

## War on terrorism: What went wrong in Afghanistan?

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### Abstract

The 9/11 attacks are apparently a milestone for the United States (US) and the world alike. Right after the 9/11 attacks, the US started a war-on-terrorism policy against al Qaida and its affiliations. The US had to change its priority because of the attacks and embarked on taking vigorous action to eradicate global terror networks. Thus, in its first year this war involved a maintained campaign against the al-Qaeda network and the termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

This paper assesses the war on terror policy of the US against al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan and what went wrong there after the intervention. It also points out the miscalculations and policy deficiencies in promoting stability after the invasion.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Al Qaeda, Taliban, Terrorism, ISAF, CIA

### Introduction

After the tragic 9/11 attacks, the United States (US) initiated a global war on terrorism (Rogers, 2006). Obviously, the 9/11 attacks are a certain landmark for the American people and the world alike. As it is sole superpower of the world, America changed its priority and vowed that it would take vigorous action to wipe out global terror networks before anything else. Thus, the US unilaterally applied various measures and in its first year this war involved a maintained campaign against the al-Qaeda network and the termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

This paper tries to evaluate the war against al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan and what has changed there after the intervention of the US. As a matter of fact if the United States and its close ally, Pakistan, had not helped thousands of religiously motivated radicals in giving armament and training during the Soviet occupation, and then had not failed to prevent those radicals from transforming themselves into terrorists, this war, the terror attacks of 9/11, and others might

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almost never have happened (Kinzer, 2007; Mamdani, 2005). For understanding today's Afghanistan, it is imperative to look at the history of the Taliban regime, which ruled the country between 1996 and 2001.

### **The History of Taliban**

In the 1980s, when Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union, the US handed over billions of dollars to revolutionary militia forces named the mujahedeen through a secret CIA operation. Unfortunately, in 1989 no sooner had the Soviet Union withdrawn from Afghanistan than the mujahedeen factions, which had come together for driving out the Russians, almost instantly turned against each other and began a new civil war when it became evident that the coalition governments established after the Soviet invasion had failed to overcome differences of their members based on ethnicity, clan, and religion (Roraback, 2004). It was in this chaotic environment of civil war that an extremist religious group emerged victorious. The Taliban, the name derives from the Arabic word for student, was in fact comprised of young men and boys who hardly lived in Afghanistan since they were in refugee camps, and attended to radical religious schools in Pakistan. Although Saudi Arabia provided the financial support, the Taliban was espoused primarily by Pakistan in terms of military aid and personnel (Rubin, 1999). The Taliban was also greatly indebted to the US, since some of its militants had passed through the training camps that were financially supported by the CIA during the Soviet occupation (Kinzer, 2007). Many others were radicalized in the ultraconservative atmosphere that blanketed Afghanistan during the 1980s, while the CIA overlooked or even encouraged in the name of fighting against the 'evil'. After the Soviet withdrawal, they either took part in the civil war or move back to their religious schools in Pakistan. When they reappeared a few years later as an extremist religious militia, they owed to the US as much as Pakistan (Mamdani, 2005).

Thanks to their capability of bringing relative stability and providing security for the large territory under their control, most people in Afghanistan initially had sympathy with the Taliban and felt that the chaos they had lived through so many years came to an end. With its 25,000 fighters, the Taliban seized most of the country in 1995 (Ruiz, 2004). Drawn from the majority Pashtuns ethnic group making up some 40 percent of Afghanistan's 20 million people, the Taliban also stirred up Pashtun nationalism. Even though the Pashtuns had reigned in Afghanistan for three centuries, they had then lost out to the other smaller ethnic groups. "The Taliban victories revived hopes that once again the Pashtuns would dominate Afghanistan" (Rashid, 2010).

Within the territory controlled by the Taliban, its growing zeal for religious issues began to draw criticism and spread uneasiness among the public. The vast majority of Afghans resented from the

group's strict reading of an ancient tribal social code named Pushtunwali, since they had not been exposed to such restrictions before (Ruiz, 2002).

Because of all these developments, while heading north, the Taliban was challenged by the Northern Alliance, which was formed by many of the former mujahedeen groups that ultimately came together against the Taliban. The movement took over Kabul as well as Jalalabad in late 1996 and Mazar-e-Sharif, de facto capital of the Northern Alliance, in 1998 (Ruiz, 2004)

The intensified fighting for control of northern Afghanistan initiated a new refugee exodus in which many educated persons, including medical professionals, engineers, and teachers of Afghanistan run away to Pakistan in the fear of torture and death. They were strongly opposed to extremist religious view of the Taliban and many restrictions that were imposed on the population, based on their fundamentalist view. Many members of ethnic minorities who feared discrimination by the Taliban also fled. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of civilians within Afghanistan were displaced internally. By 1999, the Taliban controlled 90 percent of the country and ruled Afghanistan with a notorious iron hand (Ruiz, 2004).

