

Beyond US Withdrawal: What Happened in Afghanistan?

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Introduction

On the face of it, the two events that provoked the end of an era in Afghanistan as we had come to know it, were the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020 and the unconditional NATO commitment to withdrawal by May 2021. While this is a myopic view of the subject matter, it warrants some attention, given the chaotic evacuation out of Kabul airport and the instant disintegration of the entire state apparatus in August 2021. No words can capture the amount of effort that went into building all of those institutions from scratch after 2001. Yet after a closer look, the original question remains unanswered. Why was a political settlement not achieved because of the Doha Agreement?

To start, the war was mischaracterized, producing a failure to understand national and local grievances in Afghanistan on the part of the Afghan elite returned to power and their western patrons. Understanding conflict and insurgency through the lens of ‘grievances’ whether those grievances are social, psychological, religious, or ethnic paves the path to a radical and fundamental change in state-building strategies. For all intents and purposes, the post-2001 western efforts in Afghanistan represented a liberal project. But it would be simplistic and reductionist to suggest that the state was entirely dependent on the US and, therefore, collapsed after its departure. This characterization dismisses the critical errors made in the past two decades, a few of which this essay will try to unpack.

The assumptions feeding into conflict management and state building during this period predominantly came from the opportunity cost theory of war literature, arguing that an earning man will not rebel¹. This was overly deterministic and simplified a conflict that was fueled by ethnic, ideological, and nationalist narratives and claims. If the war in Afghanistan had been understood through the lens of grievances – those of communities, ethnic groups, different genders and social structures - then the strategies to mitigate them might have been embedded in the reconciliation process, opening the opportunity for a more inclusive and sustainable state.

Instead, dependency in all areas politically, economically, and financially became a dominant feature of the post-2001 Afghan state. Resources dedicated, for example, to the creation of ten TV channels and an unsustainable army might, instead, have been directed at promoting and supporting existing religious structures that have been historically moderate and might have

¹ See Collier (2000); Berman et al. (2011)

delegitimized radical elements². Meanwhile, adopting institutional devolution and regional autonomy might have created stability, capacity, and accountability instead of concentrating billions of US dollars and enabling so many forms of corruption.

Internally, there was a consensus among Afghans on the republic side of the wall, at least about two issues: the Taliban had not changed ideologically or structurally, and the Americans would not leave Afghanistan completely. On the first issue there were good reasons to believe so: Taliban were gaining more territory, were more aggressive, and carried out more attacks. While this was the concern within the republic, the republic had little control over the peace process in Doha. The US had bypassed its partner (the Afghan state) and directly negotiated with the Taliban. To pave the path for Doha talks, the media had started to portray a favorable image of the Taliban too. This left many ordinary Afghans puzzled. I want to accentuate the clause ‘ordinary Afghans’ once more, as they were at the frontlines fighting for – or informally supporting the government. The puzzle was a simple question, is the West on our side or the Taliban’s?

On the other hand, the Afghan state had steadily slipped from disfunctionality to absolute failure. For over four years (2017-2021), it was a one-man show, embroiled in populist tactics and corruption. Anecdotes on how the cabinet meetings were ineffective and had a dictatorship-like atmosphere were abundant. In simple terms, no one could speak, question, discuss or criticize any ideas coming from the president. Leadership was abandoned in pursuit of micromanagement and populist rivalries. In other words, at the decision-making level, the international partners made fatal errors (intentionally or unintentionally) in letting this carry on unchecked.

In today’s societies, grievances arise from economic, ethnic, religious, and political reasons. For instance, poverty, the marginalization of ethnic minorities, gender & religious discrimination, or exclusion from the political process can all lead to individual- or group-level grievances. If ignored long enough, they can lead to social fragmentation and division and, then, full blown violence and insurgency. This was and remains the root of the reasons for insurgency in Afghanistan³.

In the remainder of this essay, I will expand on three themes I consider important sources of grievance in Afghanistan: (1) centralized administration and a centralized fiscal system; (2) systematic corruption, perception of injustice & insecurity; and (3) anti-foreign resistance narratives. The first two give an understanding of the domestic challenges and the last one is important in understanding the Afghan psyche vis-à-vis foreign interventions. Understanding conflict through the grievances lens, we must rethink conflict management approaches and radically move away from the top-down enforcement of telling recipient nations “what they are” and “what they should be”. I do not claim to invent the wheel anew in this paper, these sources have been extensively studied in the emerging literature on Afghanistan.

