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# The Collapse of the Afghan State and its Relation to US Policy

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The Collapse of the Afghan State and its Relation to US Policy

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Statement &amp; Methodology</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Part I</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Part II</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Part III</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>33</b>

**Abstract**

The main inspiration for this has been down to my curiosity of my heritage. The events described, particularly in the 1970's, were things that were contemporary to my family, and the escape from Afghanistan as refugee was an experience that was firsthand for my dad—who escaped in 1979 to Pakistan to claim refugee status in the US. One of the things that struck me the most in his story of escaping on foot with a group of villagers, was that the centers for refugees in Pakistan were not the cleanest and housed a crowded room of people who were stuck in a cycle of uncertainty. They didn't know if the homes they grew up in, raised their families in, and had get-to-togethers in, were still standing—and even if the existing state still was there. Assuming that everything was going to be okay (it wasn't), they couldn't have predicted that the causes of violence that made them flee their homes the first time would come back to have an effect on that the next time, or even another time again. It should be reminded that these people who I'm describing are affected the most by the events laid out.

## Statement & Methodology

Why does US policy towards Afghanistan play a role in the country's destabilization?

When it comes to the topic of Afghanistan, more Americans believe that the US's goals in Afghanistan led to more failure than success. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of which part of US policy towards Afghanistan was to blame for the failure.

Whereas some are convinced that bordering states like Pakistan and Iran have more of hand in the collapse, others support that the US continues strict policy to curb any extremist activity in the region. The view of this paper will explore why the current crisis in Afghanistan is a result of US foreign policy decisions that did not sufficiently support the legitimacy of the Afghan State between US Presidential administrations, which led to disillusion of central government in Kabul, causing civilian support for non-state actors outside of the capital.

The method of this thesis will be in the form of literature review, applying the information and insight from the primary and secondary sources, the speeches from big figures and official statements, some statements and events will be referenced through secondary sources to build the argument. The research includes Congressional Research Reports, United Nations Security Council Resolutions, official Speeches from Presidents and secondary resource materials that directly reference those primary sources. The body of resources and information on the subject is quite extensive as events have been seen and accounted for within the last few generations, though many of the hyperlinks on the official US government website of the National Archives are no longer there, the lack of evidentiary archive on the part of the US government. Anthropological and sociological literature will supply evidentiary context for the topic, which will be discussed in the first part of the paper that recaps the history of the region; the evidentiary archive for these subjects is corroborated in the Political Science literature.

The literature assessed in the references reflect the general sentiment of the thesis and provide documented accounts of Afghanistan's eroding state structures which coincide with general sentiments about The War on Terror that the academic journals and the PEW studies back up. The literature disagrees about the extent Islamic fundamentalism plays a role in the legitimization of non-state groups like the Taliban, but the consensus and agreement of the literature pertains to the degradation of the Afghan state and how US foreign policy plays a fundamental role in Afghanistan's nation building project. For the sake of the thesis, I will not focus on the theocratic ideology of the non-state actors, simply the role US policy played in trying to legitimize the Afghan state, as the literature on US policy only gives contextual details, which is what I will do as context for the different actors in this situation.

The structure of the thesis paper will follow chronological order with an introduction of Afghanistan's history and its relationship the US, this is everything leading up to the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Afghanistan in 2001. The first part of the thesis body will draw on scholarly literature to supply the brief history Afghanistan before and during Bush admin's involvement in the region. This section will end on what the state of Afghanistan was by the end of the Bush administration, and what political and ideological forces led it to that point. The next section will go over the next administrations, the Obama administration, highlighting their administration's foreign policy shifts and then centering it back to security policy on Afghanistan. The literature review in this section will focus on the era of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations while contextualizing the efforts of the earlier administration— and like the last section, it will end with summary of the impact that these administrations had in what led up to the pullout of the country. The conclusion is the final part and the overall conclusion of the paper, the topic is currently on-going and the extent that the literature review will take me is

when the Taliban officially set up state rule. Using the knowledge, literature review and summarization of the earlier sections, the conclusion will go over what is known about the state and make a healthy prediction of the future of the state based off what the discourse community is discussing.

The state of Afghanistan has not been stable since the early 1970's, political coups, civil-war and theocratic militant rule have been a part of this history up to the US invasion and state building in 2001. A handful of administrations later and the situation in Afghanistan is looking close to the state it was in early US involvement. The pullout of Afghanistan itself by the Biden administration was a glimpse of what the state of Afghanistan has been since its political turmoil in the 1970's. Since the subject of current Taliban rule is a newer phenomenon, the current literature for review on that subject is limited due to the contemporary nature of the subject, however the literature overviewing the earlier involvement and efforts are quite abundant. The history of the Mujahideen insurgent group is relevant to US allied interest in the region, and that history sees a through line to Taliban rule in the 1990's which is echoed by current Taliban rule in 2022.

## **PART I**

### ***Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-1989***

Although Afghanistan was a Monarchy from 1747 until the bloodless coup of King Mohammed Zahir Shah in 1973, modernization efforts made by the King were weak in the rural regions among the different tribes and clans, which would show a weaker central government. The Pashtun ethnic tribes that had typically held dominant rule as far back as encounters with colonial Britain, have historically held assemblies that bring together tribal leaders and prominent in the region for a meeting to settle affairs and conduct council— these are called ‘Jirgas.’ The region is home to many diverse ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Aimaq, etc.) all of which have their own cultural traditions and relations with each other, for example, the Hazara’s who the largest ethnic and Shia minorities in the country have been historically, and Pashtuns who have typically held positions of power historically (Monsutti, 2013).

