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Afghanistan's "uncertain" future: domestic and regional implications

Sami Yousafzai

Pakistan and Afghanistan: national identity versus bonds of blood and civilisation

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Afghanistan's "uncertain" future: domestic and regional implications

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Afghanistan's "uncertain" future: domestic and regional implications

Introduction

Afghanistan has endured more than four decades of protracted conflict that entailed foreign invasions, civil wars, and sprees of terrorist violence. There is yet no clue of a certain and secure future for its nearly 40 million inhabitants.

The fall of Kabul and departure of former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani were significant happenings of the last year for Afghan people, the region and even the wider world. It was surprising even for the Taliban, who did not expect 33 Afghan provinces falling and more than 300,000 soldiers laying down their weapons in less than two weeks; the 34th province, Panjshir, fell to the Taliban a month later. That gave the Taliban the power they had been seeking for over two decades through insurgency against Afghan and NATO forces. Tens of thousands of lives were lost in the war.

The first Taliban regime was toppled by US-led coalition forces in the late 2001 after Mullah Mohammed Omer refused to hand over Osama Bin Ladin, the accused mastermind of September 9 attacks. Bin Ladin and his Arab followers of Al- Qaeda were based in Afghanistan and operated from their training and command centers in southern and central parts of the country. The ouster of the Taliban did not bring stability and an end to violence, despite billions of dollars were poured by international community. During those years of war on terror, the country achieved little in terms of development and governance. The Taliban also gradually expanded their insurgency operations from their southern strongholds to west, east, north, and central parts of the country.

The 2021 regime change in Afghanistan is not being seen as much different from the one in 2001 in terms of stability in the country. Even though the insecurity and violence have significantly declined since the Taliban took power in August last year and most parts of the country appear relatively

safer for business and travel, yet the Taliban face multiple challenges regarding governance, international recognition, poverty, and small-scale insurgencies started by different groups in northeastern provinces. Failure to deal with these challenges will only add to the concerns of the Afghan people as well as countries in the region.

Governance issues

"Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (IEA) was the official name the Taliban used for their movement and now for their government. Their supreme leader, or Amir Al Mominin, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada is a reclusive figure, who succeeded Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansoor in 2015 after the later was killed in an American drone strike in Pakistan's Balochistan province near Iranian border. Haibatullah Akhundzada is usually based in Kandahar. Mullah Mohammed Hassan Akhund is second in the Taliban line of command. He holds the position of prime minister in Kabul and leads a cabinet of 33 ministers,² who are all male, and members of the Taliban movement; most of them are ethnic Pashtun.

Since the beginning of their second regimen more than a year ago, the Taliban have been facing the opposition and pressure internally and externally for their exclusive way of governance. World expects an inclusive government at Kabul, which represents all Afghans including women and minorities, as a way to extending them political recognition. Even China, which is considered supportive of the Taliban, called for an inclusive government in Afghanistan. In late September 2022, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin in a press conference urged the international community to step in and help form an inclusive government in Afghanistan. According to Wang, Beijing enjoyed close relation with the

² Andrew Watkins, "One Year Later: Taliban Reprise Repressive Rule, but Struggle to Build a State," United States Institute of Peace, August 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/one-year-later-taliban-reprise-repressive-rule-struggle-build-state>

Taliban and stressed that his county sought more engagement of the world with the group. Prior to these remarks by spokesman of the Chinese foreign ministry, deputy permanent representative of China to United Nations, Geng Shuang, American special representative for Afghanistan Tom West, foreign minister of Iran, special representative of Europe Union, and leaders of Tajikistan and other countries also called for an inclusive government. Inside the country, former president Hamid Karzai, and former chairman of High Peace Council Dr. Abdullah Abdullah repeatedly asked the Taliban to hold a Loya Jirga and facilitate a national dialogue in Afghanistan about the future of the country and an inclusive government.

It is not just the case of participation and inclusiveness, but some other issues also make the Taliban legitimacy difficult and governance fragile such as the girls' education. Closing secondary schools for girls has been a major stigma for their government since the start of their second term. No one really knows the real reason behind this decision because most of the Taliban ministers publicly support a return of the girls to schools. The issue drew more attention when on 23rd of March 2022, the long-promised reopening of girls' schools was observed just for two hours, and the schools were shut again with the orders from the Taliban leadership. The situation became even more complicated when the Taliban set the options for girls during university entrance exams in early October as students couldn't try their luck for journalism, computer science, political science and arts. Later in the month, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, minister of higher education, was also fired by Sheikh Haibatullah for no clear reason and replaced with a more hardliner Sheikh Neda Mohammed Nadem, who previously served as Kabul governor.

In October, Rina Amiri, American special envoy for Afghan women and human rights, in a series of tweet raised concerns about the Taliban's depriving girls from education for more than 400 days. Meanwhile, Afghan religious scholars, political and tribal elders, social activists and heads of

international organisations including UN, HRW and OIC have been calling upon the Taliban to reopen the girl schools as soon as possible but to no avail.

Not all the Taliban leaders are against girls' secondary schools but only a handful of hardliners are forcing the ban. Those who are against reopening schools above six grade, reportedly fearing moral corruption, include: Sheikh Haibatullah, the supreme leader; Mullah Hassan, the prime minister; Mullah Noor Mohammed Saqib, minister of Hajj and religious affairs; Sheikh Abdul Hakim, head of judiciary; Sheikh Mohammed Khalid, minister of promoting virtue and preventing vice; and Mullah Mahmood, a close aide to the supreme leader Haibatullah. They outmaneuvered the rest of the Taliban officials and leaders because of their senior positions and authority. Most other Taliban leaders including members of Haqqani network, Mullah Yaqub, son of Mullah Omer, ministers, and military commanders support girls' education. But they can't raise their concerns against the six conservative leaders cited earlier because of respect, fear, and obedience. In some instances, these pro-education figures persuaded journalists to report on the subject, in a hope to solve the problem.

The Taliban favoritism and lack of capacity in governance affairs are causing serious problems in the Taliban ministries and abating the service delivery and its effectiveness. Not only 33 ministries are occupied by the Taliban, but offices of 34 governors, police commanders, and health, education, energy, mining, and financials directorates are also led by Mullahs, or Taliban leaders, and insurgency veterans. In a recent move, on 25th of October, the Taliban appointed Mullah Mohammed Shafiq as the director of Sardar Daoud Khan Military Hospital in Kabul to replace orthopedic specialist Mohammed Ismail Wardak.³

³ Details can be seen here: <https://pa.azadiradio.com/a/32099859.html>

The intricacy is more plausible in passport, electronic ID, energy and business sectors of the government, where such issues cause disruption in services and activities for weeks and hinder their effectiveness.

It is not just high-ranking officials who get terminated by the Taliban, only to be replaced with the Taliban fighters and members, but low-level employees also face such treatment and insecurity. The newly created ministry by the Taliban supreme leader, 'promotion of virtue and prevention of vice', got the authority to impose their socio-religious order on government employees. These rules forced some of the government employees to focus on their personal safety more than their official tasks.

Limitations on freedom of press and speech, which are considered indicators of bad governance in civilised world, are strictly enforced by the Taliban with all possible means. The Taliban threaten and put behind the bars the journalists and social media activists just for a critical post against the Taliban government on social media. That is also true for foreign journalists. For one, in July this year, the Taliban intelligence arrested Lynne O'Donnell, an Australian journalist working for Foreign Policy magazine, for her reporting and forced her to tweet an apology.⁴ She left the country after being released. Later in October another foreign journalist Stefanie Glinski of Guardian claimed the Taliban sought information, via WhatsApp, about her sources but she refused.⁵ After failing to fulfill the request, she was not able to travel back to Afghanistan after having worked there for four years.

