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President Obama has announced the longest war in the history of the United States will last another two-and-a-half years. On Tuesday, Obama said that the United States will maintain almost 10,000 troops in Afghanistan after its formal combat mission concludes at the end of this year. The United States will eventually withdraw troops until only a small residual force remains after 2016. By then, the war will have lasted more than 15 years. We are joined by Anand Gopal, author of the new book, "No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes." A journalist and a fellow at the New America Foundation, Gopal has spent years reporting on Afghanistan.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** America's combat mission will be over by the end of this year. Starting next year, Afghans will be fully responsible for securing their country. American personnel will be in an advisory role. We will no longer patrol Afghan cities or towns, mountains or valleys. That is a task for the Afghan people. Second, I've made it clear that we're open to cooperating with Afghans on two narrow missions after 2014: training Afghan forces and supporting counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al-Qaeda.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** That was President Obama speaking Tuesday, one day after he made a surprise Memorial Day visit to Afghanistan. During the ceremony, he paid tribute to more than 2000 U.S. soldiers who have lost their lives in the war.

Meanwhile, the second round of presidential elections in Afghanistan is scheduled for June 14th. The frontrunner in the race is former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who won almost 45 percent of the vote in the first round, while ex-Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani came second with over 31 percent.

**AMY GOODMAN:** To talk more about Afghanistan, we're joined by Anand Gopal, author of the new book, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*. He's a journalist and fellow at the New America Foundation, has spent years reporting on Afghanistan.

Welcome back to *Democracy Now!*, Anand. Talk about the president's announcement.

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, it wasn't really a surprise, because the Pentagon had been asking for around that number of troops, and this is what he delivered. But it's important to realize that the war is not going to end even after 2016, because the U.S. has allied with power brokers, warlords, also the Afghan army, who are going to be continuing to fight the war on terror on the U.S.'s behalf.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** But even after 2016, even if—will it only be Afghan warlords who will be fighting, or will Special Operations forces remain?

**ANAND GOPAL:** No, after 2016, it will only be Afghan warlords. But for the next two years, it will be Special Operation forces. And when he says "counterterrorism operations," what he means is night raids, targeted killings and allying with these warlords.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And what about mercenaries? What about private contractors?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Yeah, I mean, when I say "warlords," I mean private contractors, because the U.S. is paying for them, essentially. They are mercenaries. They're paramilitary forces. There's hundreds of thousands of them around the country.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And they will leave also, at least according to this plan, by the end of 2016, or continue?

**ANAND GOPAL:** No, they will continue. These are Afghans, actually. These are—these mercenaries and private security contractors, unlike Iraq, they're mostly Afghans. They're mostly people who the U.S. has been paying unofficially over the last 10 or 15 years. They're going to continue. So it's going to look like a proxy war, essentially, of Afghans who are being paid by the U.S. to fight against the Taliban.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** So do we have an idea, of these 9,800 troops that will remain in Afghanistan, how many of them will be Special Operations forces, special forces?

**ANAND GOPAL:** It's unclear at the moment, but we can expect a sizable number to be special forces, because you don't need a lot of advisers.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Well, could you explain, what is the distinction between special—what do they do as against regular military personnel?

**ANAND GOPAL:** So the Special Operations forces, these are the ones who are doing what are called counterterrorism operations, which means, for example, night raids, so that's going into people's houses, taking people who are suspected to be Taliban or al-Qaeda, sending them to Bagram. In previous years, they were sending them to Guantánamo. It also means targeted killings, so there's a list of people, list of Afghans who are supposedly enemies of the United States, who will be targeted through drone strikes or through conventional types of attacks.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can you talk about this election that is taking place and what the two major candidates represent? What is the role of Hamid Karzai?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Both candidates actually have a surprisingly similar platform. There's really not much that's different between the two of them. Both have pledged to sign the agreement that would keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan over the next two years. Both are considered to be very pro-American. They both recognize that without the U.S.'s support, financial support particularly, they wouldn't be able to exist. The Afghan government wouldn't be able to exist, because the U.S. actually pays for the government to function.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** And in your reporting in Afghanistan over the course of the work that you've done there, what did you find was the effect among Afghans of the kinds of operations that you suggest the special forces will continue to carry out?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, you know, Afghanistan is complicated because the war is only being fought in about half the country. And in that half of the country where these raids are being

carried out, people are very angry and have been angry at the U.S. forces. If you talk—if you ask somebody, "What you think about the United States?" in these areas, they will say, "Oh, these are the people who come and kick our doors down in the middle of the night and take our loved ones away." And so, in those areas, they're happy that by 2016 this will hopefully be over.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Talk about the people you profile in your book. You have spent years reporting from Afghanistan. You look at three major figures.

