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How the Taliban Re-took Afghanistan

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On 15 August 2021, Taliban forces entered the Afghan capital, Kabul, as the government collapsed and the president, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country. This brought an end to the twenty-year campaign waged by the US and its allies to remake the country. The speed with which the Afghan army collapsed shocked many, but others, who understood developments in the country better, were not surprised.[1] On 31 August, the last US forces left the country.

Sorce: CIA Factbook

The final report of the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), released in mid-August, stated that during the 10-year draw down of US forces, the Afghan government could not sustain progress made nor could it provide for its own security. The scathing report also criticized the $145 billion reconstruction effort for its unrealistic goals and timelines although it commended the

achievement of lower child mortality rates, increased per capita income and literacy rates. The report concluded that "If the goal was to rebuild and leave behind a country that can sustain itself and pose little threat to U.S. national security interests, the overall picture is bleak."[2]

Afghanistan has long been subject to instability and foreign invasions. The British invaded in 1839-41 but were forced to withdraw after incurring massive losses in 1842. In 1878-80 they invaded again, and this was followed by a long-term and very problematic relationship with foreign powers. The British aimed to limit Russian influence and protect their access to India. The Afghans gained independence from the British in 1919, following the Third Anglo-Afghan War that began in May 1919 when the Emirate of Afghanistan invaded British India and ended with an armistice in August 1919. The war resulted in the Afghans winning back control of foreign affairs from Britain, while the later recognized Afghanistan as an independent nation. The Durand Line was reaffirmed as that between Afghanistan and the British Raj and is now the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In 1979, Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union and was occupied until 1987. With US and Pakistani backing, the Mujahadeen (local factions of tribesmen) waged a jihad against Soviet forces and the Afghan communists. The war that followed was devastating. The Soviet Union was unable to crush the mujahideen while one million Afghans were killed and another four million were displaced. After leadership changes in Moscow, the Soviets came to the same conclusion that British had reached a century earlier: occupation of Afghanistan had huge costs and few benefits. Following the exit of Soviet forces, the Mujahideen factions turned on each other and this chaos gave rise to the Taliban — ethnic Pashtuns who imposed their fundamentalist interpretation of Islamist order on the war-weary population.[3] The Taliban had given shelter to al-Qaʿida personnel and in 2001, following the September 11 attacks, the US and the UK invaded Afghanistan to crush al-Qaʿida plus its Taliban backers. They remained there for twenty years.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2020, the population was almost 39 million; the national income equaled $19.8 billion and national income per capita was $5,090. In purchasing power parity terms (measuring what can be bought in

the country), GDP/capita was $2,088, about 16 percent of that in Egypt. Afghanistan's human development index in 2020 was 0.496, the fifth lowest in the world.[4]

It is a predominately rural society with only an estimated 26 percent of the population living in cities, a much lower share than in other South Asian countries. This is after significant urbanization: in 1950, only five percent of Afghans lived in cities. In recent years, Afghan cities have been growing at around four percent per year, one of the highest rates of urbanization in the world.[5] As a result of foreign aid and government prioritization, the adult literacy rate increased in recent years from 31.4 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2018, but that rate was one of the lowest in the world.[6]

Since Afghanistan's first confirmed case of COVID-19 in February 2020 the public-health sector has had limited hospital capacity and resources to treat the disease. Many Afghans reportedly avoided seeking treatment when they showed symptoms, deterred by poor hospital conditions, false rumors, and various cultural stigmas associated with contracting COVID-19. By July 1, 2021, the number of confirmed cases had reached 120,216, with 4,962 deaths, but a high test-positivity rate—42% as of June 30, 2021—suggests the actual spread, case numbers, and deaths are far greater.

