

Aftermath of War on Terror in Afghanistan: Choices between Chaos and Sustainable Peace

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ABSTRACT: On August 15, 2021, the war on terror, which had prolonged for two decades, was concluded as the Afghan Taliban took control of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The war on terror is perhaps regarded as one of the most controversial wars, strategically and politically defined during the 21st century. What deed was done in these twenty years is now history, but now the region has come up with a more significant concern. The concern of humanitarian crisis, the concern of political trust in Taliban leadership, and the concern of sustainable peace are some of the highlights that stakeholders seemed to be worried about. During the recent 17th Extraordinary conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Secretary-General of the United Nations identified that Afghanistan today faces a humanitarian crisis. The stakeholders must take a serious note of the issue, or the region will face the highest catastrophe of the century. Will there be any peace and sustainability in Afghanistan? Would the Taliban be able to secure their trust among the public? What would be the future of the political scenario in the state? This paper tends to analyze the facts of the contemporary politics of Afghanistan. Moreover, this paper will try to identify the outcomes in terms of regional and state-level concerns while the Taliban holds the center throne. A historical overview and brief contrast of the War on Terror will be provided to understand the topic better. This paper will also evaluate the future aspect of political domains in Afghanistan.

KEYWORDS: Afghan Taliban, Political Rights, Humanitarian Rights, International Politics, War on Terror, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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Introduction

In September 2001, five airplanes were hijacked, and four out of them collided to secure and prestigious statues of the United States (McNeese, 2021). The attacks of 9/11 were not simply regarded as “terrorist attacks” but were echoed around the world more than the incident of Pearl Harbor. Hundreds of civilians and state personnel were taken as casualties, and the security guard and sovereignty of the superpower America were openly breached. Al-Qaeda firmly accepted this incident, whose then-leader was Osama bin Laden. Long story short, then President of the US, George W. Bush, demanded the world react against such heinous crimes and the biggest military operation in Afghanistan to eliminate terrorist outfits like Al-Qaeda (USAID, 2023). This

operation was termed the War on Terror and was backed by NATO and allied states. Britannica mentioned that this operation against terrorism was a multidimensional campaign of almost limitless scope.

From then till now, various stakeholders, researchers, and think tanks have colluded to define the stakes on which the War on Terror was supposed to end. Hundreds of autobiographies, scripts, research, and articles were written during the operation accord. This operation exceeded its terms for nearly two decades and was shared by George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Unlike what was supposed of this war to come up; as a result, the sudden inclusion of the Afghan Taliban with this much pace shocks the stakeholders what they supposed as a complete hegemonic role of the US state that was nowhere to be found when on August 2021 Afghan Taliban hold their reign in Kabul (UNDP, 2023). Though the peace agreement done by President Donald Trump and the Afghan Taliban seemed fruitful, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was a surprise to many.

The world saw the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban in the political sphere of Afghanistan, thus posing many questions concerning the future of Afghanistan. It appeared that important actors in and around Afghanistan had paid little attention or simply failed to grasp the consequences of the Afghan war. The sudden shift in Afghanistan's political environment, coupled with the US withdrawal, brought several concerns to the forefront: Who would contribute to forming the new political cabinet? Mr. [Name] is all set to take over the presidential seat, a post that more often than not is taken over through an election. What kind of constitution would be established? How would the state function if the Taliban were to take over its administration? Were there any conditions that allowed women to engage in political and public life? More importantly, what awaits Afghanistan in the future? The creation of a humanitarian crisis only compounded matters, and as the state structure collapsed when the Taliban overtook Kabul, the machinery ground to a halt. Some of these issues include the status of women's rights, education, the democratic principles enshrined in the Afghan constitution, and the electoral systems under the new leadership. These questions are crucial to knowing the fate of Afghanistan, which has faced an unstable future after the Taliban's resurgence.

Discussion

The Taliban reclaimed power in Afghanistan twenty years after a US-led operation. In a shift from two decades ago, Taliban officials have stated that the new administration will be "inclusive," but only as part of their specific concept of "inclusive". Although the Taliban's second regime has attempted to project a more moderate image, it continues to impose severe restrictions on freedom of expression, including a crackdown on media outlets and the systematic violation of human rights, particularly in regard to women" (The Conversation, 2023). "Despite international engagement efforts, the Taliban have shown little progress in upholding their promises of governance reform, with widespread reports of forced disappearances, restrictions on women's rights, and the suppression of dissent" (Mantraya, 2023).

The Taliban leaders promised general pardons for officials from the previous Afghan government, led by Ashraf Ghani, pointing out that women will be part of the government's structure, particularly in light of incidents of aggression against the Hazaras, a predominantly Shiite ethnic minority, and restrictions on access to education for women and girls. The precise nature of political Islam in Afghanistan remains unknown, raising concerns about the Taliban's future internal and foreign strategy (Mallapaty, 2022). Thus, now there is a complete shift in the case of Afghanistan, where stakeholders have been diverted from war strategies

towards the state's political future. The new reign of the Taliban in Kabul doesn't seem to be like that of the past, but surely their gestures and routines have raised various concerns for international society.