With dismissals of the experienced staff and no capacity building programs in place for the new employees - who are mostly only battlefield veterans

⁴ Alys Davies, "Lynne O'Donnell: Taliban detained, abused and threatened me," BBC, July 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62248625>

⁵ Akmal Dawi, "Taliban ban foreign journalists on misreporting charge," Voice of America, October 13, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-ban-foreign-journalists-on-misreporting-charge/6789461.html>

- the Taliban are making it more difficult for them to run a sophisticated government system that was largely designed by Western technocrats. What is left behind is also not in good shape.

Nonetheless, the Taliban officials tend to downplay such concerns. The Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi once said their government is already inclusive and all minorities have posts in the cabinet. Meanwhile the officials keep on claiming that corruption has been eliminated, technical personal are hired without bias, schools will be reopening for all girls, and freedom of speech is respected.

No doubt, there are areas of improvement compared to the collapsing Afghan republic, which should not be ignored by both Afghans and international community. For instance, any major force to challenge the Taliban authority militarily or politically is conspicuous by its absence. All the warlords and power brokers which used to create hurdles for Ghani government had fled the country as the Taliban were closing in over Kabul. Despite international sanctions and fragile economic situation, Taliban have managed to pay the salary for nearly a million military and civil sector personal on monthly basis mostly from domestic revenue resources.

In May, the Taliban leadership banned cultivation of poppy in Afghanistan. This was a real challenge for the previous governments as during last two decades Afghanistan was placed in first position of opium and heroin production roster of UNODC. According to recent information from Kandahar and Helmand province, two major hotbeds of opium cultivation, no farmers dare to defy the Taliban order and cultivate poppy on their land. In their previous era of rule in 1990s, the Taliban, in same manner, had unprecedentedly put an end to widespread opium farms in the country.

International recognition

In the 1990s, only three countries, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, had recognised the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This time

around, despite being in power for more than 15 months, the Taliban have failed to convince a single country on the globe to recognise their government. That is causing frustration among the Taliban.

The Doha Agreement, which was signed by the Taliban and the US in February 2020, is the core basis of the understanding reached between the Taliban and international community. But both sides accuse each other of violating the agreement clauses, which is also factoring in the international community's reluctance to recognise the Taliban government. Forming an inclusive government, respecting human and women rights, providing freedom of expression, and as listed in Doha agreements, cutting ties with all terrorist groups, are the key preconditions set by international community. But the Taliban claim there is a political agenda of the West especially US in blocking their recognition. On 21st of October 2022, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told a Turkish journalist that West was behind preventing the recognition of and cooperation with an Islamic government, although the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan had made and continued to make great attempts. But unfortunately, some pressures were applied, he noted.⁶

Killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri on 31st of July 2022 in a US-led drone strike in downtown Kabul was the major setback for Taliban legitimacy and recognition. It explicitly revealed that the Taliban had violated the Doha agreement terms by safeguarding a key foreign terrorist inside Afghanistan. The American spy networks tracked and neutralised Zawahiri in an upscale Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood in a compound belonging to a member of Haqqani network. After days of silence, the Taliban government said they were investigating the case but even three months after the assassination, the result of their investigation was not

⁶ "Mujahid says West preventing Islamic Emirate's recognition," *Pakistan Observer*, October 22, 2022, <https://pakobserver.net/mujahid-says-west-preventing-islamic-emirates-recognition>

finalised. The incident further muddied the situation between Taliban and rest of the world and added to suspicions of other countries about Taliban providing sanctuaries to terrorists inside Afghanistan.

Although in UN and more than 50 countries, the Afghan embassies and diplomatic mission are still in control of diplomats appointed by the previous government, but Taliban have taken control of Afghan embassies in Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Qatar and some other countries. Meanwhile the embassies of China, Japan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Russia, India, and Iran are open in Afghanistan and providing services at different levels.

Lack of international recognition is marginalising the Taliban government on global level besides negatively affecting the business, diplomatic and economic sectors in the country. It is not clear when Taliban and the world will make understand each other and get along, if ever.

Poverty and economic crisis

The streams of cashflow which had started flowing towards Afghanistan in 2001 with the arrival of NATO forces suddenly drained in second half of 2021 after the withdrawal of these forces and the ouster of Ashraf Ghani government. The regime change, and the subsequent political changes, led the country to poverty. According to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, nearly a million jobs had been lost in about a year of the Taliban rule,⁷ and daily incomes had dwindled greatly.

In late 2021, United Nations along with other international welfare organisations raised grave concerns about the lack of food for more than half of the country and requested international community for billions of dollars to respond to the impending humanitarian crisis.

⁷ ANI, May 10, 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/900000-afghans-lost-jobs-since-taliban-takeover-sigar20220510064511>

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) announced on 15th of February this year that humanitarian needs had skyrocketed across the country, and that by the end of the year about 97 percent of the population was expected to be living under the poverty line. It also noted that almost 23 million Afghans - more than half of the country's population - were facing acute food insecurity, and one million children were at risk of a severe malnutrition. The IRC warned that an unaddressed humanitarian crisis could lead to more deaths than twenty years of war.

IRC country director Vicki Aken said that the international community's cutting off non-humanitarian funds after August 2021 led to subsequent worsening economic problems. IRC statement further noted that Afghanistan's slide toward catastrophe was primarily driven by the policies of the international community rather than conflict and disasters. For one, the survival of millions of Afghans depended on their ability to access humanitarian aid, but humanitarian aid could not replace the functions of the state.

Although the IRC counted natural disasters as a low-level factor in poverty and economic crisis, but it is not only draining of foreign cash which put Afghans in a desperate situation, but natural disasters also cost the nation greatly. According to World Food Program (WFP), recurrent drought in the country was one of the main factors for decreasing agriculture harvest and further threatening the income and livelihood.⁸ The WFP warned in the same report, released in June, that the situation remained precarious as household income continued to shrink for the second month in a row and the country saw an increase in proportion of household with deteriorating

⁸ Relief Web, "Afghanistan food security update round ten June 2022," July 27, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-food-security-update-round-ten-june-2022>

incomes; in June this increase was marked at an alarming 10 percentage point.

Constant drought has destroyed large portion of agriculture harvest in 2021 and 2022 in southern and eastern parts of the country and there is not any clear plan to deal with this looming problem for Afghan farmers and landlords.

While people of Afghanistan grappled with poverty, a strong earthquake hit the south-eastern provinces of Paktika and Khost in June this year, killing more than 1000, and injuring hundreds of others, besides destroying a large number of houses in both provinces.⁹ That resulted in displacement of many Afghan families; most of them were still living under sky or tents.

The heavy floods of June and July this year also harmed the livelihoods of Afghans in many parts of the country. They did not cost human lives only but also destroyed whatever agricultural harvest had survived the drought. According to Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, heavy floodings had killed 182 people (UN aid coordinating agency OCHA put the number at 256) and injured 250 others in different provinces of Afghanistan. Meanwhile 3,100 houses were completely destroyed, and thousands of livestock killed.¹⁰

As the flash flooding took place spontaneously, the impact was huge, and the Taliban government was not in a position to control the situation and help the vulnerable people. Zabihullah Mujahid in a news conference called on international organisations and Islamic countries to help them because Islamic Emirate could not manage the floods alone. The already

⁹ Susannah George, et al., "Afghanistan earthquake kills more than 1,000, injures 1,600, officials say," The Washington Post, June 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/22/afghanistan-earthquake-taliban-khost-deadly>

¹⁰ AP News, "Heavy rains set off flash floods, killing 182 in Afghanistan," August 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-floods-united-nations-taliban-zabihullah-mujahid-c2eef1896ffd20bc0723115542cf6288>

poor people lost the remaining means of their livelihood, and some were lucky enough to survive the drowning floods and left behind everything else.