Afghanistan, being a close regional neighbor of the USSR at the time of the Cold War in the 1950’s, had a friendly relationship as part of their policy and would offer military aide, advising, and programs that would send Afghans to the USSR for education— this aide would obviously increase past the coup and into the newer government. Mohammed Daoud Khan, Zahir Shah’s cousin, overthrew the monarchy in 1973 while Zahir Shah was out of the country. Daoud Khan established a democratic constitution, named himself president, and continued more liberal modern reforms. Daoud Khan’s close relationship with the Afghan communist party, called the “People Democratic Party of Afghanistan” (PDPA), would end in a bloody coup in April of 1978 which would be known as the Sauer Revolution (Hughes, 2008). The PDPA was initially made up of two communist groups, the Parcham and the Khalq; the Parcham wanted to implement Soviet Style communist rule incrementally, to consider the Islamic aspects of society



and the major reforms needed in the rural regions– the Khalq however were more accelerationist, wanting to breakdown the dominance of Dari as a language, Islam as a state ideology, and they would violently purge the Parcham. Although both had different approaches, ethnic consciousness amongst communists were the deciding factor between the two factions, the Parcham favoring less Pashtun Majority government rule. Nur Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin of the Khalq, respectively, became the President and the Prime Minister of The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, a government that had a little more than a close relationship with the USSR (2008); one could argue they were forming together like a ‘Soviet satellite state’ just like the Central Asian countries in the North and Northeast that were communist.

The civil war preceding the main conflict was met with the opposition forces, the previously mentioned Mujahideen, backed by a close alliance between General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq of the bordering Pakistan and the Carter Administration in America at the time– the occupation was the end of the Détente between America and the Soviet Union at the time. Jamaat-e-Islam, an ideology originating from the partition of India along the time the Muslim Brotherhood originated in Egypt, was a primary force for combining the Mujahideen fighters in their training in Pakistan (Muehlenbeck, 2012). The 1979 Iranian Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, saw him throw in support against communist insurgents in Afghanistan as well– although this was to further merge and expand his own political revolution for Shia Muslims. America saw the Shia and Sunni divide in the Islamic world as an opportunity to embrace Jihadist elements within Pro-US Islamic countries. This was the basis of the Mujahideen who were seen as driven by political Islamic ideology; some could argue that the Mujahideen were ‘Holy Warriors’ in their pursuit for Islamic Jihad (2012). The support from Pakistan did not

come until the occupation—Pakistan and Afghanistan have an exceedingly long history and sometimes contentious relationship with the ethnic Pashtun population in that specific part of the region, which they have wanted to claim as their own; Soviet occupation of its neighboring country of Afghanistan meant that there was reasonable geopolitical concern on the possibility of the Soviet sphere of influence to make its way to Pakistan. This common concern is what helped the US and Pakistan ally for conflict on the grounds of training soldiers for religious warfare. The conflict proved to be deadly and life changing for many refugees, but it was not till the occupation that displaced most of the civilian population where the conflict combined to Spetsnaz versus volunteer Mujahideen recruits. For most of the Muslim world, this call to arms to resist communist occupation that threatened Muslims was a call for Jihad. The Pakistani town of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa near the border was a key area for military training as well as centers for Islamic education, and therefore the religious war doctrine was further entrenched in the training of the Mujahideen (2012). The dichotomy between the traditionally religious resistance and the secular DRA did not help the latter when it came to rallying support from any of the religious countries neighboring conflict. The Soviet Union's relationships with other, mostly Muslim, central Asian countries came into question because of this conflict, and the ethnic identities of DRA and Soviet conscripts became a problem amongst differing Afghan ethnicities and their Russian Soviet allies. It was delegitimizing to the 'anti-imperialist' cause and ignored major factors about the region that led to neighbors like Iran, Pakistan, China, and the Gulf States to support the Mujahideen— they were ignoring what united the Mujahideen.

The support against Soviet occupying forces was a focus of Carter's administration at the end and at the beginning of the Reagan Administration— The close relationships with Gulf states like Saudi Arabia were strengthened through opposition of the Soviet Union in the region as well

as concern from the Iranian Revolution that bolstered anti-Western attitudes and a much stronger, politically effective Shia Islamic movement. The US provided the majority of aide throughout the 1980's, with the Saudi kingdom supplying their finances for Mujahideen insurgents from their vast oil wealth. The US was crucial for providing military weapons throughout the eighties to the Mujahedeen, the Stinger Anti-Aircraft weapon was only made available to them after increased efforts by the Reagan administration and the CIA to have the Soviets suffer a complete military defeat– bringing some comparisons of the US aid to Soviet aid to the North Vietnamese preceding the US defeat there. To be clear, there was no direct communication between the CIA and the Mujahideen, however, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), were the covert institution that oversaw the military training and religious education apparatus of the Mujahideen that the US helped fund and set up close relations with (Fergusson & Hughes, 2019). Unfortunately, there was not an ideological consistency to the outfit; Iran had backed Shia Hazara's, Saudi's backed Wahabis' groups led by prominent leader Abdurrahman bin Sulayman and Osama Bin Laden, and MI6 and French intelligence had trained and supported relations with Ahmad Shah Massoud “The Panjshir Lion”, who led Tajik guerilla forces in the Northern Region. The ISI was the main supporter of one Mujahideen leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and his Mujahideen group, Hizb-i-Islami– Hekmatyar was seen as very radical figure in the Islamic sense and was a tough asset as he was staunchly anti-American. Hekmatyar and Massoud were students of Burhanuddin Rabbani's Islamic school where they had opposed King Zahir Shah's monarchy and the PDPA's merged republic and spread the ideology that originated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Muehlenbeck, 2012). Although these figures were united in their hatred for the communist government, their ideological and material interest set them apart during the insurgency and after the collapse of

the DRA. Different outside forces helping different Mujahideen insurgents messed with the cohesiveness of the entire, almost 500,000-man outfit (Katzman & Thomas, 2017) that would hint at its violent inter-conflict that would occur after this war.