A significant breakthrough occurred to initiate a formal process for peacebuilding within Afghanistan, which has been in the works since 2017 (BBC, 2021). The United States of America struck a separate agreement with the Afghan Taliban to bring about a political settlement and move the situation toward a ceasefire. There was no question that the Afghan Peace Process began, and the Afghan people embraced it, but the Taliban's role in the broader peace process has remained contentious.

In mid-August, the Taliban took control as the last of the US-led coalition soldiers backing the previous administration withdrew (UN, 2021). However, the international world has yet to acknowledge the current administration. Billions of dollars in financing, assets, and loans for government agencies, developers, and humanitarian services remain blocked. Furthermore, foreign research funding is no longer available (Byrd, 2021). So, the question stands: whom to favor and what to do with a war-torn state? August was not a date for US withdrawal, but along with them, much of the workforce and well-settled families of Afghanistan fled. People perhaps see through the lens of history, which was not in favor of them or any contemporary norm of a democratic state. Such a phase of uncertainty has changed the political demographics of Afghanistan. The uncertainty among the population, the forthcoming famine as predicted by the World Health Organization, the quest in internal politics of the state, and the policies that don't seem reliable are giving more grief to the cause.

Current Scenario of Governance in Afghanistan

Following two decades of an extensive, expensive multinational state-building endeavor, Afghanistan's government disintegrated in a matter of weeks in the summer of 2021 (Jonegård, 2019). The relatively quick loss of Afghan security forces drew widespread notice. Still, the Taliban's success against the internationally supported Afghan republic was due to a combination of deep-seated political and administrative problems. So, the new government of the Afghan Taliban has to deal with all these governance concerns, be it the issue of corruption, shortage of workforce, inability to gather policymakers, and the list goes on.

The structure of internal governance and politics is more crucial and complex in Afghanistan than in the past. A state that was already inundated with war, extremism, nepotism, corruption, proxies, and drug-related accusations is now introduced with the cabinet, which doesn't seem to work with the contemporary norms anytime soon. However, the Taliban have agreed to make an inclusive government in Kabul that would have members from all ethnicities and political groups from Afghanistan (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020). Yet it still has to be implied practically as the government in Kabul has not yet given any results out of it. Another concern in the capital is the members that the Taliban have included in their cabinet. Most of the cabinet members in Kabul are on the International Security Watchdogs and the United States' list. This may be another hurdle for the government to bring legitimacy within the state and internationally.

Already beleaguered by instability, COVID-19, mismanagement, dwindling revenues, and drought, the Afghan economy will confront a slew of new obstacles due to the Taliban's takeover and the international community's clampdown on aid and support (Statista, 2021). As a new Afghan administration takes shape, the Taliban's activities and the international community's response might worsen or moderately ease the existing economic and humanitarian issues.

The current governance scenario in Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, remains precarious as of 2023 and 2024. The Taliban's rule has been marked by increasing authoritarianism, with significant curtailments of civil liberties, particularly the rights of women. Women have been largely excluded from public life, denied education beyond secondary school, and banned from many employment sectors. Moreover, the Taliban has implemented severe restrictions on media, resulting in the closure of many outlets and the silencing of independent journalism.

Despite the regime's claims of moderation, reports indicate that Afghanistan has faced a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions facing hunger and displacement. The Taliban's inability or unwillingness to address these issues has led to widespread criticism from international organizations, although some countries, like Turkey and Qatar, have continued to engage diplomatically, advocating for conditional support (Mantraya). Afghanistan's governance is characterized by deep divisions between the Taliban's internal power structure and the global community's response, with limited progress in terms of governance reform or human rights protections (The Conversation).

Multinational state building in Afghanistan is one of the most sustained and costly endeavours that was initiated about two decades ago, and in the summer of 2021, the Afghan government collapsed and allowed the Taliban to seize power. But a breakdown of its support structure described below clearly showed that much of Afghanistan's development relied on international support. Despite the huge bulk of the resources which was thrown in, shortcomings in the state's structures – including rampant corruption, over-reliance on foreign assistance, and the lack of sustainable state institutional frameworks- ensured that the state could not withstand the withdrawal of such support (Jonegård, 2019; Barfield, 2022). This rapid disintegration of Afghan security forces reflects the overall incompetence of the state, leading to a leadership vacuum, which was perfectly seized by the Taliban. Governance Amidst Taliban Authority: Obstacles and Constraints. The return of the Taliban has made Afghanistan again governed under a rigid mechanical structure with supreme authority yielding disciplinary measures. Early promises to form a broad-based government team that involves Afghanistan's diverse colors and political factions have not been met. The interim administration discriminates against women as well as significant ethnic minorities such as the Hazara group, thus narrowing down considerable segments of the population (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2023). The non-inclusion has reduced domestic confidence and alienated Afghanistan in international politics, accommodating cabinet members who are barred by the United Nations and the United States of America's lists of sanctions and terrorism (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