As a result of the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that Afghanistan's urban poverty level increased from 41.6% to 45.5% in 2020. Yet, according to the World Bank, overall poverty levels actually decreased from 55% to 47% in 2020 because the pandemic had a less significant impact on the rural economy than originally projected. Due to the drought in 2021, food security has deteriorated. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, food prices have risen due to COVID-19 and are likely to increase further given projected impact of the draught. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent has expressed "grave fears" for the millions of Afghans "who will need humanitarian support in Afghanistan this year due to this drought-driven food crisis piled on top of the debilitating social and economic impacts of COVID-19 and the long-running conflict." About 12.2 million Afghans, (one-third of the estimated population), are currently facing "crisis" and "emergency" levels of food insecurity, placing it among the three countries in the world (with Yemen and South Sudan) with the highest proportion of food insecure people. Almost half of Afghan children aged under five years are projected to face acute malnutrition this year.[7]

The pandemic also reduced the government's ability to generate domestic revenue and its heavy dependence on international assistance. About 90 percent of the economy is informal and therefore, largely escapes taxation, further inhibiting the Afghan government's financial self-sufficiency. In recent years, as the economy struggled to achieve sustainable economic growth, it has increasingly relied on remittances from Afghanis working abroad, especially in Iran. By 2019, they accounted for the equivalent of 4.3 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, an increase from 1.2 percent in 2014. However, officials from the intergovernmental International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate this figure could be as high as 15–20 percent, given that many remittances are sent through the informal *hawala* money-transfer system. The World Bank suggests that the pandemic has reduced remittances in 2020 to Afghanistan by an estimated 10 percent. Afghans in Iran have struggled to find work due to COVID-19 and economic sanctions, forcing many to return home, where they face rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and insecurity. In 2020, the IOM recorded the largest return of Afghan migrants in a single year, approximately one million—almost double that in 2019. Over 200,000 returned between January and March 2021, more than double the number during the same period in 2019 and 2020.[8]

Afghanistan is also a multiethnic and mostly tribal society in which the parts are greater than the whole. The population consists of numerous ethnolinguistic groups. The Afghan National Anthem and the Afghan Constitution each mention fourteen of them, though the lists are not exactly the same. The Pashtuns are an Iranic ethnic group and make up one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan, accounting for about 40 percent of the country's population. The majority of Pashtuns are Sunni Moslems and most live in the south and east of the country. Despite their previous political dominance, Pashtuns have never formed a homogeneous group, and many have suffered oppression at the hands of the elites from their own community. The power and leadership of individuals divides Pashtuns, not only into different tribes but also into numerous sub-tribes, each isolated within their own borders. Interference in each other's affairs has caused conflict among sub-tribes throughout their history. Yet despite their infighting, they have usually rallied to form a unified front when challenged by external threats or interference by a central non-Pashtun government. The Taliban, (or "students" in Pashto), emerged in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan (where there are some 50 million Pashtuns and along

Afghanistan's southeast border) following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. This predominantly Pashtun movement, which preached a fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam, first appeared in religious seminaries that were largely funded by Saudi Arabia. The promise made by the Taliban was to restore peace and security and enforce their own austere version Islamic law, once in power.[9]

The Taliban has traditionally been opposed by the Northern Alliance, or United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. This was a military alliance of rebel groups that operated between 1996 to 2001 against the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The United Front was originally assembled by key leaders of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. It fought a defensive war against the Taliban government and received support from India, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The Taliban were backed by Pakistan. By 2001, the Northern Alliance controlled less than 10 percent of the country, in the north-east and based in Badakhshan province. The US invaded Afghanistan, providing support to Northern Alliance troops on the ground in a two-month war against the Taliban, which they won in December 2001. With the defeat of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance was dissolved as members and parties supported the US backed Afghan Interim Administration, with some members becoming part of the government of former President Hamid Karzai. In August 2021, with the fall of Kabul, former Northern Alliance leaders and other anti-Taliban figures regrouped as the Second Resistance or Panjshir resistance, named after the mountainous region in the northeast of the country where it is based.