By the mid 1980's, the Soviet forces in the major cities, routes, and airbases had failed to make meaningful progress in their goal of curbing anti-government resistance and creating an environment to withdraw Soviet forces for PDPA and DRA forces to resume control. The Mujahideen and their guerilla tactics were effective in addition to the fact that the fighters were local and had extensive knowledge on the mountainous regions, allowing Panjshir fighters to hide for guerilla style counter attacks (Hughes, 2008). The Soviet's had a contained force overall and never deployed more than two percent of its entire forces to Afghanistan, keeping to cities and bases and not confronting opposition. The 40<sup>th</sup> army's counter-insurgency tactics forced the populations to flee and did not legitimize the PDPA., in some violent cases where they air bombed and burned villages and agriculture.

Approximately one million Afghans died in the conflict, from fighting between tribes, religions, and ethnicities; thousands died from disease and starvation because of poor living conditions; over a million injured and around 6 million were displaced into neighboring Pakistan and Iran (Muehlenbeck, 2012). What would have ended in a transition of power became an all-out civil war, as the Mujahideen factions that originated from differing countries and were still receiving aid from the US-Pakistan-Saudi alliance, all turned on each other for a power grab originating from Hekmatyar, who wanted to seize Rabbani's proposed transitional government. Amongst the fighting between differing ethnic groups, the Pashtun supported Mullah Mohammed Omer of the Taliban, who took over most of Afghanistan with close financial help from Pakistan. The more fundamentalist ideology of Islam took over the state polices in what is

known as Sharia law. They repressed women and the Hazara ethnic minority and there was more fighting between the Arab Al-Qaeda group and the Northern Alliance to keep Pashtun majority which worsened the quality of life (Taheri, 2009) as more refugees came through Pakistan.

The Afghan-Soviet war had a domestic and a global impact– it was fought on grounds of civil and ideological differences that would affect Afghans, while being a proxy war in America’s international war on communism. For many Afghans that were able to make it out, the best-case scenario was that you found a new place to live, and it is this conflict that made things worse off than before. The impact that this conflict had on the Soviets can be partly attributed to their dissolution just a few years later, a defeat that was the goal of the US. But while one side was defeated, the power vacuum in its place had only created more extremism and factions. This conflict would play a role in fostering the terror group that would go on to commit the 9/11 terror attacks and further destabilize the region through terror networks and relations with warlords.

### ***Operation Enduring Freedom: 2001-2007***

In the lead up to the George W. Bush administration, Afghanistan was reeling in the aftermath of the internal conflict between the different Mujahideen factions vying for power, and the later rule that the Taliban brought into the country. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1297 adopted in 1999 condemned the Taliban rules in what was known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan for its repression against women and minority groups like ethnic the Hazara population who are typically subscribed to the Shia sect of Islam. They also condemned them for their assistance in international terror activities as well as their ties to Osama Bin Laden in the controlled territories of Afghanistan. Even though the Taliban had established security in the territories they held with the funding of the Pakistan government, their violations of previous

UNSC resolutions under the Clinton administration and their failure to follow through Resolution 1267 meant that the sanctions and a lack of effort in statehood building following the Taliban takeover of Rabbani's (exiled) government in Kabul held Afghanistan behind with a lack of central government control. By this point, the state of Afghanistan was a result of internal conflicts preceding a larger war that was both an emancipatory insurgency and proxy war between larger Cold War powers, and proceeding was a decentralized, land mass that was reeling after years of conflict, its citizens desperate for security in a land contested by many different warlords and tribal leaders of established groups in constant conflict.

In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration, through congressional authorization, launched Operation Iraqi Freedom and the smaller Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The main goal for both campaigns was the defeat of the radical Islamic forces that attacked America on 9/11. The Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud was the Western supported resistance that held off Taliban presence in the North— Ahmad Shah Massoud was assassinated by Al-Qaeda operatives on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001, just two days before the attack on the twin towers in New York, though none of the hijackers on that day were Afghan in origin, highlighting a distinction between the primarily Arab and Egyptian Al-Qaeda faction that came to Afghanistan during the Soviet Occupation and Mujahedeen insurgency (Taheri, 2009). By this point, the blowback from the US participating in a Jihad to fight its Cold War rival had reached the world with Al Qaeda terror attacks and while it panned out in curbing Soviet forces from the region, it allowed for an extremist resentment towards Western countries that they felt had abandoned them materially. The unstable nature of different factions, warlords and the ideology for an Islamic State allowed Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden to set up non-state networks for his own brand of Jihadist Islamic extremism. The decision to disrupt activities of

Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan coincided with the US toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, both conflicts brought forth the need for state building. This section will focus on the Bush era's need for state building at a time of launching multiple conflicts and the emphasis on US-based military security which lacked the need for proper nation-building in Afghanistan.

The US took military leadership within the broader coalition that the Bush administration formed to fulfill his stated goal of using the necessary force against those who conspired, aided or harbored those who conducted the attacks on 9/11, as told in his joint resolution with congress addressed to the nation on September 18<sup>th</sup> (S.J. Res. 23 – 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2001). Osama Bin Laden, who's leadership of the Al-Qaeda cell following the collapse the Soviet occupied Afghan territories, claimed responsibility for the attack and laid out a detailed manifesto for the reasoning of his antagonism towards America. Among the antisemitic conspiracies around the state of Israel and the Islamic world that he had a claim on, he emphasized the economic and military reach that the US had on developing nations, specifically the Islamic regions, to inspire those to join his caliphate. The US saw that the interest in proving humanitarian stability in Afghanistan intersected with their main interest of militarily defeating those who aided Osama Bin Laden's conspiracy against Western nations, and the military campaigns took precedent over the state's formation in the scope of the United States Department of Defense under Donald Rumsfeld (Greentree, 2021). By December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Taliban influences in the capital Kabul, the rural Mazar-e Sharif, and the stronghold in Qandahar, had been eliminated by US military forces (marine ground troops and Airforce missile strikes) and Afghans within the Northern Alliance.

