

## Peace Be With Afghanistan

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Two years ago, the Afghan government constructed and armed at Washington's great expense dissolved one provincial capital at a time. The Taliban occupied Kabul on August 15. America's role in Afghanistan's tragedy came to an inglorious and shocking end.

Today the Afghan people are impoverished and isolated; the Taliban leadership is fanatical and tyrannical. The so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as yet recognized by no nation, is in the global cellar on almost every measure.

If anything, failure has only made the extremist leadership more obdurate: "Over the past year, the Taliban's rule progressively hardened and became more authoritarian and dogmatically 1990s-like. The Taliban's exclusionary Pashtun-centered rule has turned highly repressive toward all forms of opposition." Western criticism of Taliban policy, particularly toward women, is seen as validating the regime's radical interpretation of Islam.

Washington, haunted by its ignominious exit, continues to struggle over policy toward Afghanistan. The refusal to recognize Kabul is needlessly counterproductive, preventing even basic communication. The Taliban rules and is the de facto if not de jure government. Its policies are odious, but brutal repression has never prevented the U.S. from engaging hostile governments.

Moreover, Taliban rule has delivered one essential benefit lacking during America's two decade-long attempt to install a liberal, centralized democracy in Central Asia: peace.

As *The Economist* last year summarized the status of a watermelon farmer: "since the Taliban returned to power, the guns have mostly fallen silent. True, poor rains have ruined Mahmood's harvest, his relatives have lost their jobs and his family is broke. But at least he no longer has to worry about his children being shot." Ponder the latter observation. Only *after* America's departure did this poor farmer no longer "worry about his children being shot." For him, the U.S. was a malign, even deadly force. And his feelings were widely shared.

Journalist Anand Gopal visited Afghanistan shortly before its collapse, reporting that "the biggest thing I noticed on the ground is just how tired people were of fighting." It is difficult to overstate the benefits of even a bad peace to those who suffer through such a war. Afghanistan still is not free of violence. The Islamic State (Khorasan Province) is most responsible for bombing attacks that have killed hundreds of people. Nevertheless, overall casualties are way down. Reported the Crisis Group last year:

The Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 put an end to 43 years of almost continuous war, an overlapping series of conflicts that reached a new ferocity as U.S. forces prepared for their departure.... Afghans certainly noticed the change. They had grown accustomed to a drumbeat of death and destruction: an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 battle fatalities per year, a toll that for several years had surpassed those of Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and more U.S. airstrikes than in any other part of the world. All of a sudden, after the Taliban seized power, the emergency wards were not full of Afghans suffering shrapnel cuts and blast injuries. In the early months of 2022, by UN estimates, fighting diminished to only 18 per cent of previous levels.

Two decades of conflict involving the U.S. resulted in an estimated quarter million deaths, some 70,000 who were believed to be civilians. Before the Trump administration reached its agreement with the Taliban, Washington loosened its aerial rules of engagement, increasing civilian casualties. Gopal reported on an extended family in Helmand province that lost several members in a single bombing raid. One of the men "travelled to Kandahar to report the massacres to the United Nations and to the Afghan government. When no justice was forthcoming, he joined the Taliban."

The war's impact was especially harsh in rural Afghanistan. Wrote Baktash Ahadi, who served as an interpreter for U.S. forces: "Virtually the only contact most Afghans had with the West came via heavily armed and armored combat troops. Americans thus mistook the Afghan countryside for a mere theater of war, rather than as a place where people actually lived. U.S. forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods."

The humanitarian consequences were predictable. In the *New Yorker* Gopal discussed the experience of a 40-something Afghan woman named Shakira:

Entire branches of Shakira's family, from the uncles who used to tell her stories to the cousins who played with her in the caves, vanished. In all, she lost sixteen family members. ... [Other families, he found] lost ten to twelve civilians in what locals call the American War. This scale of suffering was unknown in a bustling metropolis like Kabul, where citizens enjoyed relative security. But in countryside enclaves like Sangin the ceaseless killings of civilians led many Afghans to gravitate toward the Taliban. By 2010, many households in Ishaqzai villages had sons in the Taliban, most of whom had joined simply to protect themselves or to take revenge.