The Afghan economy is not only weak but has, for many years, been dependent on foreign aid. The private sector is very small, with most employment - 44 percent of the workforce - in agriculture where productivity is low. The development of the private sector and diversification of the economy has been limited by insecurity, political instability, ineffective institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a very difficult business environment. In 2020, Afghanistan was ranked 173 out of 190 countries in the World Bank's *Doing Business Survey*. Weak institutions and property rights limit access to finance and as a result credit to the private sector was equal to only three percent of GDP. The lack of competitiveness resulted in a chronic foreign trade deficit, of about 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely by foreign grants. These also financed about 75 percent of public spending. In 2019, security-related expenditures were equal

to 28 percent of GDP, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent. Total public spending accounted for 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a large share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and mining.[10]

Afghanistan has mineral deposits worth nearly $1 trillion. Iron, copper, and gold deposits are scattered across the country. There are also rare earth minerals and large deposits of lithium, an essential but scarce component in rechargeable batteries and other technologies vital to tackling the climate crisis.[11] Minerals generate about $1 billion in Afghanistan a year, 30 percent to 40 percent siphoned off by corruption, as well as by warlords and the Taliban, which have presided over small mining projects.[12]

After more than four decades of displacement, Afghanis form one of the largest, protracted group of refugees in the world and their displacement is one of the worst crises of its kind in modern history. Since 2002, nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan under UN auspices.[13] At the end of 2020 there were an estimated 2.9 million displaced people in Afghanistan. In the first seven months of 2021, a further 550,000 Afghanis were internally displaced, 80 percent of whom were women and children. Some 120,000 fled from rural areas and provincial towns to Kabul province.[14] By 2021, 470,000-500,000 Afghanis were legally resident in the European Union, nearly 60 percent in were Germany.[15] In 2020,116,403 Afghan asylum seekers and 980 Afghan refugees are residing in Turkey.[16] In October 2020, the Iranian government stated that there were 780,000 Afghan refugees, two million undocumented Afghans and 600,00 Afghan passport-holders in the country.[17] Almost three million Afghan refugees, half of them unregistered, have been living in Pakistan for decades.[18]

Since 2002, the United States has provided nearly $88 billion in security assistance, $36 billion in civilian assistance, including $787 million specifically intended to support Afghan women and girls, and nearly $3.9 billion in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.[19] The war has cost the US over $2 trillion and resulted directly in the death of about 240,000 people. This does not include deaths caused by disease, loss of access to food, water, infrastructure, and/or other indirect consequences of the conflict.[20]

Despite this huge and prolonged effort, the Afghan army, nominally 300,00 strong, largely trained and equipped by the US collapsed in the face of the Taliban who numbered an estimated 70,000. Why did this happen?

Proximate reasons include the withdrawal of US forces and equipment. According to one Western trained Afghan general, the Afghan Army was not without blame. It had problems of cronyism, bureaucracy, but ultimately stopped fighting because its partners already had. The February 2020 peace agreed by the Trump with the Taliban in Doha doomed the Afghan army and government by putting an expiration date on American interest in the region. US contractor logistics and maintenance support, that was critical to combat operations, ended. Finally, corruption, that was endemic in the government, affected the senior military leadership and crippled the armed forces.[21]

There were also, however, problems at a much deeper level. The US and its allies acted backed a highly centralized state, with a constitution, promulgated in 2004, that was similar to that of the monarchy in the 1960s. This took place in an ethnically diverse, mountainous country where local leaders, communities, and tribes had often effectively ruled. The 24 provincial governors, police officials, and even lower-level officials were appointed by the president. While the president of Afghanistan was elected by popular vote, the same could be said of local officials. Many Afghans believed that a strong central government was necessary to prevent national disintegration, Iranian and Pakistani interference, and war-lordism. Opposition to federalism and regional government was particularly strong among Pashtuns in the east and south while Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks who were more inclined toward local autonomy, opposed federalism that would enable warlords. All groups, however, endorsed local control over local affairs at the level of villages and tribes, and did not want the government to interfere with traditional customs.[22]

President Ashraf Ghani, elected in 2014, was a former official in the World Bank and coauthor of a book called *Fixing Failed States*. He aimed to build institutions that would disenfranchise local powerbrokers, but this put him in opposition to powerful tribes and clans. Tensions between Kabul and regional actors created vacuums that the Taliban were able fill. Their local support expanded until they almost became a national movement. The Afghan army created by the US, was large, well-armed and equipped with

air power, but its chain of command clashed with family and tribal loyalties, and it relied on US contactors. As US involvement in Afghanistan was drawn down, it was unable to win the war.[23]

Afghanistan has been dependent on external subsidies for most of the past twenty years. When the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan state survived with support from the Soviet Union until it withdrew in 1992. It then collapsed, leading to a decade of civil war and Taliban rule. After 2001, as the international community pledged to rebuild Afghanistan, the pattern of donor dependence intensified. In 2021, the government and security forces remained heavily dependent on funding from abroad.