² See Joya and Rahimi (forthcoming)

³ See Johnson (2006)

Centralized Administration and Centralized Fiscal System

Afghanistan has long been a heterogeneous and fragmented society, with no single ethnic majority⁴. Each ethnic group has its own language, traditions, somewhat particular geography, and social structure. On the other hand, there is evidence from political scientists that a decentralized and community self-governance approach in Afghanistan as a fragmented/divided society may lead to a more stable political outcome⁵.

Despite such a vast body of evidence, a highly centralized rule was imposed by the 2004 constitution in Afghanistan. This produced a constant tension and rivalry with a strange unwritten ethnic coalition-formula to govern: how to divide the ministries among ethnic groups' supposed representatives, essentially warlords, corrupt individuals, entrepreneurs etc; which ethnic group would be represented in the president; which ethnic group would get the Defense, Interior or Finance ministries; and what percentage of which ethnic group was going to form the military? Meritocracy was absent. Further inter-governmental frictions within the state apparatus paralyzed decision making because the office of the president sat above the law and dictated all matters of government.

For instance, a few years before the collapse, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was stripped of all hiring and firing authority and the responsibility was transferred to the National Security Advisor's office, unelected and not vetted for a vote of confidence by parliament individuals. This individual controlled and sat above all the military and security decisions in the government. The problem does not lie with individuals but with the centralized structures that granted king-like powers to one person: the president⁶.

There is a well-known 'asymmetry of information problem' such that central authorities or the principal does not have all the necessary information and the know-how to deal with regional/rural issues. This crucial principle was abandoned by the international partners on the wishes of their Afghan ruling partners. One can count several reasons for this compromise: administrative convenience or monopoly over financial decisions, which eased paths to corruption; and the unfounded fear of threats to national sovereignty. In this setup, provincial governors, mayors, heads of district and all matters related to the police were handled centrally and directly by the president.

The second prong of the centralized system that created local grievances and continued distrust was the centralized fiscal system. For instance, the Ministry of Finance controlled and decided the budget for the Judiciary System and provision of its security. This not only undermined the autonomy and integrity of the courts but undercut the democratic doctrine that the Judiciary System be the third independent pillar. In another example, when the first cases of Covid-19 were detected in Herat Province in March 2021, there were no preparations and the health

⁴ See Roy (2000)

⁵ See Rahimi (2019); Rubin (2004); Allan (2003)

⁶ See Shahrani (2018)

workers had to go into contingency plans. They needed money to get the facilities to isolate positive cases and prevent the spread. Herat hosts several customs offices and points of import and export for Afghanistan, which brought in a large portion of the domestic revenues. To get their budget, a request had to be put to the central Ministry of Public Health, which in turn had to be requested from the Ministry of Finance to approve the spending for the contingency. This process took weeks if not months. Provincial authorities had little to no authority to make spending decisions in the meantime.

The centralized administrative and fiscal systems resulted in further conflict, bottlenecks, poor service delivery, and lack of local participation in development projects. Perhaps most importantly, the absence of executive powers at the provincial authority level resulted in centre-periphery tensions, creating grievances of political exclusion, anti-state resentments and feelings of alienation.

Systematic Corruption, Perception of Injustice and Insecurity

The human cost of the wars in Afghanistan has been unimaginable. It is a curious fact that human memory is selective and does not remember all the atrocities. When I returned to live in Kabul full-time in 2017, I felt like I'd walked straight into Frank Miller's *Sin City*. The protagonists included corrupt and ex-convict politicians, while the kingpins and the mob ran trade and covert Taliban suicide squads were tasked with blowing things up. Days would start with the daily series of bombings, shellings, or complex attacks often targeted at government officials in armored vehicles and buildings equipped with layers of security and safe houses. Kabul residents became the collateral. The mob's favorite activities included kidnapping, extortion, and blackmail. A public job represented a lottery ticket with jobs in the financial and procurement directorates as jackpots. There was no job security and an invisible short-termism ruled over almost everything in the public sector. Driving around the city, if you were lucky not to get blown up by the Taliban suicide squad, you might get run over or blocked by constant motorcades of the republic. The T-walls served as the separating line, the physical embodiment of the distance and lack of trust between those who ruled and those being ruled. A significant majority of residents I spoke to for four years had grievances and disruptions caused daily (and unnecessarily) by those in power. The rule of law was absent for those in power. Instead, the rulers' law was in force.