In relative luxury, denizens of Washington could, and still do, debate the finer points of counter-insurgency strategy while bearing none of the costs. Few Americans can even imagine the price that "real" Afghans paid for the privilege of a dubious democracy powered by venal warlords, festooned with officials both corrupt and incompetent, and capped by a central government notable for its dysfunction.

When Shakira and other women in her community were asked about the Taliban, they judged the movement compared to Afghan alternatives rather than American fantasies: "The women described their lives under the Taliban as identical to their lives under [local warlord] Dado and the mujahideen—minus the strangers barging through the doors at night, the deadly checkpoints." Dado was thankfully displaced by the Taliban, but he returned with the Americans

more arbitrary, corrupt, and brutal than ever. Whatever Washington's intentions, Ahadi noted that "When comparing the Taliban with the United States and its Western allies, the vast majority of Afghans have always viewed the Taliban as the lesser of two evils."

Different were the lives of those living in Kabul and other major cities, which contained only about 30 percent of the Afghan people but who were almost 100 percent of those who shared Western values, experiences, and outlooks. Urban dwellers prospered economically and rarely suffered the full human costs of the conflict. American visitors, like me, typically spent most of their time with these Afghans. Yet U.S. policymakers had strikingly little contact even with them, other than those serving in government or other official roles. And the latter did not really represent Afghanistan. Observed Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution, "In the end, few Afghans believed in a government they never felt was theirs."

Today the slaughter is over. Indeed, two years ago when Americans were transfixed by desperate people rushing the airport, most Afghans were marveling at the experience of peace. The *Wall Street Journal's* Yaroslav Trofimov wrote that "in Afghanistan's rural districts like Baraki Barak, where Taliban rules don't differ that much from existing conservative customs... the collapse of the Afghan republic and the U.S. withdrawal mean, above all, that the guns have fallen silent for the first time in two decades." Life might be a bit harder economically, but rural men aren't being killed and neither cruel local warlords nor corrupt distant politicians are interfering with people's lives. A village elder who lost sixteen members of his extended family during the war told Trofimov: "Now, there is peace. And when someone doesn't feel danger, doesn't fear war, and can walk with a peace of mind, he is happy even if he is hungry."

Of course, Afghans shouldn't have to choose among barbarities. They should be able to live in a system that mixes liberal rules with federal rule, while entering the 21st century at a measured pace. However, that was never on offer as they suffered through multiple domestic insurgencies and outside interventions. Writing before the Kabul government's collapse, the Brookings Institution's Vanda Felbab-Brown and John Allen observed that "peace is an absolute priority for some rural women, even a peace deal very much on the Taliban terms."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of U.S. foreign policy today is how little policymakers weigh the costs of their decisions on others. In recent decades Washington has contributed to hundreds of thousands, probably millions, of civilian deaths. The lethality of combat was evident in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and other countries in which the U.S. intervened. Sanctions, a fan-favorite in the nation's capital, can be even deadlier than war.

Speaking for a generation of wannabe Masters of the (Global) Universe was Madeleine Albright, who responded to a question about the lives of children lost to American sanctions: "we think the price is worth it." She viewed it as unfortunate, of course, that some—in this case, a half million—must die. Nevertheless, she and Washington leaders evidently believed they had the Mandate of Heaven, as the Chinese call it; that they were more discerning than the world's other 8 billion people; and they could rightly decide humanity's fate. If foreigners died as a result, the seeming assumption was that the latter should be glad that America decided they were worthy to make such a sacrifice.

U.S. officials, both political and military, made many mistakes during the 20-year war. At base, argued Hamid, “the United States never understood Afghanistan. American planners thought they knew what the country needed, which was not quite the same as what its people wanted. American policy was guided by fantasies; chief among them was the idea that the Taliban could be eliminated and that an entire culture could be transformed in the process.”

Tragically, Washington’s exit from Afghanistan was unnecessarily botched. Left behind were many Afghans who sacrificed much on Americans’ behalf. Nevertheless, the U.S. departure was inevitable and long overdue. The debacle offers Washington policymakers many lessons, including the importance of considering the cost to other peoples. Like Mahmood and his vulnerable children and Shakira and her lost uncles and cousins.

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