last year was the worst so far for Afghan civilians and soldiers. A recent Taliban attack killed more than 160 Afghan recruits and the violence could grow as the spring fighting season begins. In a recent visit, Defense Secretary, James Mattis, said he expects a tough year ahead.

**James Mattis (video clip):** I'd say that we're under no illusions about the challenges associated with this mission. 2017's going to be another tough year for the valiant Afghan security forces and the international troops who have stood and will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Afghanistan against terrorism.

**Aaron Maté:** The White House is now considering a request for more US troops. At a hearing earlier this year, the US commander in Afghanistan said he needs several more thousand.

**John McCain (video clip):** How many more do you need to get this stalemate reversed?

**General Nicholson (video clip):** Mr. Chairman, I have adequate resourcing in my counter terrorism mission. In my train, advise and assist mission however, we have a shortfall of a few thousand.

**Aaron Maté:** So with the potential of more US forces, what is next for this never-ending war? Well joining us is Matthew Hoh. He served as a Marine in the Iraq war and later resigned from the State Department in Afghanistan in protest of US policy there. He is now a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy. Matthew, welcome.

**Matthew Hoh:** Hello and thank you for having me on.

**Aaron Maté:** Thanks for joining us. So talk to us about what is now being considered. There's about 9000 US forces on the ground in Afghanistan right now. The White House is considering adding what is said to be a few thousand more. What do you make right now of the current US strategy?

**Matthew Hoh:** The policy and the rhetoric for the Americans in Afghanistan have remained the same. Basically, since the Americans and NATO have started the military escalation of the war, which predates the Obama escalation. I mean, this goes back to the NATO escalation

in Afghanistan, which begins about 2005, 2006, which if people remember, is when President Karzai was being criticized for being only the mayor of Kabul and for the humanitarian interventionists out there, the folks in the western part of the world who wanted to see democracy flourish, who felt that we had to prove that the Western way was the right way, that couldn't be allowed.

So what you had in 2005 was this escalation of the NATO presence in Afghanistan and that's when you really start to see the insurgency start to re-flourish the Taliban, rather than reentering forcibly into Afghanistan in many cases being pulled back into Afghanistan. And so, much of what we're seeing, Aaron, is the same rhetoric, the same policies, the same type of things we've seen over and over again on the American side, on the NATO side of, "We're going to send in more troops, more money, we're going to help the Afghans build, we're going to help them stand up," but the reality is, is that we're just fueling the same type of corruption. We're keeping the same warlords and drug lords in place and we're seeing the conflict continue to grow because all we're doing is continuing the bloodshed.

**Aaron Maté:** Okay Matthew, so if the US wanted to seriously change course, what would some tangible options be? There have been some fitful attempts at something resembling a peace process, including negotiations with the Taliban, or indirect negotiations, but those never seem to pan out. And part of the conventional thinking on that is that the Taliban isn't seriously interested in an accommodation because they are doing well.

**Matthew Hoh:** Well that's been a complete and total lie on behalf of the American government and I think that's very clear now ... I mean that's part of the reason why I resigned. I mean, my story is a minor story. I was a US State Department officer in Afghanistan, I was a mid-level one but part of my ... When we were approached by Taliban surrogates my instructions from the embassy was, "Do not talk to them. Negotiation is not what we're here for." It is now certainly clear that what General Petraeus did in Iraq say, was not to negotiate peace in Iraq, was negotiate an exit for the Americans in Iraq, was to negotiate a retreat. A way to get President Bush right out of Iraq. And the same thing is true for what he did for McChrystal, was going to do for President Obama in Afghanistan; escalate the war, make it look good enough for the Americans to withdraw and then blame it on the Afghans that they couldn't handle it.

Same with the Iraqis. In our case, there was no interest in negotiations on the Americans' part and this has been shown over and over again. If you look at various press from the Middle East from Western Central Asia, you can see that throughout 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, there were overtures. 2011 even. There were overtures by the insurgency to negotiate. The American media, unfortunately, never really picked up on this. Most importantly though, and there are other figures too who were commenting on this from the United Nations. Sherard Cowper-Coles, who was the UK and the NATO senior diplomat in Afghanistan, has spoken about this complete absence, a complete lack of desire on the part of the Americans for anything resembling peace, only wanting victory, only wanting a military win in Afghanistan, only demanding surrender from the insurgency.