**ANAND GOPAL:** Yeah, that's right. I look at three Afghans, and I follow their lives from 2001 to today. One is a Taliban fighter, and he's somebody who had been a major Taliban commander in the 1990s during the Taliban government, and then he quit in 2001, tried live a civilian life but for various reasons, mostly because of the warlords that the U.S. had supported, couldn't, and so he was driven back into the insurgency.

The second is a warlord that the U.S. has supported over the last 10 years. He's somebody who rose from obscurity to become a very rich and powerful person. And it's symbolic of many of the types of warlords that we've supported over the last decade.

The third is a Afghan housewife. She's somebody who grew up in Kabul and fled to the countryside. And she was very interesting, for me, to be able to get a sense of how this war looks like from the point of view of Afghan women.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So talk about how they will each fare now, what they are doing. Give us more about the way you flesh them out in these profiles in your book.

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, the Taliban fighter—his name is Akbar [Gul]—he's somebody who's very interesting because, as I said, he had quit the fight in 2001. And he wasn't alone in this. In fact, most Taliban had actually quit when the U.S. had invaded. They tried to switch sides. So, what ended up happening is you had no Taliban, essentially, that were fighting, and you had no al-Qaeda, because al-Qaeda had fled the country, as well. And so you had the U.S. forces on the ground without an enemy to fight. And that's where the alliances with the warlords came in, because the U.S. allied with all sorts of shady characters, and they would accuse people of being Taliban or al-Qaeda, and a lot of people got wrongfully arrested and sent to Guantánamo. And he, this Taliban fighter, was one of the people who was wrongfully arrested, a couple of

times. He was beaten. And through this, he actually ended up back into the insurgency.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And the housewife?

**ANAND GOPAL:** And the housewife is—she grew up in Kabul. She was somebody who's—was educated.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What is her name?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Heela is her name. And she fled to the countryside in the 1990s when there was a civil war. Basically, the U.S.-backed mujahideen, who were the warlords and Islamic fighters that we had backed in the 1980s, when they were fighting against each other, basically reduced Kabul to shreds. So she fled to the countryside. And for the next 10 years, she was essentially locked in her house. That included when the Taliban was in power and when the U.S.-backed regime was in power. She had very little chance to go outside of the house. And so, a lot of the book is—details her travails under the circumstances and figuring out how she can get out of the house and how she could find a way back to her home in Kabul.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And the warlord and how a warlord will fare after the U.S. leaves?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, the warlords are really the ones we've empowered. If we want to ask, "What is the American legacy in Afghanistan?" it's that we've taken people—some of these people were obscure figures before. For example, this warlord, back in the '70s, he was a school janitor. After the CIA had backed a lot of mujahideen fighters and after the last 10 years when we backed warlords, people like him became extraordinarily wealthy and powerful. And what we've left Afghanistan with is a countryside full of these warlords. A lot of them are drug traffickers. A lot of them are human rights violators whose record is really no better than the Taliban that they replaced. And he is an example of that. Now, he was killed, and that happens—what happens at the end of the book, but there are many others like him who are really the real power in the country.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** And you point out in a recent article that you've written, and it's also

suggested in your book, that the war in fact could have ended much earlier than it did. So what is it precisely that U.S. policy produced that allowed the war to go on to this day and, you know, two-and-a-half years hence?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, we have to go back to the mood at the time in 2001, 2002, which was: You are either with us or against us. So, Bush essentially divided the whole world into two categories. And so, when the U.S. came, invaded in 2001, they expected to find either good guys—in other words, people that supported the U.S.—or terrorists. But the reality in Afghanistan was much more complicated. As I said, the Taliban had completely surrendered. So all of the Taliban, from the rank and file to the senior leadership, had given up their weapons, and they were sitting at home. And they weren't doing this because all of a sudden they became pro-American or pro-peace. This is sort of how Afghanistan has functioned over 30 years, where people learn to switch sides very often to survive. And so, the U.S. forces didn't have any enemy to fight. But because they allied with warlords and because they saw that there's—you were either with us or against us, whoever the warlords said was an enemy, that became the U.S. enemy, and so a lot of innocent people got caught up in that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's go to another clip of President Obama's speech Tuesday.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I think Americans have learned that it's harder to end wars than it is to begin them. Yet this is how wars end in the 21st century, not through signing ceremonies, but through decisive blows against our adversaries, transitions to elected governments, security forces who are trained to take the lead and, ultimately, full responsibility. We remain committed to a sovereign, secure, stable and unified Afghanistan. And toward that end, we will continue to support Afghan-led efforts to promote peace in their country through reconciliation. We have to recognize Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one. The future of Afghanistan must be decided by Afghans. But what the United States can do, what we will do, is secure our interests and help give the Afghans a chance, an opportunity, to seek a long-overdue and hard-earned peace.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Anand Gopal, if you could respond to that. He also compared leaving Afghanistan, like we—the U.S. government has left Iraq.