According to OCHA estimates in late August this year, the floods had affected over 100,000 people in 32 out of the country's 34 provinces. The worst hit areas were in eastern Afghanistan, including Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. Katherine Carey, the deputy chief of OCHA, said that, with 75 percent of Afghanistan's rural population dependent on agriculture, the loss of farmland, crops, and livestock will have a lasting economic impact on livelihoods.¹¹

However, lack of technical and financial facilities didn't stop Taliban from rushing to the help of flood victims. Had their defense ministry helicopters not helped the trapped people, the number of casualties would have been much higher. The Taliban air force's reaction to requests for rescue missions was quick and swift, from eastern Nangarhar to southern Zabul province where they lifted up dozens of people including women and children to safe locations who were at high risk of drowning.¹²

The Afghan are not yet out of the risk and danger of floodings as the issues related to climate change remain unaddressed. Afghanistan lost a big chunk of its forests during nearly five decades of war, and the risk of negative climate impact is higher compared to other countries. According to Katherine Carey, deputy head of OCHA, Afghanistan is one of the world's

¹¹ Abubakar Siddique, "'We are left with nothing': Deadly floods aggravate Afghanistan's economic, humanitarian crisis," Gandhara (RFE/RL), August 31, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-deadly-floods-humanitarian-crisis/32012886.html>

¹² Yousaf Zarifi, "Army helicopters rescue 321 people in Nangarhar, Laghman," Pajhwok, August 26, 2022, [https://pajhwok.com/2022/08/26/army-helicopters-rescue-321-people-marooned-in-nangarhar-laghman/#:~:text=JALALABAD%20\(Pajhwok\)%3A%20At%20least,places%2C%20officials%20said%20on%20Friday.](https://pajhwok.com/2022/08/26/army-helicopters-rescue-321-people-marooned-in-nangarhar-laghman/#:~:text=JALALABAD%20(Pajhwok)%3A%20At%20least,places%2C%20officials%20said%20on%20Friday.)

most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change, and vulnerable Afghans need long-term reconstruction and development support from the international community.¹³

These climate changes not only exacted a heavy price on crops and harvests, but also forced Afghan to displace from their villages to towns and neighbouring countries to find resources and feed their families. On 10th of October 2022, United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a statement declared Afghanistan as sixth country in the world with largest number of internally displaced people (IDPs).¹⁴ The UNHCR further noted that bad economic situation, successive droughts and insecurity in the past years were the reasons for the increase in IDPs number in Afghanistan.

International organisations have launched supportive programs to help IDPs. For instance, on 15th of October 2022, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) published a video clip of a carpet weaving workshop and claimed that the organisation had created more than ten thousand jobs for IDPs through supporting 400 businesses.¹⁵ Most of those who got the jobs were war IDPs, especially women, and the IOM supported them

¹³ Abubakar Siddique, "'We are left with nothing': Deadly floods aggravate Afghanistan's economic, humanitarian crisis," Gandhara (RFE/RL), August 31, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-deadly-floods-humanitarian-crisis/32012886.html>

¹⁴ "Afghanistan ranks 6th among countries with most IDPs: UNHCR," Ariana News, October 10, 2022, [https://www.ariananews.af/afghanistan-ranks-6th-among-countries-with-most-idps-unhcr/#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20High%20Commissioner,internally%20displaced%20people%20\(IDPs\)](https://www.ariananews.af/afghanistan-ranks-6th-among-countries-with-most-idps-unhcr/#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20High%20Commissioner,internally%20displaced%20people%20(IDPs))

¹⁵ "IOM claims to have created jobs for more than ten thousand IDPs, women in Afghanistan," *Hasht-e Subh*, October 15, 2022, <https://8am.media/eng/iom-claims-to-have-created-jobs-for-more-than-ten-thousand-idps-women-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=IOM%20Afghanistan%20published%20a%20video,women%2C%20according%20to%20the%20IOM.>

because of women's fundamental role in the economic development of Afghanistan.

The Taliban government does not have enough resources to deal with the overall economic and humanitarian situation, and they also lack international recognition and monetary privileges. The Afghanistan Central Bank had about seven billion US dollars in reserve in a US bank that were frozen by the US government immediately after the Taliban takeover of Kabul to prevent terrorists' access to them. This step critically affected the services of private banks, a flourishing business in Afghanistan, and limited their ability to pay only about \$400 or its equivalent in Afghani to their costumers per week and stop cash transactions out of the country for business deals.

Despite numerous requests from Taliban government, people of Afghanistan, and international welfare organisations, the fate of Afghan reserves is not clear. US president Joe Biden's decision to split the money between Afghans and 9/11 attack victims' families was challenged by an American judge and families of those killed and maimed in Washington and New York terror attacks. It is not clear if the Biden's executive order will be implemented or not. But the remaining half will not go directly to the Taliban-controlled central bank of Afghanistan. In September 2022, the US government announced that USD 3.5 billion of the frozen money will be transferred to a newly created Afghan fund to benefit the Afghan people as the hunger gripped every province in the country. According to US officials, the Taliban government will not have access to the fund, which will be held at the Bank for International Settlements in Switzerland.¹⁶

¹⁶ Fatima Hussein, "US sets up Afghan relief fund with frozen central bank money," Associated Press, September 15, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-switzerland-taliban-5393b05f911d4eeba6d75ae74ea3fd13>

The US Treasury Deputy Secretary Wally Adeyemo said in September that "the Afghan Fund will help mitigate the economic challenges facing Afghanistan while protection and persevering \$3.5 billion in reserves from the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), Afghanistan central bank, for the benefit of people of Afghanistan."¹⁷ Shah Mehrabi, a Montgomery college economics professor is one of the four trustees of the new fund, and he believe that the money should be used primarily to maintain prices stability in the country rather than for humanitarian purposes. "I think the purpose of board, as a member, is to address the liquidity and price stability issues in the country expeditiously, prior to a harsh winter," he said. "There are ways we can provide relief so that Afghans are able to have food and energy and to perform their basic daily duties," he told the Associated Press in September.¹⁸

Because of frozen assets and other economic difficulties, Afghan economy is greatly affected as the World Bank says income and economic output in Afghanistan have dropped between 20% and 30%, imports have declined by roughly 40%, and 70% Afghan household report they are unable to fully meet basic food and non-food needs.

Insurgency and opposition

As the Taliban took control of Kabul on 15th of August 2021, many from Afghanistan opposed it. However, after a year the opposition spirit didn't die which continues to challenge the new rulers of the country to this day. The opposition came both in hard and soft forms. Taliban's ideological enemy Daesh or IS-K and other local/national armed resistance groups emerged as a militant or hard form of opposition, while soft opposition came in the shape of women rights activism and from those who fled the country.

Amrullah Saleh, the former vice president of Afghanistan, moved along with his supporters from Kabul to the mountainous Panjshir valley two

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

days before the fall of Kabul and formed an armed resistance along with Ahmed Massoud, the son of former northern alliance military commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. After two weeks of Kabul's takeover by the Taliban, Panjshir came under control of the resistance forces, named as National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan. However, as the Taliban forces marched on the valley, the resistance fighters were pushed to mountains after a brief skirmish and their leaders fled, taking exile in the West. With Panjshir brought under control, the Taliban completed their control.

Ahmed Massoud is a 33-year-old youth, educated in UK with nearly no military and combat experience. He climbed to the leadership position by making use of his father's fame and hierarchy to gain internal and external support for his resistance. His fighters consist of locals from Panjshir and Andarab valleys in Baghlan province and some former Afghan army commandos who refuse to bow to the Taliban.

Since its creation, the fighters of NRF have been openly engaging in asymmetrical warfare against Taliban. Moreover, in the second half of 2022 their insurgency extended beyond its birthplace of Panjshir and Andrab valley to the northern Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, inflicting losses on Taliban forces. However, their obtrusive struggle is not strong enough to shake the Taliban's power base in the country.