Another factor in this era was the political establishment of a post-Taliban government to supplement the state-building task that the US decided to undertake following its backing of United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1378. The call for this resolution was to

“Expresse[s] its strong support for the efforts of the Afghan people to establish a new and transitional administration leading to the formation of a government...” which would be a “...broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative of all the Afghan people and committed to peace with Afghanistan’s neighbours,” (Resolution 1378, 2001) and greatly emphasized the multinational assistance of an economically stable Afghanistan, as America would be its greatest donor until the end of the Bush administration. The military invasion of the country on the part of the US was not allowed by the UN resolutions even after this; these resolutions were solely on the part of the NATO coalition to ensure security for a new state. US forces were deployed on their own missions outside of the coalition as well.

By 2005, major combat operations had ended in Afghanistan between the US-NATO-Northern-Alliance coalition and the Taliban insurgency. The stronghold of the Taliban, Qandahar had no presence and neither did their fled leader, Mullah Omer. The taking of the capital signaled a sense of stability among the coalition’s presence and the international community to establish the democratically liberal Afghan national government, The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Murray, 2002). One of the priorities to alleviate the reliance for US troops was the training, funding and arming of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) which consisted of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the state police force, which was set up for security and law enforcement independent of the under present NATO coalition and US military forces. The Western nations in this instance took to the training and arming of the army; to do so was of utter most importance in the mission to secure the territories and reduce the influence of the Taliban and those perceived by the coalition to be enemy combatants (Morelli & Belkin, 2009). During this era of the War on Terror, the NATO and non-NATO coalition’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), set up under UNSC Resolution 1510, were



needed to bring stability--; not just for security reasons but for what they called ‘PMESII,’ (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, and Information). NATO took command of the ISAF, with the goal of disarming the militias, disrupting the heavily present opium narcotics trade, and fostering political and military stability. One could see this as America taking the lead to do the job that non-Government Organizations (NGO) were initially tasked with (Rietjens 2022), but what this really means is the military apparatus coalescing its affairs through efforts they hadn’t tried before, leading to confusion on what role civil-military relations were in the fledgling state. The early perception of the war in Afghanistan from the Department of Defense was that it required very little long-term support from ISAF, the main objective would be to rid the region of Taliban and Al-Qaeda influence and that it would be up to the ANA to bring security to the region in the long term (2022) to prevent the need for support in the future from the ISAF to fight Jihadist insurgencies.

The National Government was composed from a Loya Jirga that developed its constitution in 2004; Hamid Karzai, a figure from Mujahedeen insurgency in 1980’s with contact to Western nations, and with the help of the Bush administrations UN Ambassador to Afghanistan, Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad. They adopted the constitution in 2005 (Taheri 2009). Karzai had been appointed as the interim president in that first Loya Jirga, giving him the incumbency advantage in the first official elections after the end of US-led invasion; for Khalilzad, the “accelerating success” initiative under the Bush admin something he was appointed to oversee (Murtazashvili, 2022). The state was modeled from a Western style democracy, with a parliament made up of a bicameral lower house (House of People) and the upper house (House of Elders), a formal Judicial system with a Chief Justice, and an executive office with a president. Hamid Karzai was the interim leader fulfilling that central executive role by securing

more alliances with the Northern Alliance warlords and tribal leaders. Amin Saikal, an academic scholar who's closely followed the constitution, describes it, "[r]eflecting partly the mosaic nature of the Afghan society and partly Karzai's original opposition to party politics. Its members operated within informal groupings and ad hoc alliances, based mostly on tribal, sectarian, factional and ethnic allegiances..." but importantly noting "It included many strong local power holders or what have popularly become known as 'warlords,' with varying records of human rights violations and a determination to do whatever it takes to protect themselves against any public scrutiny and prosecution," (Saikal, 2010). What resulted from its creation until the end of the Bush era was a weak central government made of alliances between economic and political elites with close ties to the executive office. The fragmented statehood that was built from a military invasion could not seem to separate itself from the aid, security and state-development that were mostly provided by foreign aid, and the parliamentary structure did not prove to be clear of its troubles and corruption under the reign of King Zahir Shah.

The constitutional council, including those in the Bush administration did not consider the lack of central governance in earlier democratic constitutions— military presence from the ISAF and their training of the ANDSF as well as alliances with warlords kept its national security outside of its central governance. Heavy military presence had a profoundly substantial impact on civil-military relations in the area, in regard to the strength of NATO's presence. Law of requisite variety, in nation building terms, would mean that a viable system thrives when its internal diversity matches the variety and complexity of its environment. This would mean in the context of Afghanistan that the ISAF would have many structures in place to organize cooperation. These were the CIMIC or Civil Affairs units and staff, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), as well as various civil advisors— rule of law advisors, cultural advisors, political

advisors, and counternarcotics advisors. The many different chains of civil-military procedures didn't help the administration of aid in areas where the central government did not have much reach in, such as areas with foreign heavy military presence dealing with civilians and foreign aid groups (Rietjens, 2022). This kind of requisite variety brought cross-cultural confusion among the ISAF coalition and the civilians on ground; for example, to bring about economic stability to the land and to disrupt the drug trafficking business' thriving there, forces were needed to burn down the opium farms that fueled the drug trade (2022). The amount of resources, intelligence information, and effort put into a method of bringing stability disrupted the other main methods that NGOs have used that have fostered better relations between locals and the coalition ISAF. The need to bring interpreters on deployment and to educate units on pre-deployment about the language and the cultures of the region introduced another hurdle to proving popular sovereignty to the central government.