But most importantly, most recently, at the end of 2016 the New York Times reported on the Norwegian attempts to negotiate a peaceful end to the war in Afghanistan. It lasted for three years, from 2007 up until 2011 when the United States put 100,000 more American troops into Afghanistan and escalated the war dramatically. Said, "We're not going to negotiate. We're going to beat you. We're going to force you to surrender." The Norwegians actually met with Mullah Omar. Up until last year there was no indication that no Westerner, no non-Mus-

lim had ever met with Mullah Omar. And now we learn that Norwegians had actually met with him to discuss peace in the years up to the American escalation of the war and Americans had no interest. My government, your government, our government ... had no interest in talking about peace in Afghanistan. We only wanted a military victory.

**Aaron Maté:** Is the current approach of relying so heavily on the Afghan forces to fight the Taliban, is that sustainable? Because already in the first six weeks of this year, according to that report that we talked about, more than 800 Afghan forces have been killed and every year about one third of the Afghan military and police desert their post, which is a dynamic very similar to what happened in Iraq before the time that Isis took over control of towns like Ramadi and Mosul. They were able to do so in part because the Iraqi military just fled.

**Matthew Hoh:** I think it's sustainable as long as the American Congress continue to spend three and a half, four billion dollars a year propping up the Afghan military, that's about what we're doing right now. So as long as we continue to do that, it's sustainable because the Afghan economy has nothing else. There is nothing else in the Afghan economy - of course, with the exception of the Afghan drug trade, with the exception of the opium trade. So as long as that's continuing, there will be people who are desperate enough to go into the military or into the police services or into the intelligence services but as you said Aaron, 1/3 of them are getting into it and realizing that, one, "I don't want to die for this." But there's another part of why they're also leaving. Part of it is, "I don't want to die for this, it's not worth it." The other part is what they're seeing. What they're seeing is obscene.

One of the reports that came out recently from the United Nations is the prevalence of torture that is used by the Afghan security forces across the board, whether it be the Afghan army, the Afghan intelligence or the Afghan police forces, torture is so widespread in use by the Afghan security forces. It is used by every branch of the Afghan security forces and it is used on a common and routine basis. Anywhere from 25 to 50% of detainees are reporting torture being used against them by various branches of the Afghan security forces. So many of these recruits, many of these Afghan recruits who are entering and then leaving the Afghan security forces, certainly are doing it because they say, "Hey, I don't want to die for this corruption. I don't want to die for these drug lords and warlords ultimately who I'm working for on behalf of the Afghan army." But a lot of them are also leaving Aaron, I believe, because of what they're seeing.

**Aaron Maté:** Finally Matthew Hoh, Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor. Can you talk about this strange dynamic we have where there are elements of the Pakistani government that support the Taliban inside Afghanistan but at the same time, Pakistani military getting huge amounts of support and aid from the US every single year. So can there be a solution to the Afghan war without a serious change in policy inside Pakistan?

**Matthew Hoh:** Well none of these wars, whether they be in Asia or Africa or the Middle East or the Americas or wherever, will stop until the Western world, in particular the United States, as well as Russia, stops exporting arms as well as stops funneling money into these conflicts. Pakistan, this is probably maybe one of the heights of absurdity and the heights of obscenity, because we do. We don't have as many troops in Afghanistan as we once did and we're certainly not taking a lot of casualties as we once did, but we did for many years.

We were having our young men and women being killed by the people who were being funded and trained by the military that we were giving billions of dollars in assistance and aid and intelligence and support and who our generals were going out for cocktails with them, Wash-

ington DC, with their generals and above the surface there was some cat-fighting going on and maybe when Admiral Mullen left office he said some nasty things about the Pakistanis but for the most part, they got along. But yes, there is this very real and the word "obscene" keeps coming to mind because I'm not sure how to describe it, but that is what we're dealing here with Aaron.

We're dealing with this conflagration, this unholy mixture of the arms industry, of these politicians, of these generals, who are willing to trade various interests in order to get their way, in order to see their career ambitions fulfilled, in order to see the maps on the board colored the way they want. And so if that means young men and women from Florida or Kansas get killed in a country 9000 miles away by a bomb-maker who was trained by an intelligence operative who is funded by money appropriated by the U.S. Congress, but if that means that that country is then going to buy our F-16s, then so be it. Because they're not going to buy, you know, MiG-31s from the Russian then. I mean this is the reality of what happens in Washington DC.

**Aaron Maté:** Matthew Hoh, former US Marine and State Department official, now a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy. Matthew, thanks.

**Matthew Hoh:** Thank you, Aaron.

**Aaron Maté:** And thank you for joining us on "The Real News."

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