



US Should Stop Starving the Afghan People: Negotiate with Kabul and Release Frozen Funds

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Washington spent two decades at war in Afghanistan. America's troops are home, but US policy continues to punish the Afghan people. Millions could starve this winter.

The Biden administration should make peace with the Taliban. Washington should restore diplomatic relations, negotiate a working relationship with the new regime, and allow Kabul access to what is the Afghan people's money.

Afghanistan desperately needs peace and stability after decades of war. The US directly intervened in 2001, but that was merely the midpoint of a succession of wars. The country was relatively peaceful and largely unaffected by the Cold War until 1973, when the monarchy was overthrown. The royal palace remains, ruined, on the outskirts of Kabul, a symbol of a society also wrecked.

Five years later a communist regime took over in a coup, sparking violent resistance and US covert intervention. The following year the Soviet Union intervened on Kabul's behalf, followed by intensified American support for the insurgent Mujahedeen. The Soviets withdrew in 1989, returning the country to a purely Afghan civil war, in which the communist regime was finally overthrown in 1992. At that point former allies became enemies in a reordered civil war, which led to the Taliban's victory four years later. The civil war then took another turn, with largely non-Pashtun forces battling the Taliban government. The 9/11 attacks triggered a new phase. America invaded on October 7, 2001; two months short of 20 years later, US forces finally went home.

The consequences of nearly a half century of war were horrific. Much of the countryside was devastated. Afghan society was ravaged. No one was safe, especially Afghanistan's rural residents.

Estimates of the total number of dead start around 1.5 million and rang up to two million-plus. American involvement, which dominated the news in America, was but a small piece of a much larger, bitter conflict:

"Many thousands were killed as a direct result of factional fighting; hundreds or thousands of prisoners and civilians were executed by tribal, ethnic, or religious rivals; and a large number of combatants – and some noncombatants – were killed during the U.S. offensive. Moreover, tens of

thousands died of starvation or of a variety of diseases, many of which in less-troubled times could have been easily treated, and hundreds of thousands were killed or injured by the numerous land mines in the country."

Millions of people also were displaced, many driven abroad – peaking at an estimated six million during the Soviet occupation. Some 2.6 million currently are registered as refugees, the bulk in Iran and Pakistan. Another 3.5 million have been driven from their homes within Afghanistan, though some have returned home with the general end of fighting.

Washington played a vital role in turning Afghanistan into a national charnel house. Taliban rule was oppressive and cruel, but the US carried on the war for no good purpose for two decades. In only a few weeks Washington had ousted the Taliban and wrecked al-Qaeda, the primary objectives after 9/11. By November 2001 the Taliban essentially offered to surrender. Barnett Rubin, with the United Nations at the time, observed: "The Taliban were completely defeated, they had no demands, except amnesty." However, the Bush administration was in thrall of its own genius and, preparing to invade Iraq, refused to respond. "The United States is not inclined to negotiate surrenders," insisted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

How did Washington satisfy such hubris? It decided to establish a democratic and centralized state in a rural land heretofore ruled at the valley and village level. The US created institutions, government and military, in America's image, with which few Afghans identified. Urban elites benefited from – indeed, many grew rich, living in what were derided as "poppy palaces" by Afghans I met when I visited a decade ago – but failed to fight for Washington's creation. Rural residents, who made up 70 percent of the population, had even less connection to Kabul and those sent forth to rule over them. The Brookings Institution's Shadi Hamid observed, "In the end, few Afghans believed in a government they never felt was theirs."

Not understood in America was how the war turned the countryside, the home of most Afghans, into a killing field. The consequences were terrible for people trying to survive lives of hardship in the best of times.

For instance, onetime interpreter Baktas Ahadi wrote: "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. US forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods. One could almost hear the Taliban laughing as any sympathy for the West evaporated in bursts of gunfire."