This exclusionary strategy has aggravated the governance crisis in Afghanistan. Currently, administrative problems and a lack of Institutional framework have put the Taliban in a poor shape to face the socio-economic and political crises confronting the nation. By centralizing power, division has been deepened within the society, and the administration has not put in place structures to address the needs of its people (Khaama Press, 2023). It is certainly no secret that the global economy plummeted during the initial months of COVID-19; in fact, it is an economic catastrophe. Afghanistan's economy has been weakened through years of war, and has now been virtually in shambles under the rule of the Taliban. The complete stoppage of foreign aid, together with the freezing of Afghan central bank reserves, which were almost \$9 billion, amounting to over 75% of the public expenditure, has caused a great financial crisis in the nation (World Bank, 2023).

Lay-offs are prevalent, hyperinflation remains rife, and wages in the public sector are insufficient to tolerate massive economic risks that have elevated millions of citizens into poverty (IMF, 2023). The economic problems are accompanied by an increasing humanitarian problem. By December 2023, over 28 million people, which is more than two-thirds of the Afghan population, required humanitarian assistance, while nearly 6 million people were at risk of famine (UNOCHA, 2023). Again, the humanitarian operation has faced significant challenges from the Taliban restrictions, which include no employment of women, and this has hampered essential aid operations. Lack of these services has led to millions living in dire conditions. This is a clear revelation of the Taliban's bad governance (UNHCR, 2023).

That is why today we observe methodical undermining of human rights. In a bid to exercise its control over the population, the Taliban has been implementing its political rule through the systematic regression of human rights, most especially women's and girls' rights across Afghanistan. Girls can go up to the 6th grade, but they have been locked out from many areas of employment and excluded from public life. Amnesty International (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2023) have listed these restrictions as gender apartheid in general. Taliban not only maintain gender disparities but also hamper the social and economic development of Afghanistan. The Taliban administration has worsened the media and free journalism practices, especially for female journalists, who face many limitations. Many have closed down due to censorship, lack of funds, or harm threats... They say the suppression of free speech has denied Afghan society much-needed openness and honesty, and has locked in authoritarianism all the more (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Global Involvement: Challenges and Prospects. The international world has a complex dilemma regarding its engagement with Afghanistan. While providing humanitarian aid to address the needs of the Afghan inhabitants, diplomats and international organizations face controversies with regard to the recognition of the Taliban authorities. Other countries like Qatar and Turkey have encouraged what they refer to as conditional engagement noting that change within the region requires a gradual process – this implies that as much as NPE was being adopted the accompaniments such as the rights of individuals within the country and integration of marginalized groups must equally be pursued (Mantraya, 2023).

However, progress has been close to non-existent because the Taliban continue to disregard the international push for diversification and their responsibility to the people of Afghanistan. China and Russia have been seeking to build practical relations with the Taliban for regional security and business reasons in particular. Despite the government providing a minuscule amount of funding, these initiatives do not adequately address the general governance and human rights crises in Afghanistan (Barfield, 2022). Inability to develop a coordinated international process has compounded the process of exercising steadiness within the nation. Routes to Stability Due to the challenging situation that Afghanistan faces, efforts made to address its challenges need to be holistic, and the well-being of the country's population has to be at the forefront of the strategy. Humanitarian aid must also continue to be politically neutral so that there is a focus on relieving current suffering.

At the same time, any diplomatic efforts should also stress the need for a government system that would engage all the aspects of Afghan society. This strategy then requires constant pressure and coordination between global institutions, civil society, and regional actors. That, however, is countered by the resilience of the Afghan people as they hold on to what will be achieved in the next phase. This is why the idea of a

sustainable future for Afghanistan has to be constructed with respect to the country's structural pathology and with an understanding that the fight for human dignity can't be lost.

Afghan Taliban and International Actors

No state has yet recognized the Afghan Taliban government, but they have developed warm relations with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and Qatar. The Afghan Taliban have held various talks with other parties, such as the Taliban opponents in Russia, and have developed very warm ties with Iran. Since 2010, Qatar has played a key role in the Afghan Peace Process as it allowed the Taliban to hold their office in Doha (Administrator, 2021). Pakistan, a neighbor who has always shared the burden of Afghanistan's grievances, has played a pivotal role in stabilizing the peace in the region. Pakistan was among the states that have insisted international organizations and human rights watchdogs look after the people of Afghanistan now that the US has withdrawn from the state (Brown, 2021). Pakistan has also facilitated the newly incumbent government of Afghanistan, such as providing them with food and the accessories the people need firsthand. The Afghan Taliban has given some a glimpse of its foreign policy as the Afghan Taliban has welcomed the foreign investment in their country.