Head of the foreign relations committee of the NRF, Ali Maisam Nazary, told France 24 TV that the NRF is having thousands of fighters stationed in of Panjshir valley and on mountain tops but lacks ammunition and logistical support. However, for the time being, according to their military commander, conventional warfare against Taliban is not an option.¹⁹

¹⁹ Complete interview can be watched here: <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20211005-taliban-not-victorious-in-afghanistan-s-panjshir-region-parallel-govt-official-says>

Ahmed Massoud during a trip to Europe in July 2022 told Foreign Policy that the Taliban leave them with no option but war. He appears desperate for foreign support: "I believe that even with slightest support of the world, we will be able to liberate portions of our country because the people are not happy and do not support the Taliban."²⁰

Currently, the regional countries and global powers seem unwilling to provide the necessary assistance for Massoud's NRF. However, only Tajikistan has allowed the NRF leadership to use the country for living and traveling abroad to lobby for support, while the rest of neighbours including Russia, Iran and China along with US declared that they do not support arm resistance against Taliban. Moreover, Iran arranged a meeting between the Taliban and NRF leadership to facilitate peace negotiations which failed.

The Taliban government neither comment about the activities of their armed opponents in the country nor they accept the existence of armed insurgency against their government. But in August 2022, Taliban's supreme leader, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, appointed the notorious Mullah Qayum Zakir—a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and the current deputy defense minister of Taliban government—as a military commander to lead a clearance operation against NRF forces in Panjshir province and Andarab area of Baghlan province.²¹ After a three-week long operation since the appointment of Mullah Zakir, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed around a hundred rebels were killed, injured and detained. Moreover, a large number of weapons were seized. This operation cleared the area of the resistance forces. Some of the NRF's well

²⁰ Lynne O'Donnell, "Afghan resistance leaders see 'no option' but war," Foreign Policy, September 29, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/29/afghanistan-taliban-resistance-terrorism-jihad/>

²¹ Bill Roggio, "Taliban appoints former Guantanamo Bay detainee to lead fight in Panjshir," Long War Journal, August 21, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/08/taliban-appoints-former-guantanamo-bay-detainee-to-lead-fight-in-panjshir.php>

known commanders were killed in this operation, but the infamous Khalid Amiri—a former commando unit officer now leading insurgency in Panjshir—survived.

Some Taliban sources say more than twenty thousand of their fighters are positioned in Panjshir province. Most of them are from the southern and eastern provinces. After the Mullah Zakir-led operation, NRF accused the Taliban of summary executions, extrajudicial killings, torture and forced disappearance of their fighters and civilians. To investigate these claims, the UN sent Richard Bennett—special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Afghanistan—to Panjshir province where he met local officials and people. In his report to UN General Assembly, he acknowledged the claims.

It is not just the NRF which has risen against the Taliban rule, but Afghanistan Freedom Front also has presence in some provinces. In areas like Baghlan, they conduct joint strikes with NRF against the Taliban.²² AFF was created and is being led by previous government deputy defense minister and chief of the general staff, General Yasin Zia. It is, however, less known compared to NRF, but its attacks in the Taliban heartlands, although sporadic, in Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul are a sign of their wider presence. On the other hand, the NRF is concentrated in the north-eastern provinces. However, like Ahmed Massoud, General Zia also complains of lack of international support to AFF.

Yet there is another fundamental problem for the anti-Taliban resistance to overcome. It is disunited and without any coordination; General Zia's saying that he and Massoud have not met proves that. But the former acknowledges the need for unity if they want their dreams to come true.

²² Lynne O'Donnell, "Afghan resistance leaders see 'no option' but war," Foreign Policy, September 29, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/29/afghanistan-taliban-resistance-terrorism-jihad/>

Some other groups also claim to have established armed resistance forces against Taliban. the NRF Noor led by Atta Mohammed Noor—the former powerful governor of Balkh in Hamid Karzai government—the Jabha e Azada Gan (Front of Freedom Seekers), and Afghanistan’s National Islamic Freedom Movement are among these groups, but their existence is limited only to social media propaganda.

Exiled politicians of the previous regime, now dispersed in various countries, are trying to make an alliance against Taliban to pressurise them for negotiations on an inclusive government. The 'national resistance council for rescuing Afghanistan', formed by former warlords, announced their existence in an online conference and requested the international community to support democracy in Afghanistan and press Taliban for an inclusive government.

Hanif Atmar, president Ghani’s national security advisor and foreign minister, announced the creation of National Peace and Justice Movement in late September 2022 and called the Taliban government illegitimate. He also called an intra-Afghan dialogue to pave the way for a democratic process and an elected government.²³

In July 2022, another group of exiled Afghan politicians released a statement and said they have created a political movement by the name of Republicans. The former deputy defense minister and governor of Nangarhar province, Shah Mahmood Miakhel, is the spokesman of the movement. He stated in a press release that they are trying to bring together all the political stakeholders to negotiate and lead Afghanistan to a better future

Moreover, in October 2022, Ashraf Ghani’s second vice president, Sarwar Danish, created Justice and Freedom Party. In a statement, the party claimed that the Taliban didn’t leave other options to people of

²³ For details, visit: <https://www.afintl.com/202210153931>

Afghanistan but war and resistance, therefore, to protect rights of people they will use all possible means.

Just like armed struggles, these political movements are divided, and each of them has its own distinct agenda for the future of the country. However, the most important point regarding these exiled anti-Taliban factions is that no group has the ousted president Ashraf Ghani, now residing in United Arab Emirate, as its part.

Regarding the political movements and activities out of the country, the Taliban government is pessimistic and said the Afghan people do not welcome those who didn't perform in the past. Moreover, the spokesman of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that Afghanistan has now a strong government and no one will be allowed to divide the nation in the name of a party or movement.

Afghan women rights activism, a non-violent movement with apolitical ambitions, is yet another kind of opposition the Taliban are facing. These women activists consist of university graduates and human rights activists. They request the Taliban regime to respect the basic rights of Afghan women including their right to go to school, work, and freedom of speech and travel. The women rights protests were primarily started by Kabul women which later spread to other parts of the country including Balkh, Herat and Paktia provinces.

Taliban treated the participants of these protests harshly. They beat, arrested and imprisoned them or their male family members and forced some to flee the country for their safety. However, these tactics to silence the Afghan women have failed so far in yielding any results. The women activists take to social media for disseminating their demonstrations. This way they further expose Taliban and their oppressive tactics.

Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) and TTP

Announcing its presence in 2014 in Afghanistan, Daesh Khorasan or IS-K was mainly made up of defected TTP fighters. Stationed in eastern Nangarhar province, the group was driven out by Afghan commandos and US air force and later wiped out largely by the Taliban in 2018. These defeats did not eliminate the threat posed by the group against Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. After the fall of Ashraf Ghani government, hundreds of IS-K's imprisoned fighters were freed who took not time to regroup in parts of Afghanistan. The first major attack by IS-K after the fall of Kabul came only ten day later, when a suicide bomber struck Kabul airport where desperate Afghans were trying to leave the country. The attack killed more than 180 people including 13 American soldiers, and wounded dozens more.

Unlike NRF and AFF, IS-K is not confined to Afghanistan only, but it is linked to the broader ISIS or ISIL. The group opposes the Taliban government because of ideological reasons and calls its own war as the real jihad.

After having lost their bases in Nangahar and Kunar provinces, the IS-K members now conduct their operations in urban areas of the country, targeting mosques, educational centers, hospitals, buses, and members of other faiths as well as minority Islamic sects mainly Shias. Moreover, the group is also involved in the assassination of its vocal opponents including the Taliban and Deobandi religious scholars.

Although the IS-K doesn't control any territory in Afghanistan, its urban cells carried out the most ruthless attacks in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar e Sharif, and Kunduz province in 2022. These attacks killed hundreds and left thousands of people wounded.