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, I think that's setting a pretty low bar, because Iraq is pretty violent today. And Afghanistan is going to continue to be violent. I mean, we say that the war is going

to end. Actually, in Afghanistan, for Afghans, the war is going to continue. There is no end in sight. The Afghan government and the Afghan army are going to be entrenched in the cities. The Taliban are going to remain in the deep countryside. Neither side is going to be able to defeat the other or dislodge the other. So we're really going to see the status quo, which is war continuing basically in perpetuity.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** And, Anand, could you explain the significance—you have written recently about the Haqqani network. Who is the Haqqani network, and how has it grown?

**ANAND GOPAL:** The Haqqani network is a—one of the factions that makes up the Afghan insurgency. And they were considered for many years America's greatest foe—in fact, even a bigger enemy than al-Qaeda. They had engineered many suicide bombs in Kabul. They had attacked many U.S. soldiers. And they have been the main target of the drone campaign in the border areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Talk more about this. I mean, the title of the [piece](#) that you did in *The Huffington Post* is very interesting: "How the U.S. Created the Afghan War—and Then Lost It." And you relate it to Haqqani.

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, and this is an extraordinary history, because if you listen to the U.S., you will think that the Haqqanis were a natural enemy of the U.S., and that's why we have to go and fight them. In fact, back in 2001, the leader of the Haqqani network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, actually tried to cut a deal with the United States. And, in fact, he has a history going back to the '80s. He was an old CIA hand. And he tried to cut a deal to come to join the Afghan government, but because the U.S. had allied with a different warlord who was an enemy of this person, Haqqani, essentially, that deal was rebuffed. And the U.S. enacted upon a campaign to kill Haqqani and, in the process of it, killed a hundred or 200 civilians and drove him and his followers into Pakistan, where, in subsequent years, they regrouped and launched the insurgency that we see today.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** So how common is that trajectory, in fact, Jalaluddin Haqqani's trajectory, from a mujahid during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and then to the Taliban?

**ANAND GOPAL:** It's very common. In fact, everybody in the Taliban—or, most people in the Taliban were mujahideen in the 1980s. They were low-level; they weren't big warlords like Haqqani. But they were all people who, in one way or other, benefited from the CIA's aid to the mujahideen in the 1980s. They later became the Taliban. Then they tried to join the Americans again in 2001, and they were rebuffed, and then they went back and started fighting.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can you talk about the numbers of Afghans who have died during the war? Today, in all the U.S. media, they're talking about the number of U.S. soldiers, which is well over 2,000, but I don't know that we have that sense of how many Afghans have died.

**ANAND GOPAL:** And we don't. And, in fact, we don't even know how many numbers—what the numbers are, because it's very difficult to account, and Afghans who are killed by the Taliban tend to be counted, but Afghans who are killed by American-backed forces aren't always counted. But what we do know is that tens of thousands of Afghans have died in this conflict and continue to die. You know, what it means to be an Afghan today is that, on the one hand, you run the risk of hitting roadside bombs or being caught by the Taliban or, on the other side, being caught by pro-American warlords. They get summarily executed. There's grave human rights violations from all sides in the countryside. That's what it means to be an Afghan today in the countryside.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** And before we conclude, Anand, could you talk about in—on June 14th, the second round of the presidential elections will be held. Now, both the leading candidates, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, have said that they will sign a bilateral security agreement with the United States. Could you talk about the significance of the bilateral security agreement? And there's also a status of forces agreement; is it the same thing? Will both be operational? Are both candidates amenable to signing?

**ANAND GOPAL:** The status of forces agreement applies to NATO. The bilateral security agreement applies to the U.S. forces. But essentially they're the same thing. The idea is that U.S. troops or foreign troops would be allowed to stay in Afghanistan after this year, and they would be given immunity from prosecution in local courts if they commit a crime. So that's what it's about. But ultimately what it's about is the idea of sovereignty. That's why Karzai didn't want to look like he was signing this over, because he's sensitive to the fact that a lot of Afghans feel that the Afghan government is a client state for the United States.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And finally, the surge that happened in 2009 where something like 100,000



U.S. soldiers were there, as you reflect back on it, and you were reporting on it there in Afghanistan, what effect did it have?

**ANAND GOPAL:** Well, if the surge's goal was to defeat the Taliban and leave Afghanistan as a state without terrorism and without the sort of everyday deprivations that we see, then the surge failed. What it has done is it's—like I said, it's kept the Taliban in their villages, and it's kept the Afghan government in the cities, and Afghans in between these two sides. And if you're an Afghan, it's very difficult to—you can't be neutral. If you live near the cities, you have to support the government; if you live in the villages, you have no choice but to support the Taliban. And that's, unfortunately, the legacy of the U.S. war.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Anand Gopal, thank you so much for being with us. The title of his book, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*. Anand is a journalist and fellow at the New America Foundation. Thanks for joining us.