The government of Afghanistan has welcomed the Chinese investment to secure the state's economic collapse. Moreover, according to a few reports, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States of America now seem to develop a backdoor channel relationship with the government in Kabul (Ruby, 2020). The 17th extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was held in December 2021, which was hosted by the neighboring country (Al Jazeera, 2021). Pakistan hosted the conference to solve the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and make the international lobby accountable to give aid to the people of Afghanistan. At that conference, the prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan Niazi, asserted the importance of the scenario to the United Nations delegation and the United States representatives that there should be a margin drawn between the Afghan Taliban and the people of Afghanistan. He further pressed the matter to the stakeholders that if this matter were not addressed sincerely, the repercussions of the looming humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan would have a long-term effect (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Current data indicates that up to 70 percent of Afghans would be in poverty within a year. According to the data published by the World Food Program, 8 million people are on the verge of poverty and famine, with up to three million expected to suffer from malnutrition (WFP, 2022). This indicates the bigger picture, a reality, that a humanitarian catastrophe is about to break in Afghanistan. OIC has also asserted to the member states that after decades of war, suffering, and insecurity, the people of Afghanistan need relief and peace. But there was no outcome about accepting the government in Kabul. Therefore, it will be earlier to say whether the international societies and states will accept the reality of politics in Afghanistan. But whatever the concerns are, the Taliban should abide by their agreement on an inclusive government of Afghanistan to secure their seat at international platforms.

Conclusion

The land of Afghanistan has been used as a war zone, whether concerning internal conflicts or being used for proxy wars in the core of the international arena. The quest by many great empires and the wealthiest nations to conquer Afghan soil all went in vain. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that Afghanistan is the "graveyard of empires." The war on terror is now a story of the past; the main concern for the international

community is now to look forward to the growth of the Afghan people. The Taliban of today are not like the Afghan Taliban of the nineties. Post Ashraf Ghani and the current Taliban government seem to unify different country factions, both from an ethical and sectarian perspective. The Taliban government in Kabul has declared that Afghan soil would not be used against any neighbors or any country globally, and would not be part of any bloc. During this incumbent government of the Afghan Taliban under the leadership of Mula Haibatullah Akhundzada, many policies such as allowing media and allowing women's education in accordance with Shariah were not among the Taliban reign in 1996-2001 (Gohel, [2023](#)).

Moreover, the incumbent government announced that there would be no support granted to Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), or any other banned outfits (Travesí, 2021). The current Kabul government emphasizes international recognition and wants to develop full diplomatic ties with the world. On the other hand, international parties either directly interested in the region or far away seemed reluctant as the Taliban have not included political leadership, especially from the pre-Taliban era or from the Grand Jirga. However, the recent speech given by the former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, stated that now the world should see the reality before them, and states should recognize the Taliban government and hold a Grand Jirga. Through this Grand Jirga, the issues and concerns of Afghanistan should be channeled as one, which will give hope to the institutions and the public. In addition, this speech also indicates that the Taliban have a negotiation with the political leadership that will hopefully bear fruitful results.

Last but not least, the Taliban, during the current 17th extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Pakistan, and the Taliban requested all of the members to aid Afghanistan on the looming issue of humanitarian crisis (Berkley Forum, [2021](#)). These efforts still don't provide any clear path about what the future holds for Afghanistan. If the Taliban shows leniency, be more optimistic, and includes true democratic reforms in their state, it would be easier for the international community and the United States to accept their legitimacy. Unless, then, anything said or analyzed could have both paths to follow.

Afghanistan, because they can lead to a situation where they can use aggressive force, which will cause civil war in the country. Thus, it could be said that the Afghan conflict is precarious. It requires a long-term period and the desire of all stakeholders to pursue peace discussions. Concerning conflict concerns, there should be defined objectives. Furthermore, there should be a definite strategy to conduct several series of discussions to transform the conflict. Furthermore, policies developed for conflict resolution and transformation should be long-term, not short-term, to achieve peace and resolve political chaos.

The Afghan Taliban need to engage with political stakeholders of the state and should engage all the members of parliament. Though it would not be the leap towards the solution, it would help the government and other parties to set it on the table for once. Afghan Taliban must deviate from their hardline policies towards one that is more acceptable to the public of Afghanistan and internationally, such as women's rights, especially their participation in matters of state (ICTJ, [2024](#)). Taliban should, for once, comply according to the policies on matters regarding human rights, political participation, and such other policies that are endorsed in contemporary world politics. All of these stakes shall prove to be a guarantee to recognize the Afghan Taliban in the international arena.

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