It is led by Engineer Sanaullah Ghaffari aka Shahab Al Muhajir, who is in his early 30s and carries ten million USD bounty placed on his head by the US government. With about 3000- 4000 fighters in its fold, IS-K is becoming a

formidable threat to the country's minority Shia population because of their sectarian identity. Moreover, the political and military involvement of Shias in Iraq and Syria against ISIS also factors in the IS-K's war on Shias in Afghanistan.²⁴

IS-K does not limit its operation to Afghanistan, but it also strikes Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. The group twice fired missiles into Uzbekistan from Afghanistan and once hit Tajikistan from northern Takhar province of Afghanistan. In its consecutive assaults on non-Afghan targets, the group attacked Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022, which killed nearly twenty Afghans and at least two Russian nationals. Weeks after the attack, the embassy suspended its consular services. The group also claimed a failed assassination attempt on Pakistani ambassador in Pakistani embassy in Kabul.

Nevertheless, the IS-K has now become an attraction for militants from several nations including Afghanistan, Pakistani, Uzbekistan, and Uyghurs among others. The increase in attacks in the country indicates that the threat posed by the group will not subside anytime soon.

At first the Taliban government completely rejected the presence of IS-K in the country and would name IS-K members, who were killed in Taliban counter operation, as kidnappers. However, in recent weeks it has named IS-K as Daesh Khawarij.

Moreover, the Afghan Taliban are also savage in their campaign against IS-K, using all ruthless methods to overcome the challenge. In the last one year, dozens of decapitated and hanged bodies were discovered in canals and ditches of Nangarhar province of alleged IS-K members. They were

24 Bill Roggio, "U.S. offers \$10 million reward for leader of Islamic State Khorasan Province," Long War Journal, February 16, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/02/u-s-offers-10-million-reward-for-leader-of-islamic-state-khorasan-province.php>

executed by the Taliban intelligence officers. Furthermore, Zabiullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for Taliban government, recently claimed that hundreds of IS-K members surrendered through the local elders' mediation.

Additionally, the security analysts are concerned that instability, the presence of foreign militants, severe economic crisis, the killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri, underdevelopment, joblessness, and the persecution of former Afghan army members by Taliban will create an opportunity for IS-K to recruit more fighters to their ranks.

Apart from IS-K, the presence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a two-edged sword for the Taliban regime. The Taliban neither deny them sanctuary nor accept them because of the pressure from Pakistan and the promises made in Doha agreement.

In the first week of Taliban rule in Kabul, the ex-ISI chief Faiz Hameed visited the Afghan capital and while holding a cup of tea posed for a victorious photo in Serena hotel. This meant the success of Pakistani military establishment through their alleged proxies against their archrival India, which had close relations with the Ghani administration and funded projects of multimillion dollars in Afghanistan to enhance their influence. However, the increase in attacks by the TTP in successive months showed that not all expectation of Pakistan can be fulfilled even if the Afghan Taliban are in power in Afghanistan.

Because of continuous pressure from Pakistani military, the Afghan Taliban facilitated direct talks between the Pakistan and the TTP hoping to end violence on the other side of the Durand line. Three rounds of high-level talks in Kabul led to a ceasefire in early 2022 and some TTP prisoners were also freed from Pakistani jails. However, the process was ill-fated as the TTP continued carrying out attacks in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and did not appear willing to compromise on its primary

demands. Due to such developments the ceasefire was at last broken officially by the TTP just recently.

Despite of the efforts made by Sirajuddin Haqqani—the interior minister of 'IEA'— to reconcile the TTP with Pakistan so that it ends the violence, the Pakistani army looked disappointed with the TTP continuing attacks on army, police, FC and intelligence personal mainly in ex-FATA and KP. This attitude of the TTP forced the army to conduct a counterterrorism operation against the TTP in April 2022 in which suspected TTP hideouts in Khost province of Afghanistan were hit by airstrikes, leaving 47 dead and 22 injured—including women and children.²⁵

After the air strikes, Pakistan continued hunting down the TTP and Baloch insurgents in its own way and in only six months killed nearly twenty well known Baloch and TTP commanders in Kabul, Nangarhar, Kunar, Paktika and Kandahar provinces.

However, in retaliation the TTP also accelerated its cross-border attacks against Pakistani forces and extended its presence beyond its bases in Waziristan and Bajaur to rest of the province, vowing to avenge its losses and continue its 'jihad' until all its demands are accepted.

For the time being the peace process between TTP and Pakistan army is replaced by violence. Moreover, the Afghan Taliban disappointed Pakistan by failing to put down the TTP and solving border disputes. In addition, the Afghan Taliban also have been disillusioned as the Afghan migrants' abuse by Pakistani police continues and Islamabad hesitates to recognise the Taliban rule as legitimate.

²⁵ Relief Web, April 22, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/pakistani-airstrike-leaves-47-civilians-dead-and-22-injured-afghanistan-s-khost>

Conclusion

The Taliban government faces precarious challenges internally and in its relations with neighbouring countries. While internally the Taliban face enormous governance-related, economic, and legitimacy-linked challenges, the growing opposition including armed is only compounding these challenges. The groups based in the country are also adding to the Taliban's challenges on external fronts. Skirmishes erupt time and again between border guards at Pak-Iran and Pak-Afghan borders. In the last one year, the Taliban border soldiers engaged in cross border clashes with Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan which resulted in numerous casualties for both sides. Only China and Uzbekistan are out of the border-conflict list.

That makes the future of landlocked Afghanistan uncertain. With its 40 million population, if the Taliban ignored the risks and didn't not use the existing opportunities for improvement it's not clear for how long they will enjoy ruling the country in the absence of a constitution, international recognition, and economic development. The anti-Taliban movements, both armed and political, are not able to topple the Taliban in near future, especially without foreign support. However, Afghanistan can slip into a civil war and bloodshed like the one which started four decades ago. In the event of a civil war breaking out in Afghanistan, the whole region will be thrown into chaos.

Pakistan and Afghanistan: national identity versus bonds of blood and civilisation

Zaigham Khan²⁶

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Pakistan and Afghanistan: national identity versus bonds of blood and civilisation

The Afghans love Pakistan's national poet Iqbal so much so that one may confuse him for an Afghan due to his Persian poetry that celebrates the majesty of Afghanistan's mountains, character of its people and nobility of its heroes. In his eulogy of Ahmad Shah Abdali, Iqbal calls Afghanistan "the heart of Asia", a term now appropriated by Afghan politicians.

*"Asia is a body of water and clay,
Of which the Afghan nation forms the heart.
The whole of Asia will be corrupt,
If the heart is corrupt.
Its decline is the decline of Asia,
Its rise is the rise of Asia.
The body is free only as long as the heart is free,
The heart dies with hatred but lives with faith."²⁷*

However, Iqbal's love for Afghanistan was a norm rather than an exception among his generation of South Asian Muslims, and this phenomenon was based on a thousand-year-old civilisational affinity between the Afghans and Muslim of northwest subcontinent. According to historian Richard M. Eaton, a Persianate world embraced much of Western, Central and Southern Asia from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. It was based on a prestige language and literature that conferred elite status on its users. This civilisation, like the Sanskrit civilisation, comprised transregional traditions spread over a vast territory, embraced by peoples of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds.²⁸

Despite the decline of the Mughal empire, the prestige of Persian language continued unabated. The East India Company retained Persian as official

²⁷ Ahmad Shah Abdali in *Javid Nama* (see Chapter 79 of *A Novel of Reality*)

²⁸ Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000-1765* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

language till 1830s, while it also remained the court language of the Sikh Empire that ended in 1848.²⁹ Afterwards, while Persian declined officially, the civilisational links endured for another century as Indian Muslims kept reading and producing Persian literature. Iqbal can be considered the last great poet of the Persianate age who carried the heritage of South Asian as well as Iranian and Afghan poets. The great predecessors of this tradition included Sinai, Attar, and Rumi, two of whom had roots in Afghanistan and one in Persia. A good part of Iqbal's poetry is a dialogue with his spiritual and literary master (though centuries apart in time), Mawlana Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan, though he lived and died in Konia, modern day Turkey.