Between the initial occupation and the end of George W. Bush's first term, resources and assistance fluctuated as they were either allocated to the front in Iraq or to counter-insurgency campaigns in the name of establishing security in Kabul and the regions of authority with the help of tribal leaders and warlords. This would suggest a lack of state-building even in the early years unless it came into the hands of the defense department. The troubles with establishing a central statehood rid of corruption with the popular sovereignty of its citizens were apparent from the start with its reliance on foreign aid for economic military development and constitutional orientation that gave power to warlords that were considered, in the eyes of the ISAF coalition and the Afghan government, as allies in the fight against terror and maintaining security.

## **PART II**

### ***The Obama Doctrine: 2009-2015***

The election of President Barack Obama brought rhetorical change about the war in Afghanistan as well as strategy shifts on the overall war on terror to the campaign trail. By the end of the George W. Bush administration in 2007, the former president couldn't be less popular on the agenda and results delivered, both domestically and abroad— the global war on terror was not as popular amongst the American voting base as it once was, this being a crucial factor in the shift between support and election for the Democratic Obama and the Republican Bush. While the Bush administration took a unilaterally heavy handed and militaristic approach to state-building which would diffuse out into the broader ISAF coalition that was still militarily involved. In analyzing the policy attitudes and changes of this era there is more of a shift in emphasizing surrogate the military operations; surrogate would mean to elect as a substitute, and in this context, it refers to human or technology substituting the deputizing of ground forces, which would be a defining theme of not just President Obama's administration's policy (Krieg, 2016) and attitude towards Afghan state building, but the subsequent administrations as well. The Obama doctrine and the administration's approach to state-building still relied on a multi-lateral military coalition, retrenchment, and operational surrogate warfare from the instability caused by the years of fighting in the region.

Though the wars in the middle east in this time were seen as unpopular within the context of the domestic economy state of Bush's administration, the conflict in Afghanistan, the fight against Taliban forces, and the nation building process itself was seen as more justified than its counterpart, Operation Iraqi Freedom. This difference in favorability allowed Barack Obama's administration to utilize the existing state-building procedures from the alliance between the

ISAF and the Islamic republic to try to expand the state-building process that began with the previous George W. Bush administration, but with less direct hands-on construction on the part of US military, this still meant that they had a presence there. The continuing presence and surge of 30,000 troops in 2009 as an executive agreement between President Obama and President Karzai, was expected with an eventual draw down that was projected in July 2011. This relationship placed an emphasis on institution building and its relationship with adequate governance, reconstruction, and security with Pakistan's compliance. It looked to expand military operations into the heartland of the Taliban, with known escalations of cross-border operations into Pakistan to target Taliban and al Qaeda leaders and strongholds (2016). Obama's reasoning for the policy shift from the Bush era came from the idea that years of fighting in both the Afghan and Iraqi fronts for both NATO ISAF and US military coalitions had left the US operational forces fatigued from combat operations. Despite the presence of war in the region, the Taliban insurgency has continued support from the Pakistani ISI, making the Afghan-Pakistan border a hot zone of fighting, narcotics trade and cross-border conflict. This would play a role in Obama's foreign policy relations with Pakistan at the time, though internal issues with the Afghan government's President, Hamid Karzai, suggested that talks to give the Taliban leadership a seat at the table sounded more realistic than to continue special military operations to expend ISAF and ANSF forces (Lieber, 2016), the latter of which had still insufficient capabilities without foreign assistance or aid.

The results of the 2004 constitution gave President Karzai more power than any King or leader of the past central rulings; his, administration had been characterized as corrupt from its citizens outside of Kabul, and also, those who would support the Taliban. The 2009 re-election was rife with cheating due to his position and status as the head of state, and the loyalty of power

makers in the regions with provincial control. The aftermath of that election didn't do much to improve relations between the US, Afghanistan and the surrounding countries (2016). Karzai's administration held loyalties to the major provincial power brokers he held relations with which would prove to win support for the succeeding President, Ashraf Ghani, in 2014. The transfers of power to Ghani's new administration, which was hotly contested and seen as illegitimate as the earlier election, required the intervention of the Secretary of State John Kerry to create an administration with both Ghani and his competitor, the former advisor to Ahmed Shah Massoud of the Northern Alliance, Abdullah Abdullah (Dodge, 2021). Requiring the intervention and aid of the US even on a smaller scale with bigger power implications showed the volatility of the head of state position on the regions controlled, even if they were receding.

The coalition building within the Afghan government and their alliances with anti-Taliban warlords unintentionally undermined the institutional changes to rule of law within the ANA controlled areas, especially areas that were fragile due to Taliban presence or influence. The concern that a lack of political parties in the parliamentary representation level and the power granted to a central authority figure like a president would result in the personal gain of those who serve the needs and agenda of the executive office. Outside of the bounds of the capital, the rule of law in the context of state justice was not as rigid as traditionally established Western democracies with a judicial system. The US was looking increasingly isolated within their broad-based coalition to legitimize Afghanistan within the region and to keep the Taliban presence and influence in the region to a minimum, the group by now whom General David Petraeus thought was not an anti-American outfit (Taheri 2009). Tribal rule of law in areas such as the Kunar province on the North-East border between Pakistan, much outside of the capital, were disrupted by US invasion and further occupation of deployed US forces over the years. In

doing so, they intervened in informal tribal rule of law, replacing the Taliban's armed authority with the ISAF, forcing citizens to cooperate with the newly established judicial system that wasn't equipped with the cultural knowledge of tribal councils and non-justice.