A poignant example of the victims of America's war was 40-ish Shakira, whom journalist Anand Gopal interviewed:

"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. I wondered if it was the same for other families in Pan Killay. I sampled a dozen households at random in the village, and made similar inquiries in other villages, to insure that Pan Killay was not outlier. For each family, I documented the names of the dead, cross-checking cases with death certificates and eyewitness testimony. On average, I found, each family 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; the movement was more thoroughly integrated into Sangin life than it had been in the nineties. Now, when Shakira and her friends discussed the Taliban, they were discussing their own friends, neighbors, and loved ones."

Lives were lost in many ways. However good Washington's intentions, it cannot escape responsibility for the harm it caused. The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs detailed the extraordinary human costs:

"The war in Afghanistan continues destroying lives, due to the direct consequences of violence and the war-induced breakdown of public health, security, and infrastructure. Civilians have been killed by crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, bombings, and night raids into houses of suspected insurgents.

"The United States military in 2017 relaxed its rules of engagement for airstrikes in Afghanistan, which resulted in a massive increase in civilian casualties. From the last year of the Obama administration to the last full year of recorded data during the Trump administration, the number of civilians killed by U.S.-led airstrikes in Afghanistan increased by 330 percent.

"The CIA has armed Afghan militia groups to fight Islamist militants and these militias are responsible for serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings of civilians.

"Even in the absence of fighting, unexploded ordnance from this war and landmines from previous wars continue to kill, injure, and maim civilians. Fields, roads, and school buildings are contaminated by ordnance, which often harms children as they go about chores like gathering wood.

"The war has also inflicted invisible wounds. In 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health reported that fully two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems.

"Prior wars and civil conflict in the country have made Afghan society extremely vulnerable to the reverberating effects of the current war. Those war effects include elevated rates of disease due to lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition, and reduced access to health care. Nearly every factor associated with premature death – poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, environmental degradation – is exacerbated by the current war."

Understandably, the collapse of the Kabul regime frightened Afghans who fought or worked for the US and allies. Not so many others, however. Explained the *Wall Street Journal's* Yaroslav Trofimov: "in Afghanistan's rural districts like Baraki Barak, where Taliban rules don't differ that much from existing conservative customs, the calculation is different, particularly in the mostly Pashtun southern and eastern provinces. To villagers here, the collapse of the Afghan republic and the US withdrawal mean, above all, that the guns have fallen silent for the first time in two decades."

Last August Washington discovered that many Afghans cared only to end the war and viewed the Taliban, which shared, however extreme, local mores and beliefs, as the lesser evil to yet another iteration of foreign invader who brought death and devastation to communities and

homes across the nation. In the end, contra the now deceased Rumsfeld, the US eventually did negotiate a surrender, *its own*.

Paradoxically, the Afghan people's humanitarian needs have only grown since war's end. Last week the United Nations launched its largest single-nation aid appeal ever, for more than \$5 billion. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, explained: "This is a stop-gap, an absolutely essential stopgap measure that we are putting in front of the international community today. Without this being funded, there won't be a future, we need this to be done, otherwise there will be outflow, there will be suffering." The UN estimated that more than 22 million people in the country and nearly six million outside it needed assistance.

Observed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: "Afghanistan has suffered more than 40 years of conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty and food insecurity. Facing an ongoing humanitarian crisis, the resilience of refugees, internally displaced people and host communities is slowly reaching its limit." Aid programs have been interrupted and the government has essentially no money.

Pamela Constable of the *Washington Post* painted a similarly tragic picture: "Many Afghans were living a meager existence before the Taliban's takeover. But others are part of a large, newly impoverished urban working class that mushroomed after the sudden collapse of the vast, foreign-funded war and aid economy." Even if the Taliban knew what to do, it has no resources. Explained Constable: "The country's new rulers, cut off from most international aid as well as Afghan government assets held in US accounts, have scant resources to protect millions of vulnerable people against another harsh winter. Aid groups estimate that nearly 23 million Afghans, out of a total population of 39 million, already do not have enough to eat. Many also lack solid shelter and money to heat their homes at night, forcing them to choose between food and fuel, and creating additional potential for a full-fledged humanitarian disaster, aid officials said."