In terms of political and geographical affinity, the links can be traced to Indus valley civilisation, and several shared empires and civilisational periods including Achaemenid Empire, Mughal Empire, Durrani Empire and the Gandhara civilisation. During the Sultanate period, some Afghan dynasties ruled North India; the Lodhi Afghans (1451-1526) being the most prominent. Afghans also formed a part of the ruling elite through joining militaries of Muslim rulers and by serving Muslim nobles. Likewise, Afghan traders and soldiers also played key roles in shaping the society by linking India with Central Asia and beyond. Sher Shah Suri (1472, or 1486 – 1545), son of an Afghan horse trader, is still considered one of the most remarkable North Indian rulers.

While migrating to Muslim India, Afghans were also helped by the fact that they were automatically counted as upper castes in the Indian Muslim caste system alongside Arabs, Iranians, and Central Asians – a practice that persists to some extent.

²⁹ Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The British era

During the British era, India's trade linkages with Afghanistan and Central Asia were severely restricted, use of Persian as official language came to an end and permanent borders emerged between Afghanistan and South Asia. It was during this period that Afghanistan was portrayed as an entity not only external to South Asia but also hostile to it. This narrative particularly suited to Indian nationalists who were trying to define primordial cultural and geographical boundaries of what they called "*Mother India*". India still uses this "otherised" and even demonic portrayal of Afghans through textbooks, political narratives, and popular culture; a recent example being the negative portrayal of Ahmad Shah Abdali and Afghans in a popular Bollywood movie Panipat.

During the British period, almost all Muslim territories went into hands of Western colonialists. Turkey and Afghanistan were seen as the only exceptions, which were able to guard their independence. Though British left Afghanistan 'unoccupied' for purely strategic and economic reasons, South Asian Muslim attributed it to the freedom loving nature of Afghans, and they eulogised Afghanistan as an island of freedom. South Asian Muslims stereotyped Afghans as freedom loving, independent, warlike, and thoroughly religious Muslims. A good part of this positive stereotyping existed till recently and some of it still endures.

This idealized image of Afghanistan resulted in a huge catastrophic event during the Khilafat movement – a movement that emerged among Indian Muslim in reaction to the impending dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of a comprehensive defeat in the First World War. As part of this movement, Muslim scholars issued a fatwa declaring India as "Dar-ul-Harab" (Abode of War). They urged the Muslims to migrate to

Afghanistan to protest the British policy. Though initiated by religious scholars, Afghanistan masterminded the campaign to a large extent.³⁰

The Afghan government saw this movement as an opportunity to leverage relations with the British. They started by encouraging the migration and promised land and support in settlement to prospective migrants. Thousands of Indian Muslims started migrating to Afghanistan in 1920. About 85 per cent of the emigrants hailed from erstwhile NWFP, currently Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while around 10 per cent came from Punjab and another 5 per cent from Sindh. Peshawar, Mardan, Nowshera, Kohat, Bannu and Hazara in the NWFP were the most affected areas. Official British estimates put the number of migrants at 'at over 50,000, while the movement sources claimed that hundreds of thousands had migrated.³¹

When the numbers became unmanageable, the Afghan government stopped further migration through a royal order by the *Emir* of Afghanistan. Thousands who had already sold their properties at throwaway prices and were on the roads had to return halfway through. Those who had managed to enter Afghanistan soon came across so many hardships and miserable conditions in the country that they were forced to take a journey back home. Many returning refugees perished through exhaustion or disease. The road from the Frontier to Kabul was dotted with refugees' graves. According to eyewitnesses, the Khaybar Pass was littered with corpses.³² Those who were able to return unharmed found themselves bankrupt and without jobs and property.

As later events showed, the Afghan government gained from the episode as the *Emir* finally succeeded in negotiating with the British a new relationship based on independence and sovereignty where Britain lost control over Afghan affairs. This event also stayed in public memory for

³⁰ Dietrich Reetz, *Hijrat: The flight of the faithful* (Berlin: Verl. Das Arabische Buch, 1995).

³¹ Ibid. 52.

³² Ibid, 69.

decades. While the Afghans had migrated to South Asia for a thousand years, it was the first time that South Asian Muslims had migrated to Afghanistan and faced harsh treatment and unfavourable conditions.

Foundation of Pakistan and contradictory Afghan narratives

When Pakistan was founded, it appeared that Afghanistan and Pakistan would be closest allies and friends. However, the relations between the two states took a different direction and during the last two decades, the sour relations between the two states have impacted people to people relations as well. Interestingly, the Afghan state narratives dominate the discourse of bilateral relations not only in Afghanistan but in Pakistan as well. The reason perhaps lies in the fact that Pakistan does not want to tell its story to avoid debate on an issue that is linked to ethnicity and separatism.

On the eve of Pakistan's independence, Afghanistan sensed an opportunity to claim large fertile areas of NWFP. Alongside Khudai Khidmatgar movement, Afghan leaders might have been influenced by Indian leaders who believed that Pakistan was an unsustainable state that was bound to beg for reunification sooner than later. Afghanistan opposed the referendum held in June 1947 by the British that resulted in the integration of NWFP into Pakistan, demanding options of creation of separate homeland for Pashtuns and the integration of the region into Afghanistan.

Once Pakistan was created, Afghanistan opposed its inclusion into the United Nations. In fact, Afghanistan was the only country to do so. Afghanistan withdrew its vote on October 20, 1947 and established diplomatic relations with Pakistan in 1948. Afghanistan came to define its historical borders in terms of the mid-eighteenth-century imperial expansion of Durrani empire into northwest India. This revisionism became a central focus of Afghan policy under Sardar Daoud, though it had no claim that could be raised at any international forum.

This revisionism can also be linked to Afghanistan's search for national identity. National identity becomes meaningful only through contrast with others, that is through distinguishing and differentiating a nation from other nations or ethnic groups.³³ Afghanistan defined Pakistan as its "other" as soon as the country was formed and this "enemy" identity has only strengthened over time, seeping into Afghan public consciousness. However, since India is the "other" for Pakistan, a corresponding dislike for Afghanistan does not exist in the country.

Afghans did not confine this "conflict" to the domain of identity formation or foreign policy alone but took practical steps to dismember Pakistan from the day of its creation, finally forcing Pakistan to react and get involved in Afghan affairs. On the eve of creation of Pakistan, an armed resistance against the British was raging in Waziristan, led by Haji Mirzali Khan Wazir, popularly known as Faqir Ippi. Afghanistan joined hands with India to arm and support this resistance and turn it against the newly founded country. Afghanistan encouraged Ippi to announce formation of Pashtunistan. Later Ippi claimed that he was duped by Afghans into the conflict against Pakistan and stopped the armed resistance.³⁴

Pakistan also faced low scale invasions from Afghanistan starting from September 1950 when Afghan tribesmen, as well as regular Afghan troops crossed into Pakistan. Pakistan government announced that it had "driven invaders from Afghanistan back across the border after six days of fighting."³⁵ Afghanistan claimed that this attack, comprised exclusively of Pashtun tribesmen agitating for an independent Pashtunistan.

³³ Anna Triandafyllidou, "National identity and the 'other,'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (1998): 593-612.

³⁴ F. Adil, "فقیر ایپی: جنگ آزادی کا 'تنہا سپاہی' جس نے پاکستان کے خلاف ایک آزاد مملکت 'پختونستان' کے قیام کا اعلان کیا," BBC News اردو, 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-54049371>.