By the later years, the USAID funded Afghan Rule-of-law Program (AROLP), established in 2004, did not make sufficient advances to established proper rule of law and judicial authority in regions that were constrained by foreign aid assistance funding and a cultural misunderstanding of non-state justice and tribal rule of law. The Taliban's justice was looked upon by locals for reasons the formal state systems were not: they were predictable, effective, legitimate, and accessible for dispute resolutions. This was crucial for gaining support for the Karzai administration against the Taliban's legitimacy as the US and international-backed state formal and informal courts were not seen as legitimate and the areas where non-state rule of law were more common, the Taliban still threatened violence for cooperating with central government and its institutions (Swenson 2017). USAID further funded AROLP under Obama with the agenda of tackling the problems of rule law enforcement outside of Kabul. Though formal court systems were better equipped for implementation and procedure of law, informal courts only got the boost insofar that it was recognized as an option to settle disputes— there wasn't an increase in participation or improvements to procedure since there was still a disconnect between these informal courts and traditional Jirgas or Shuras (2017). The initial harm and disruption to the tribal rule of law via cross-cutting of US military and ISAF operations in areas such Kunar was not undone by the further aid of informal courts in the Obama years (Baczko, 2016), the threat of violence and retaliation from Taliban was one example of US drawdown not meeting the broader coalitions goals in disrupting terror activities.

The most controversial change to Obamas policy, not just in Afghanistan but other active parts of the middle east like Iraq and Syria where the Islamic Jihadist group ISIS started to gain influence, was expansion of the Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle (UCAV) drone program as means of surrogate warfare. In addition to being a part of covert surrogate operations, it endangered civilians and civilian infrastructure that were vital to Afghanistan's national security interests. President Obama's drone program expansion drew heavy criticism from neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan, if not by their national governments, their civilians whose lives were affected (Lieber, 2016). The nature of these drone strikes were a part of the vein of ideas regarding the success of surrogate warfare and the Obama administration's need to separate itself from visible combat operations the separation of US policy in Afghanistan from combat operations that the ANA was resourced and trained for. What they didn't realize before implementation, was impact on the statehood of Afghanistan, the mission creep of legitimizing the capital while eliminating designated targets (Krieg 2016). The emergence of the Haqqani network, a Taliban faction of warlords from the era of the Mujahedeen that had close connections to Osama Bin Laden, in Pakistan-Afghanistan cross border insurgencies brought strain on their major terrorist attacks on Kabul. The broader War on Terror in Iraq and Syria were also attributed to the retrenchment of US troops and the rise of ISIS, the ISIS-K faction being the one that operated in the region (Dale, 2014).

The tendency of the US Executive office, NATO coalition and the Afghan government to announce plans for troop drawdown and increase between 2011, the first drawdown, and 2014 showed serious issues with the promise of Obama's administration to make an exit before the end of his terms. Two factors play a role in these setbacks: the Taliban insurgency and the capability of the ANA. The Taliban's knowledge and direct ties to the region gave them an upper



hand in patterns of insurgency and, the ANA needed to adapt to re-organization methods by relying less on ISAF coalition forces, taking leadership roles to push back and maintain rule. The ANA's capabilities in taking leadership, the mission goals of the commanders rose out of the patterns of troop drawdown and resurgence. US operations in this context were covert, relying on CIA intelligence and operatives in the field, special forces unit deployments and the increase in drone technology (Krieg, 2016). By externalizing the burden onto local partners in the periphery, distance was put between the Obama's administrations calls for reducing troop deployment and the involvement in covert operations. More importantly, distance was put between failures from covert operations and mission success.

### ***Operation Freedom's Sentinel: 2015-2021***

The Trump administration began a pattern of withdrawn support for the Afghan government and pulled together members of the Taliban to negotiate withdrawal plans. The two administrations that followed Barack Obama's tried to deliver the promise of drawing down presence completely, acknowledging the futile attempts at bringing about stability on the terms of US and its Western allies that in the coalition. These administrations proved a lack of faith in the Afghan national government that was primarily backed and aided by the US, legitimacy was given to the Taliban by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of the Trump administration. The Biden administration oversaw full withdrawal, delaying original dates negotiated by the Trump administration. These inconsistencies on the part of US policy soiled the messaging of US support for the Islamic Republic and the Afghan people, emblematic of the actual pullout early in Biden's term.

Setting up the pullout of Afghanistan under the Trump administration did not have the full agreement and consent of the Afghan Presidential administration whose executive by this

time was still President Ashraf Ghani. In 2018, Secretary Pompeo named Dr. Khalilzad, the Bush appointee of the 'accelerating success' initiative, a special representative of the newly established Afghan Reconciliation. What came out of this were talks between the integration of the Taliban within the state, and what ended up being agreed upon was the Doha agreement in February 2022, looking to establish negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban, the security against Al-Qaeda and other designated terrorist group activities (like the emergence of the ISIS-K faction in this part of the Middle East), and the retreat of US and NATO ISAF forces. This agreement did not include the Islamic Republic's executive Ashraf Ghani (Murtazashvili, 2022), who's presidency was seen by his people as largely illegitimate in terms of popular favor towards the governments rule and the health of the democracy.

The resulting changes made in Afghanistan heavily reduced military presence in the bases outside of Kabul over time until the beginning of the Biden administration. The agreements at reduced troop presence between the US and the Taliban also included the release of prominent Taliban members that were in US custody since the first invasion. The date was set for the withdrawal, May 1<sup>st</sup>, with no internal planning or communications between the Ghani administration and the US executive branch. Ghani's focus within Afghanistan was less on fighting the Taliban and more on joining political power within the regions he held (Biden, 2023), about 30 percent of the country. The constituency he fostered, a younger, politically active population had turned against him, his younger advisors resigning, and Ghani and the Afghan government itself became more isolated during the Trump administration. Trump's America First policies placed emphasis and discretion on America's role and removing itself from Afghanistan, but what this meant was that the US was withdrawing while ignoring the 20-

year nation building effort they had just partaken in— they were moving on without looking back at the effects they caused.