The endemic corruption at all levels of bureaucracy created a perception that ordinary citizens were systematically abused by a small – yet influential – group of 'corrupt people' in charge of the government. The highly centralized regime in Afghanistan failed for 20 years to punish a single high-profile corruption case in what would have been a symbol, at least, that justice was served. This created not only distrust but a disgust for the government. Working in the government was synonymous with being corrupt. The bad apples spoil all the good ones and in the final years, I recall very well how honest individuals did not accept government job offers because they were afraid of facing the mafia-like behavior that had taken hold in the public sector.

As a result, meritocracy was sacrificed: the choice was between irrelevance or membership in the corrupt circles. Reward and punishment mechanisms based on law and ethics had failed the

ordinary citizen. This incited anger among the people and turned them away from the government. These failures were directly linked to the international partners and many considered the Afghan government not independent. It was perceived that Afghanistan was occupied and hands behind the screen, often those of ‘the English’ or ‘the Americans’ ran the show. Over the years, an underlying and unaddressed anti-foreign resentment started to emerge.

Sovereignty and Resistance Narratives

First, the sovereignty puzzle. Most Afghans were confused as to whether the country was independent or not. This was a major source of grief and antagonism. Even those in power, sometimes in very key positions, did not know. The issues of independence and sovereignty were never fully discussed in a meaningful way in the Afghanistan of post-2001. There were no national fora or educational platforms where questions could be answered and opposing arguments rebutted. Anti-state and anti-western elements exploited this vacuum. Ideas are immortal, they accumulate, and hit where it hurts: state legitimacy. Not addressing this issue slowly led to the idea that the government of Afghanistan was a puppet installed by the western powers.

All official historical memories and symbols in Afghanistan are constructed in a way that celebrates the principle of resistance against invaders. Soon after the US-led intervention in 2001, a psychological and nostalgic challenge of grappling with foreign interventions in Afghanistan emerged. Afghan politicians sometimes enabled the anti-foreign intervention narratives when they needed leverage. The secondary and higher education systems in Afghanistan taught repeatedly how Afghans won against the British in the Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–42; 1878–80; 1919) and defeated the USSR (1979–1989). While these are supposedly historical events, they were kept fresh through national symbols (the flag), oral storytelling, even proverbs (e.g., Never trust the English!) in daily conversations among Afghans.

Looking ahead, the western US-led efforts in talking to the Taliban reportedly put forth three demands: (i) address security threats and the rise of terrorism, (ii) ensure women’s rights particularly education, and (iii) form an inclusive government. There are strong suspicions among Afghans that the last two demands will be compromised when push comes to shove.

We often stress that people in Afghanistan, especially women and children, need international help in the face of an ongoing humanitarian crisis. But that crisis did not happen overnight. Over 18 million people, well over half of the population were already living under the poverty line with the previous government, with some estimates being much higher, and real GDP growth was negative since 2012. There is a concerning argument that, because of the humanitarian crisis, we should compromise with the Taliban regime or give them the legitimacy they need to help with the crisis. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan did not happen overnight and cannot be solved overnight.

The political settlement was never going to be achieved with the Taliban. They have not changed ideologically or structurally irrespective of their promises. If anything, they have more support as a result of the mistakes made by others in the past 20 years. The challenges around the republic and its international partners were numerous. Ultimately, they failed to recognize national- and community-level grievances that resulted in an erosion of any legitimacy the state held. Worst of all, the rulers of Kabul were so out of touch that in the final year prior to the collapse, they went on a rampage with a populist, empty campaign blaming Pakistan, the US, Russia, China – practically everyone but themselves.

The crisis in Afghanistan may be resolved by a model of decentralization based in self-governance, democratic politics, and an inclusive state that recognizes the diversities that Afghanistan represents, and celebrates them. A state that respects human rights, guarantees women's rights, and promotes democratic values. Put differently, Afghanistan needs a decentralized political structure anchored in self-rule to reduce the pressures from the centre (Kabul) and allow the peripheral competition to emerge with its own regional characteristics. Localized, efficient governance may solve the asymmetry of information problem by allowing local inclusion and enabling participation that maximizes the number of political winners.

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