During the past twenty years with the support from the U.S. Treasury Department, the public finance system has been improved significantly. As a result, the government was able to increase revenues. In 2018, it raised $2.2 billion, 11.3 percent of GDP, only three percentage points below the average for other low-income countries. In the past two years however, this system was eroded as the Ministry of Finance and the Afghan central bank, became increasingly politicized.[24]

Reliance on foreign aid goes back to the days of British rule in the 19th century. The end of British rule meant that the flow of financial aid dried up. State monopolies were created, and tariffs promoted economic self-sufficiency but as the costs of governing and developing were high and Afghan rulers appealed to foreigners for aid. This was the beginning of a pattern in modern Afghan economic history: the country became one in which foreigners could project norms of statehood, development, and modernity. Foreign attempts to modernize Afghanistan always rested on fragile foundations. Taxing the population or interfering in local affairs risked revolt while reliance on foreign aid benefited the urban elites much more than rural tribesmen. The urban elite's efforts to bolster the state's legitimacy as a homeland of the Pashtun people provoked resistance from non-Pashtun minorities. Their irredentist stance toward the Pashtun also worried Pakistani elites concerned about the loyalty of their large Pashtun population.

Reliance on foreign aid increased during the Cold War. The US had shown little interest in Afghanistan, and only established an embassy in Kabul in 1948. By the mid-1950s, however, fears of Soviet influence led the US to advocate development in Afghanistan in

accordance with modernization theory. This suggested that so-called traditional societies such as Vietnam or Afghanistan could be developed in the direction of Western capitalism by reform and foreign aid. American trade and financial experts advocated reform of the country's complex tariff and taxation systems; hydrological engineers would build dams and the government would ban opium production.

For Afghan leaders the dilemma was whether to agree to US demands that it curtail opium production and risk rural revolt or ignore them and risk the end of foreign aid. When opium production was cut, the government was challenged by revolts in the country and became vulnerable to insurrection.[25]

The US aimed to create a stable country with some semblance of law and order. This required robust state institutions. Influenced by modernization theory, the US saw this as an engineering problem: Afghanistan lacked state institutions, a functioning security force, courts, and knowledgeable bureaucrats. The solution was to pour in resources and bring in expertise from abroad. NGOs and the broader Western foreign-aid complex were encouraged to help, whether the locals wanted them to or not. As their work required stability, foreign soldiers – mainly NATO forces, but also private contractors – were deployed to maintain security. Since 2002, the Pentagon is reported to have spent $108 billion on contracted services in Afghanistan. In May 2021, The Department of Defense employed more than 16,000 contractors in Afghanistan, of whom 6,147 were U.S. citizens — more than double the number of U.S. troops.[26]

While Afghanistan needed a functioning state, the presumption that it could be imposed from above by foreign forces was misplaced. Such an approach made no sense when the starting point was a very heterogeneous society based on local customs and norms, where state institutions were long absent or impaired. The top-down approach to state-building has worked in some cases but most states have been constructed by compromise and cooperation than by force. The successful centralization of power under state institutions usually involves the assent and cooperation of the people. The state is not imposed on a society against its wishes; rather, state institutions build legitimacy by securing a modicum of popular support.

US policy was based on a top-down state led approach, a long-standing tradition in US political science made famous by Samuel Huntington. The assumption was that if

overwhelming military dominance over a territory can be achieved then changes can be made in accordance with the policy objectives. As Daron Acemoglu put it, in most places, this theory is only "half right, at best; but in Afghanistan, it was dead wrong."[27]

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