The Trump administration's stance on policy was more standoffish, and considered the regional policies of Pakistan and India and their economic and financial stances use that to fulfill the US agenda in the region. The long-term support for security would be the permission to use private contractors but more so emphasis on cooperation between the Afghan government and the emerging Taliban, whose talks during the Obama era was a sign that the US could move forward (Dostyar & Farahi, 2022). This approach to foreign policy is not only isolationist in design on the part of the US, but it also assumes that the regional powers, including— Pakistan, India, Iran and Afghanistan, all have their own isolationist agenda acting against the US's interests in region. The open antagonism against powers like Iran and the standoff approach with Pakistan and India would suggest that the Trump administration didn't think too highly of nation building efforts or security in Afghanistan.

The Biden administration reflected the earlier Trump office's need to withdraw swiftly, though they were critical of them in timing the implementation. Biden's claim that there was no plan for withdrawal implementations supported his need to push back the date of withdrawal from the one initially negotiated under Secretary Pompeo in the Trump Administration. They assured the Ghani administration they would support them (Biden, 2023), but the people of Afghanistan who he ruled less of every year due to political fracturing and disputes from Karzai's provincial ministers, was looking to lead less areas. The power and ties to Karzai's corrupt administration among the provincial leaders were built like a house of cards on the looming Taliban legitimization, it was past the point for the Biden administration to undo anything, just the guarantee of support for Ghani do what he feels is needed as the state's leader.

As spring went into summer, the complete collapse of the state at the hands of the Taliban was looking closer. Whether they could take over Kabul was up for question, but other than Kabul there was nothing else except the North-East provinces where the Northern Alliance has a foothold. The Biden administration directed their National Security Council to meet with ANDSF commanders to discuss the possibilities of evacuation and the processes needed. It was initially estimated that the Taliban would take Kabul within about one or two years, even with about 2,500 US troops, considering the power and defense aid given to the ANDSF, the taking of Afghanistan in the summer stunned the intelligence communities (2023). Earlier attempts to bring together the Afghan government and the Taliban had failed under Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's, watch. Plans to negotiate peace within the factions of the Afghan government never came to agreements of the members, or President Ghani.

One area of policy the Biden administration had to rethink was the need to evacuate people who wanted to leave. A backlog of about 14,000 Special Immigration Visas (SIV) from the Trump administration were accelerated during Biden's preparation to evacuate, which have meant that if initial withdrawal procedures took place, many Afghans looking to get out in the event of their provinces falling to the Taliban, or the complete fall of Kabul, would be denied the process of entering the US (2023). This would be consistent with the Trump administrations general sentiments and policy agenda on immigration, especially from Muslim majority countries. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, President Ghani and his family fled Kabul to take refuge in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the US and other embassies in Afghanistan left, which was a decision left to Biden in respect to the US embassy and a major sign of the US formally ending its presence publicly. The final troop made their withdrawal from Hamid Karzai Airport on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, just days after the chaotic withdrawals at the same airport and the terrorist attacks at

Abbey Gate that claimed the lives of over a hundred Afghan civilians and US military service members (Mulroy & Mundy, 2022). The attacks didn't come from the Taliban; this was the faction ISIS that the Taliban swore action against, ISIS-K.

From the uncertain end to operations during the sunset of Obamas policies, to the apathetic and isolationist Trump era policies, the Biden administration's pullout could only go as well as the efforts put to nation building in all eras of US involvement. Despite the fast approach to withdrawal efforts and the lack of residual forces needed to accompany the ANDSF, the original plans for withdrawal under Secretary Pompeo, would've left confusion not just for remaining US and NATO forces, but also the Afghan government, Taliban and most importantly the citizens who didn't have a say in who they wanted. All events are results of policy decisions made under each administration that allowed the Taliban to gain footing while the Afghan government lost its legitimacy and holding stemming from the assumption that a central government was made possible by people in charge two decades prior.

## **PART III**

### **Conclusion**

Going over the history of this region is crucial to understanding the state of Afghanistan, its current events being directly tied to major modernization efforts after WWII. From this era of monarchical rule under Mohammed Zahir Shah to the constitutional democracy that was put in place under the bloodless coup of his cousin Daoud Khan, Afghanistan had trouble running a centralized state from the capital of Kabul. Even during this era, repression of ethnic minorities and women were issues to overcome during modernization, but so too were the attempts at outreach to the rural regions outside of Kabul. The rise in political uprisings in Iran other parts of the Middle East and North African regions in response to Cold War balancing of powers and the nationalist movements of its time signaled the political instability in the region, leading up to the Sauer revolution. This tumultuous time for the country and the foreign interventions that came in to prop up a state (in this instance, the Soviet Union), was met with the results that led to a failure of central control with greater force and added conflict but a counterinsurgency on the other side.

The occupation of Soviet forces and the PDPA government, supported by the former had central control of the capital and struggled to make any meaningful progress on winning the land and the minds of the people. An Afghanistan that strayed away from Islamic and ethnic tribal roots was one that most people during this era in the 1980's, especially those outside Kabul, did not want to be a part of nor did they see a future for, in comparison to the Mujahedeen insurgency. This insurgency was backed by Western nations as well as other nations in the Arab peninsula. Islamic Jihad against a larger non-Muslim superpower would be a primary motivator for this war. For groups like the Northern Alliance, this would also be about national self-

determination and the domestic security of their people. The diversity of identities and ideologies within this counterinsurgency would prove to be a major reasoning for its collapse and the fracturing of this group in the retreat of the Soviet forces would combine our understanding of non-state terror groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The legitimacy of political and judicial rule was given to the Taliban, and they enforced security to the degree that it became a human rights issue.