³⁵ "Pakistan says Afghans launch war," Associated Press, Oct. 4, 1950, quoted in David G. Ross, and T. Vassefi, "The forgotten history of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations," Yale

Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan rose markedly in 1955, when Pakistan announced that it was consolidating its control over its tribal areas. In response, Daoud Khan made a fiery speech on Radio Kabul on March 29, 1955. Demonstrations that were reportedly inspired by the Afghan government flared up in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. Pakistan flags were pulled down and insulted and a Pashtunistan flag was hoisted on the chancery of the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul.³⁶ This incident caused the two countries to withdraw their ambassadors, and relations weren't fully restored until 1957.

In late September 1960, an Afghan lashkar (irregular forces) crossed into Pakistan's Bajaur area. Pakistan alleged that conventional Afghan military resources, including tanks, had also massed on the Afghan side of the border near Bajaur.³⁷ A skirmish broke out that Afghanistan's official news agency described as "a major battle".³⁸ Pakistan bombarded Afghan forces using its airpower that resulted in quelling hostilities temporarily.

In May 1961, clashes occurred in the Khyber Pass. Pakistani president Muhammad Ayub Khan announced that regular Afghan forces had attacked Pakistani posts at the border. The Pakistani air force strafed Afghan positions in response.³⁹ When skirmishes broke out in winters of 1961, two countries broke diplomatic relations. As a result, both normal trade and nomad migration rights remained suspended from September

Journal, February 22, 2012, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/the-forgotten-history-of-afghanistan-pakistan-relations>.

³⁶ David G.-Ross, and T. Vassefi, "The forgotten history of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations," Yale Journal, February 22, 2012, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/the-forgotten-history-of-afghanistan-pakistan-relations>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Afghans report Pakistani clash," Reuters, October 8, 1960.

³⁹ "Pakistan planes again strafe Afghan base," Associated Press, May 23, 1961.

1961 to June 1963, a serious internal crisis arose in Afghanistan, crippling its economy.⁴⁰

Afghanistan and Pakistan re-established diplomatic relations in late 1963 with the mediation of Shah of Iran. As Daoud was held responsible for Afghanistan's crippled economy, a section of Afghan power elite demanded normalization of ties with Pakistan to restore Afghanistan's economy. Daoud, as a result was forced to resign in March 1963.⁴¹

Sardar Daoud seized power in Afghanistan in 1973 through a coup, two years after the East Pakistan debacle and establishment of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in Pakistan. Daoud, alongside reviving the Pashtunistan issue, provided full support to twin Baloch-Pashtun insurgencies that emerged in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after dissolution of NAP governments in these provinces. Still nursing its wounds from military debacle and dissection of country, Afghan support for this powerful insurgency proved the last straw on Pakistan's back and Pakistan decided to strike back by supporting militant resistance inside Afghanistan.

In July 1973, Bhutto established an 'Afghan Cell' in the Foreign Office. Bhutto's advisor, Major General (Retd) Nasirullah Babar, a Pashtun from the KP province, was the head of Afghan affairs. The Afghan Cell met regularly for the next four years, under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Bhutto and gave out policy guidelines. The Inspector General Frontier Constabulary and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) worked in concert to conduct intelligence missions inside Afghanistan.⁴²

The history after this period is well known and involves mutual interference through non-state actors, though Afghanistan became a

⁴⁰ Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964–91* (Springer, 2016), 31.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Leake, *The defiant border: The Afghan-Pakistan borderlands in the era of decolonization, 1936–65* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴² A.Z. Hilali, *US-Pakistan relationship* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 104.

battleground of superpower rivalries and regional conflicts. The Afghans, in the same breath, accuse Pakistan of supporting Mujahideen against their communist government and celebrate it as a great feat of national resistance. The republican Afghan government even established a museum in Herat to celebrate the Afghan jihad. The museum, however, gives no credit to Pakistan for its support to the Jihad. Much of the leadership of the republican, as well as top leadership of Taliban also consist of the former Mujahidin.

While in Pakistan a consensus has emerged that it was disastrous to indulge in the Afghan jihad, the Afghans consider it a heroic chapter of their history. The real problem emerged when Pakistan played favourites among Jihadi warlords and later supported Taliban when the movement emerged as a reaction to excesses of these warlords. This favouritism resulted in non-Pashtun groups coming together under the banner of the Northern Alliance, to align themselves with India.

“Pakistan initially supported Hezb-e Islami in the civil war that followed the soviet withdrawal in 1989, but switched its allegiance to the Taliban as the group rose to prominence in the mid-1990s.⁴³ The Taliban maintained close ties with Pakistan and remained hostile to India both because of religious differences and because of its provision of military and financial support to the competing Northern Alliance.⁴⁴ However, Taliban during this period hosted sectarian terrorists who were involved in heinous acts

⁴³ Other political parties in Pakistan did not support the government’s backing of the Taliban, such as Pushtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party in Balochistan, who “felt threatened.” see Ahmed Rashid, “Pakistan and the Taliban,” In *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 81–86; and Imtiaz Gul, *The unholy nexus: Pak-Afghan relations under the Taliban* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2002), 271.

⁴⁴ V. Sudarshan, “How India secretly armed Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance,” *The Hindu*, September 1, 2019, www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-india-secretly-armed-ahmad-shah-massouds-northern-alliance/article29310513.ece.

of terror inside Pakistan. This created tensions between the two countries in 1999.

When “the republican” era started after the American invasion, the relations between the two countries deteriorated due to Afghanistan’s accusations of Pakistan supporting Taliban and Pakistan’s blame of Afghan support for Baloch separatists and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Afghan government claimed it could provide GPS location of Taliban leaders inside Pakistan while Mir Balach Marri, the leader of the leader of Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a militant organisation fighting to separate the Balochistan province from Pakistan, was killed in Afghanistan on 21 November 2007.

It appears that generous military and civilian aid to Afghanistan created hubris in Afghan government who felt that they could totally ignore sensibilities of its neighbour. Though Pakistan extended full support to the new Afghan government in the first few years, this calculus changed when Pakistan felt that its worst fear of encirclement was turning into reality. As Afghanistan tilted too close to India, Pakistan blamed that Indian intelligence agencies were active in the country to destabilise Pakistan. Afghanistan, as a result, became the playground for Indo-Pak conflict.

India-Pakistan rivalry and the fear of encirclement

India and Pakistan have been afraid of encirclement from each other. According to Henry Kissinger, Indira Gandhi decided to support dismemberment of Pakistan and an independent Bangladesh because she feared encirclement from Pakistan as two wings of Pakistan were located on two sides of India.⁴⁵ Pakistan has felt similar fears due to Afghan hostility towards Pakistan and its close ties with India. Until 1971, Afghanistan’s territorial claims and its support for separatist movements

⁴⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Leadership: Six studies in world strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022).

in Pakistan were easier to manage without hitting back at the neighbouring state.

After 1971, Pakistan became much apprehensive about its territorial integrity. Sardar Daoud's active support for a largescale insurgency in Pakistan soon after creation of Bangladesh changed Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan once and for all. According to an expert, thanks to this "overriding fear of encirclement", since 1970s Pakistan has consistently sought to secure a "balance of power in Kabul that advances Islamabad's interests while diminishing India's role". Analysts typically refer to this policy as the Pakistan Army's quest for "strategic depth."⁴⁶ This term often used to mock and caricaturise Pakistan's policy towards its Western neighbour.

At the heart of Islamabad's calculus is a long-standing fear that India, in league with Kabul, is using Afghanistan as a springboard to weaken Pakistan's territorial integrity, particularly by stoking unrest among its ethnic Baloch and Pashtun populations.

