

The lasting legacy of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan



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On 15th April 2021, Prime Minister Scott Morrison [announced](#) the withdrawal of the 80 remaining Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel from Afghanistan, signalling the end of almost 20 years of Australian military involvement in the country. This followed the [announcement](#) by United States President Joe Biden that the US armed forces will leave Afghanistan by September 2021.

The ADF followed the US armed forces into the Afghanistan conflict with the aim of [countering the threat of terrorism](#) posed by al-Qaeda and other armed groups in the region after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Later, it became clear that nation building and creating a stable government were also key priorities.

Over 39,000 members of the ADF have been [deployed](#) to Afghanistan since October 2001 and 41 Australians killed in the conflict. In his statement to the media, Prime Minister Scott Morrison maintained that [“freedom is always worth it”](#). The ADF will leave Afghanistan under accusations of war crimes and a high number of veteran suicides, in light of this, was the ADFs involvement in the so-called ‘forever war’ really worth it?

In November 2020, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force published the [Afghanistan Inquiry Report](#), investigating unlawful killings in Afghanistan from 2005-2016. The report alleges that 39 unlawful killings were [committed](#) by ADF personnel during this time, the victims of which were non-combatants at the time of their deaths. Victoria Cross recipient Special Air Service Regiment Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG is the only person to be [named](#) in the report in connection to unlawful killings in the conflict and is currently under investigation for war crimes.

The Victoria Cross is the highest honour awarded in the ADF. Awarding it to a member of the armed forces accused of unlawfully killing multiple non-combatants, without any knowledge of these crimes by his superiors, and the subsequent media scrutiny, has undoubtedly tarnished the reputation of the ADF in the eyes of the public.

In addition to these deaths during the conflict, at least 465 members of the ADF who served between 2001 and 2018 have [committed suicide](#). This is a disproportionately high number, especially when compared to the 41 members of the armed forces who were killed during military operations in Afghanistan. One particularly troubling consequence of Australia’s 20 year involvement in the conflict is that more military personnel have died due to suicide than in the conflict itself.

These statistics are so concerning that Prime Minister Scott Morrison has [announced](#) a Royal Commission into veteran suicides which will no doubt investigate whether the ADF provided adequate support to members of the armed forces when they returned home. These deaths, as well as the continued physical and mental health repercussions from the conflict, will make it harder to justify military action on the basis of supporting US aims and foreign policy.

To be sure, the ADF, along with the US and its allies, has had some success in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. When discussing the Australian response specifically, the ADF was focussed on the Oruzgan province which has now [reverted](#) predominately to Taliban control. However, when viewed as a whole, there were successful counter-terrorism operations, notably the killing of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, and women and girls now enjoy many more freedoms. But the country still has a long way to go to achieve a sustainable and lasting peace. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has [stated](#) that his government will maintain its commitment to stability in Afghanistan through international diplomacy. However, without military support, unless the people of Afghanistan can ensure a [democratically elected government](#),

[stable institutions](#) and cultural change to safeguard the progress made, it might soon disappear.

Australia's involvement in the war in Afghanistan will end in October 2021 without a clear victory and without bringing a lasting and sustainable peace to the country. While the ADF may not see this as a failure, it is certainly not a resounding victory. In the absence of a clear military triumph, the ADF will struggle to justify some of the overwhelmingly negative aspects of its campaign in Afghanistan. With a legacy of unlawful killings, ongoing investigations for war crimes, and more veterans killed after they returned home than during the conflict, Australia's role in Afghanistan has led to reputational damage and increased media and public scrutiny which will continue long after the conflict has ended.

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