The leadup to the invasion of Afghanistan during the Bush administration in 2001 had truly little to do with the Taliban, let alone the existing state of Afghanistan— this was enough of a justification to declare the Taliban apart of the groups or people that aided Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 hijackers in their attacks against the US and their allies. The war in Iraq, which was also not closely related to 9/11 or Osama Bin Laden yet was used for justification in its invasion, occupied the resources, time and intelligence for state-building under the Bush administration. The plans to take primary lead in the efforts to rid the provinces of their declared enemies and show a national government in Kabul that favored Western support and institutions akin to Liberal democracies had similar effects to the establishment of a Soviet backed Marxist Leninist government more than a couple of decades prior. The role that the ISAF and NGOs played in reconstructing the state had major confusions when it came to cross-cultural competence, a flaw that would be a major revision during Obama's years. Major combat operations were brutal, not just on the US forces or the NATO coalition, but also on the Afghan civilians and the newly formed ANDSF that was the national defense apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

After years of unpopular policies in the domestic sphere under Bush that extended out to criticisms of his hawkish policies towards Iraq and Afghanistan, the election of Barack Obama called for change, what came about was the change in the way things were done internally. The

preference towards US retrenchment and surrogate warfare in the fight against the Taliban was a big leap in attitude shifts as the pace at which the US was meeting its goals were not matched by the Afghan government and their military, both not meeting the goals for a proper withdrawal. The overhaul in judicial and rule of law outreach, while meeting the goals in planning the structural development, was not sufficient in implementation and the inter-communications between US & NATO forces and ANDSF and Afghan civilians. The transition between Hamid Karzai's corrupt and inept government to Ashraf Ghani's technocratic rule of smaller territories did not address the structural failures that gave power to loyal warlords in the major provinces held and the country struggled to move out of a narco-state with reliance on them. Disrupting this meant making major economic shifts for those with power, something that could not be implemented effectively by both sides. With all the struggles of nation building and winning over the legitimacy of Afghans as well as land, the idea of brokering a peace negotiation with the Taliban was inevitable.

The eventual collapse of the government was directly the result of two administrations, one of which tried to correct the mistakes of the former. The pullout itself signaled a failed state in Kabul, which was agreed upon by the US Secretary of State and the Taliban— an agreement to cooperate was brokered between one party and one Executive administration. By the time the Biden administration came into office, two out of the three parties in this peace negotiation were still not involved. No formal steps were taken to implement this complete withdrawal until Trump left office, leaving a large hole in communication between all the parties involved, especially the national government that was mostly built and armed from foreign aid. The traumatic scenes from Abbey Gate and Hamid Karzai airport displayed the terror and violence making its way to the capital, something that would only signal a collapse from within the state,



a state that could really only be attributed by its policy in relation to the US executive office and its national defense apparatus as well as NATO alliance members that played a hand. As the events of this paper have shown, the US government did not sufficiently support an Afghan state, leading to dissatisfaction among the civilian population as well as for the support of non-state groups, in this case, the Taliban.

Afghanistan is now in control of the Taliban, who have sought international recognition in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Bigger problems lie in the wake of the US withdrawal than the Taliban's struggle to gain international legitimacy. Afghanistan more than ever needs foreign aid and the states assets being frozen by the Biden administration have played a role in worsening conditions for those within Kabul and those in rural regions. The people of Afghanistan are feeling the shock of what happens when the existing economic and security systems are gutted and in need of replacement—desperation and state repression are back to levels seen during the first Taliban rule. The inability for the Biden administration to cooperate does not measure to the efforts taken by said administration to make the pullout effort and promise to safeguard the region, it also deflects any agreements made by the Doha agreements by the Trump administration.

The threat of ISIS-K and other Al-Qaeda outfits in the region seem to be a common threat that both the Taliban and the US (the broader West) share; we can't predict cooperation or intelligence sharing, but that could provide a route for the Taliban's legitimacy, though we should ask at what cost. One superpower that would receive help from this as well economic cooperation or infrastructure development is China. Those in Western national security apparatuses would see this as a potential issue; it could be a benefit in comparison to the state because of frozen assets, as well as the years of combat in the region that have taken a toll on the

people and the infrastructure. All of this would come at the cost, of additional state repression under the Taliban that would be ignored internationally, but wouldn't be inconsistent with countries like The United State, Russia, China or the UK having close relations with countries like Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, The UAE or Israel in the region. We must consider this discussing that human rights issues under the Taliban domestically could slip back to their first rule, international recognition of a state that would lose its legitimacy among citizens with little dissent would be like an international recognition and support of the previous 90's Taliban regime. Despite their claims to respect basic human rights by their interpretation of Islam, women's rights have become a hostile topic and discriminatory as initially predicted; this is especially clear in Kabul which saw major strides towards women in positions of public education and government during reconstruction after the Taliban were exiled. What's most tragic to think about is that Kabul's women's rights were progressing back to the era of President Daoud Khan's modernization efforts in the 1970's, showing the fragility of this issue over decades.

But the levers of power are now in the hands of a non-state group that have operated outside of the bounds of the capital for 20 years. The well-being and survival of the Afghan civilians who have little to no say over who has authority over them are in the hands of a group whose credibility on the national stage appears weak. The Taliban gained legitimacy over the years for their ability to keep security, law and order in the eyes of the Afghan population, even before their ability as political leaders came into play, which has played out as brutally as it had in the past. Kabul's modernization efforts over the decades and especially with Western foreign aid, are different from the Taliban of the 1990's took over– they must assume the role of existing state apparatuses if they want to secure legitimacy and their view of a stable Afghanistan.

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