Fluid frontiers to national borders

Borders between Afghanistan and South Asia remained fluid until the end of 19th century. The areas up to Kabul remained under the Mughal rule for two hundred and thirty-four years (1504-1738 AD) before it was annexed by the Persian empire. In 1747, Durrani empire was founded by evicting Mughal governor from Kabul. In the next two years, Ahmad Shah Abdali, founder of the dynasty, was able to occupy areas up to the Indus River. It did not take him long to establish authority over areas that included almost all present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as Kashmir.

⁴⁶ Zachary Constantino, "The India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan," USIP, January 29, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/india-pakistan-rivalry-afghanistan>.

The Durrani Empire was evicted from Punjab and much of the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh and the Sikhs were replaced by the British in 1848. Though the map of the modern-day world started taking shape after the First World War, Afghan territorial claim do not stand up to the test of history either. Pakistani regions claimed by Kabul remained under the Durrani Empire for merely half a century while areas up to Kabul remained under South Asian Muslims for two and a half centuries.

For decades, Pakistan treated its border with Afghanistan like a pre-modern frontier, allowing movement of people and goods at a huge risk to its security and economy. On the other hand, since 1970s, it used the bordering areas as a strategic space that provided haven to militants operating in Afghanistan. However, this calculation underwent a change after the TTP established sanctuaries in the erstwhile FATA and in the adjoining areas on the other side of the border. Pakistan was also weary of the Indian influence in Afghanistan that was seen as encirclement by its avowed enemy.

On 8 June 2014 a terrorist attack was launched on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, for which the TTP and the IMU claimed responsibility. Pakistan army, in reaction, launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb on 15 June 2014 in North Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

In December 2014, terrorists attacked Peshawar's Army Public School, killing 150 people, of whom at least 134 were students. Pakistani authorities claimed that militants had entered Pakistan through Torkham. Pakistan further scaled up the operation and in order to lock in its security gains, it decided to construct a two-layer fence along the entire length of its borders with Afghanistan and Iran.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ E. Threlkeld and G. Easterly, "Afghanistan-Pakistan ties and future stability in Afghanistan," USIP Report No. 175, August 2021,

Pakistan also revised its open border policy. While previously thousands of Afghans were allowed to move between borders every day without any legal documents, Pakistan gradually made it difficult to travel to Pakistan without a valid visa. On 1 April 2016, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed on regulations that would require Afghan citizens to present valid and authorized travel documents prior to entering Pakistan via Torkham.⁴⁸ However, it can be recalled here that the Afghan government had imposed visa restrictions on Pakistanis almost a decade earlier.

On 2 April 2016 an apex committee, formed to oversee anti-terror operations, called for the enforcement of the border crossing mechanism “in true letter and spirit,” at all crossing points, especially Torkham. On 8 April, Pakistan issued notification asking all Afghan nationals residing in Torkham to vacate the area.⁴⁹

Pakistan also changed the semi-autonomous status of FATA by absorbing these areas into the KP province. The fence and these measures have improved security in bordering areas but made life and livelihood difficult for border communities who had come to rely on cross border trade and smuggling as their main source of income. Afghan Taliban have not only made statements against border fencing, but their functionaries have dismantled parts of fencing and shared videos on social media, probably to gain popularity in Afghanistan.

People to people tensions

Though Afghan governments have constantly leveraged hatred against Pakistan for internal political agendas, the credit of success can be largely

https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/pw_175-afghanistan_pakistan_ties_and_future_stability_in_afghanistan.pdf

⁴⁸ Peshawar school massacre (no date), Encyclopædia Britannica, available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peshawar-school-massacre>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

given to the two decades of Karzai-Ghani governments. Before the republican era, tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan used to be a state-to-state affair. The Karzai-Ghani governments raised it to the level of a project.

It appeared that Afghan government, dominated by the Northern Alliance, wanted to settle its score with Pakistan for supporting its rivals inside Afghanistan during the civil war. Perhaps, they also wanted to please India, their strategic partner. While Pakistan's support for Taliban cannot be denied, Afghanistan also followed the policy of interference in Pakistan by supporting Baloch separatists.

The new government had enormous resources available for communication mainly provided by the USA and Western government to win hearts and minds in the war on terror. Afghanistan was also able to develop vibrant media in state and private sector that mainly relied on state support and foreign funding. While the Afghan government won neither hearts nor minds, they did succeed in nurturing hatred against Pakistan and blaming it for all of their failures. Hate filled statements by senior Afghan leaders became a norm during this period. The former Afghan national security adviser, Hamdullah Mohib called Pakistan a "brothel house" in a public speech, straining diplomatic relations and sparking public outrage.⁵⁰

Mainstream Afghan media picked up these narratives and multiplied the voice. India was able to forge strong links with Afghan media. While Afghan officials frowned upon any media person visiting Pakistan, India was encouraged to cultivate such linkages. Social media too became a space to attack, not just Pakistani state but Pakistan and its people. The hatred spread to Afghan streets. Pakistanis visiting Afghanistan were routinely harassed, first by government officials and increasingly by common

⁵⁰ Shakeel Ahmed, "FM hits out at Afghan NSA over anti-Pakistan remarks," dawn, June 6, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1627796>.

citizens. Since most visiting Pakistani came from KP and Balochistan, major hosting communities for Afghan refugees, it created an adverse reaction in these areas.

Impact on Afghan refugees

Pakistan is host to 1,435,445 registered Afghan refugees, while there are more than a million unregistered Afghan nationals in the country. Only 32 percent refugee live in “refugee villages” while 58 percent live in urban areas. The narratives of hatred have impacted relations between host communities and the Afghan refugees as well. In August 2022, locals in the Chamkani area of Peshawar did not allow body of an Afghan child to be buried blaming that his family had desecrated Pakistan’s flag before leaving the country.⁵¹

During the 2021 Taliban takeover, Pakistan adopted a non-declared policy of not accepting Afghan refugees though it facilitated Afghans aligned with the Ghani government to flee to Western countries. More than 300,000 Afghans have entered Pakistan since the Taliban takeover. Around 100,000 of them arrived on valid visas while the rest crossed over the border illegally.⁵² India, at the same time, cancelled visas of all Afghan including former parliamentarians and government officials who had been closely aligned with India.⁵³

⁵¹ "Afghan child denied burial in Pakistan: Locals say 'bury in India'," Ground Report, August 15, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/mvujyvcd>

⁵² Ayaz Gul, “Un-supported survey finds Pakistan hosts 1.3 million Afghan refugees,” Voice of America, June 3, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-supported-survey-finds-pakistan-hosts-1-3-million-afghan-refugees/6601952.html>.

⁵³ Deeptiman Tiwary, “India cancels visas issued to Afghans outside country, asks them to travel only on e-visas,” *The Indian Express*, October 27, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-cancels-visas-issued-to-afghans-outside-country-asks-them-to-travel-only-on-e-visas-7470030/>.

Epilogue

The people of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the two states, could only gain through strong relations. The goodwill that Afghanistan enjoyed and still enjoys to some extent in Pakistan was a huge asset bestowed by history. The two countries are on the brink of squandering the social capital that could have been leveraged for mutual progress and prosperity. Linkages between the people of two countries are at a serious risk due to seepage of bitterness between the two states into the public domain.

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This series of analytical papers is among the key components of a PIPS programme that aims at strengthening Pakistan's support for the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. PIPS is implementing the programme in collaboration with Royal Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad. Larger focus of these policy-oriented analytical papers – whose sixth quarterly issue comprising two papers is in your hands – is placed on specialised aspects and themes of Afghan conflict and peace as seen from Pakistani perspective. The purpose of this series of analytical papers is to expand the knowledge base and awareness of key stakeholders on Pakistan's Afghan perspective, and its role and interest in Afghan peace and reconciliation. That purpose is linked to another underlying goal of developing and suggesting updated policy options and recommendations for Pakistani government and civil society. These papers are expected to demonstrate an overall understanding of a variety of viewpoints and positions mainly around emerging events and developments in Afghanistan and their implications for Pakistan and the region.

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