Similar was the account of the *New Yorker's* Jane Ferguson:

"A month after the Biden Administration pulled US forces out of Afghanistan, only seventeen per cent of the country's more than twenty-three hundred health clinics were functional. Doctors in the hospital in Kabul told me that they hadn't been paid since the Taliban seized power, in August, and that medicine is in short supply. The new government is struggling to feed the country's thirty-nine million people, and the chance that an Afghan baby will go hungry and die is the highest in twenty years. Half of the country's population needs humanitarian assistance to survive, double the number from 2020. More than twenty million people are on the brink of famine. The United Nations Development Programme projects that by the middle of this year Afghanistan could face "universal poverty," with ninety-seven per cent of Afghans living below the World Bank-designated international poverty line of \$1.90 a day."

With neither financial resources nor economic know-how, the Taliban has no answers to the Afghan people's misery. Nor is the war even over for Afghanistan's new rulers. The Islamic State remains, an enemy that seeks to displace the Taliban. And a force, because of its international ambitions, far more dangerous to the US.

Moreover, some Americans advocate that Washington jump back into the Central Asian imbroglio by supporting nascent resistance in the Panjshir Valley. Ahmad Massoud, son of a

celebrated Mujahedeen commander assassinated by al-Qaeda two decades ago, even proved his US bona fides by hiring a lobbyist. The endlessly hawkish Sen. Lindsey Graham naturally issued a statement of support, with no consideration of the impact on the Afghan people. So far, few of them appear inclined to rally around Massoud's standard and launch a new round in their nation's seemingly endless civil war, soon to pass its half century mark.

Afghanistan is an enormous tragedy. A half century of combat has devastated both people and land. An oppressive, unprepared government is incapable of meeting the people's basic needs. Conflict still stalks the land. And US policy intensifies the suffering of the Afghan people, victims of human action and natural events.

Instead of restarting hostilities, the US should seek a modus vivendi with the new Kabul regime which both sides can live with. For instance, the Taliban opposes ISIS, long has been at odds with Iran, and has no great love for Moscow and Beijing, which no longer can rely on the US to indirectly protect their interests. The movement cares little of the world beyond its borders and, having triumphed over America, no longer benefits much from a close relationship with al-Qaeda. With memories of the 20 years spent fighting to regain its earlier status, the Taliban is unlikely to welcome terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda or any other group within its territory.

Thus, despite the "late unpleasantness," the US and Taliban should be able to do business, starting with reopening the US embassy, even if only with a skeletal staff. The first task should be to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. That means working with international organizations and other Western nations with the Taliban to ensure access for NGOs. Another is to make frozen funds available to Kabul, perhaps some paid directly to aid agencies and other groups providing food and assistance. Washington also should immunize US and foreign banks that release deposits of Afghan citizens and businesses.

However, humanitarian provisions are not enough. The US freeze on Kabul's foreign currency reserves has shuttered the banking system and left much of the economy near collapse. David Miliband of the International Rescue Committee warned "that you can't solve this problem of mass malnutrition only with a humanitarian effort." The problem, he said, is that "The economy is not just in free fall; it's being strangled." Nearly 50 Democratic congressmen made a similar point when writing the president in December: "No increase in food and medical aid can compensate for the macroeconomic harm of soaring prices of basic commodities, a banking collapse, a balance-of-payments crisis, a freeze on civil servants' salaries, and other severe consequences that are rippling throughout Afghan society, harming the most vulnerable." It is vital to save lives at risk today.

Additional money should be released as understandings are reached on terrorism and other security issues. Over time limited intelligence cooperation might become possible. Another priority should be enabling more Afghans to leave, whether headed to America or elsewhere. The US was able to work, however uneasily, with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Washington also had fraught relationships with other communist states and assorted other regimes but maintained relations and de-escalated potential crises that threatened.

America's participation in Afghanistan's long-running war is over. Washington must develop a new role, dealing with the Kabul government that exists, not the one that Americans wished was there. The immediate priority should be saving Afghan lives. Aiding those at great risk would help redeem a failed war and needless sacrifice of so many American, allied, and Afghan lives.

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