

The war in Afghanistan as a 'just war'

Events: In October 2001, the USA and its NATO allies attacked Afghanistan with the specific intention of overthrowing the Taliban regime on the grounds that it provided a base and support for al-Qaeda terrorists. With the support of Afghan warlords and tribal leaders, notably the Northern Alliance, the Taliban regime was toppled by December 2001 with the bulk of al-Qaeda terrorists being killed or forced to flee to the border regions of Pakistan. However, a protracted counter-insurgency war then ensued against remnants of the Taliban regime, other religious militants and forces opposed to the newly-established pro-western government in Kabul, whose strongholds were in Helmand province and neighbouring provinces in the south of Afghanistan.



Significance: In a number of respects, the Afghan War can be viewed as a 'just war'. In the first place, the war can be justified on the basis of self-defence, as a way of protecting the USA in particular and the West in general from the threat of terrorism, as demonstrated by the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. Commentators such as Elshstain (2003) argued that the 'war on terror', of which the Afghan War was a crucial part, was just in that it was fought against the genocidal threat of 'apocalyptic terrorism', a form of warfare that posed a potential threat to all Americans and Jews and made no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. The 2001 attack on Afghanistan also had a clear, and clearly stated, goal: the removal of a Taliban regime whose links to al-Qaeda were clearly established and undisputed. Furthermore, the USA and its allies acted as a legitimate authority, in that they were backed by NATO and enjoyed wide international support, including from Russia and China. Finally, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks could not have been reliably neutralized by diplomacy or non-violent pressure. The UN, for example, lacked the capability, authority and will to respond to the threat posed to global security by Islamist terrorism.

However, critics have portrayed the war as unjust and unjustifiable. Their arguments have included the following. First, the purpose of the war and the intentions with which it has been fought, may be unjust to the extent that the USA was motivated by a desire to consolidate its global hegemony, or by a wish to strengthen control of oil resources in the Middle East. In this respect, the attack on Afghanistan amounted to unwarranted aggression. Second, the USA and its allies could not be considered as legitimate authorities in that, unlike the 1991 Gulf War, the Afghan War had not been authorized by a specific UN resolution. Third, although the chances of success in toppling the Taliban regime were high, the likelihood of defeating Islamist terrorists through the Afghan War was much more questionable. This was because of the probability that an invasion would inflame and radicalize Muslim opinion and also because of the dubious benefits of technological superiority in fighting a counter-insurgency war against an enemy using guerrilla tactics. Fourth, the USA violated accepted conventions of warfare through its treatment of prisoners of war (who were despatched to Guantánamo Bay and subjected to forms of torture) and in launching strikes against al-Qaeda and Taliban bases that often resulted in civilian deaths. Fifth, Islamists would argue that justice was on the side of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, not the invading forces, as they were engaged in a *jihad* – in this case, literally a 'holy war' – to purify Islam and expel foreign influence from the Muslim world.