Far from being a legitimate government, the Taliban's rule was recognized only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The international institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Conference also did not give formal recognition to the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan (Bajoria, 2011).

One of the main reasons for refusals was the fact that the Taliban pursued stringent policies in the name of Islam, yet the human right violations and abuses the Taliban regime committed against women has no foundation in Islam (Galea, 2000). Within Islam, women are allowed to earn and control their own money, and to participate in public life. Regarded as an extremist organization, even the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt denounced the Taliban's ruling as too extreme and a deviation from Islam.

Before the civil war and the Taliban reign, female education and employment in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul, were not less than the many other countries. At Kabul University, half of the students and 60 percent of the teachers were women. In Kabul, 70 percent of school teachers, 50 percent of civilian government workers, and 40 percent of doctors were also women (Hosseini, 2013). Under the Taliban rule, however, it was introduced a gender apartheid for the women, which eliminated unbelievable amount of their freedom. In this context, women were banned from getting education and working any place. Unless they were accompanied by their husbands or other close male relatives and wore a veil called "burka", which covers the entire face and body, they were

also forbidden from leaving their houses. Women were brutally beaten or even tortured, once they violated Taliban decrees (Fleming, 2004). Men had to grow their beards in order not to receive prison sentence. Colorful signs were banned. TV, movies, non-religious music and cassette tapes were all prohibited. Because they distracted them from their religious education, children could not play chess, fly kites, or play with the pigeons. (Kaynak)

The Taliban instituted a moral police force so that offenders could be readily identified and severely punished. This cruel treatment of violators was classified as a reign of terror and widely condemned by the UN as well as by other international institutions. Extremist religious fundamentalism demonstrated by the Taliban was so strict that it appeared to degrade Islam's message of peace and tolerance and its ability to live with other religious and ethnic groups. The Taliban's fundamentalist approach to Islam also stirred extremist fervor across Central Asia and Pakistan, which did not accept to compromise with social structures, current state systems, or traditional Islamic values (Rashid, 2010).

Because the Taliban regime and al Qaida terrorist network were sharing similar world, the Taliban sheltered Osama bin Laden and also allowed him to operate various terrorist camps in Afghanistan in which militants all over the world could be trained in terror tactics. Mullah Mohammed Omer, the Taliban leader, wanted Afghanistan to be a pure Islamic state, while Osama bin Laden had the same objective for the entire Islamic world. Both hated the West, especially the US. This collaboration turned Afghanistan into one of the most ideal locations for terrorism. At the same time, these were very important indications showing how Afghanistan became a main base for al-Qaeda to implement its terror campaign against the US before 9/11 (Kinzer, 2007).

On the other hand, the US maintained some kind of good relations with the Taliban regime. Especially, in the first Clinton administration, it was expressed some supportive views about the Taliban. It was even suggested that the embassy of the United States might reopen if security improved in Kabul for the Americans. And rather than isolation of the Taliban regime in the United Nations, engagement was advocated by some of the senior members of the administration (Rubin, 1999). In this period, the US gave an impression that it was not only muted, but also unconcerned and indifferent about the social and judicial practices of the Taliban. There were several reasons for these, one of which was to isolate Iran since the Taliban regime loathed Iran because of sectarian difference. The other one was related to lucrative commercial activities going on in Afghanistan at a high profiled level. For example, an American oil company, Unocal, had a desire to build a 2 billion dollar pipeline to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, and perhaps India. Because the pipeline would run across the country, Unocal was keen to see any kind

of government in Kabul which could maintain order. (Kinzer, 2007; Rubin, 1999). Only after did Madeleine Albright become the secretary of state, in the second Clifton administration, condemnation of Taliban policies on gender was forthright. While the secretary's own views might have influenced this direction, feminist and human right groups in the United States and in the Democrat Party also had an effect to change the route of the administration's Taliban policy. However, in spite of the bombings of the United States' embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the Clifton administration did almost nothing substantial in an attempt to prevent certain Taliban policies other than sent a few Tomahawk missiles (Rubin, 1999).

### **After September Eleven (9/11)**

After the September 11 attacks, it was inevitable that the US would overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Not only had Afghanistan been a place of sanctuary for Osama bin Laden and his comrades but also a haven for global terrorism. At first, before declaring war on Afghanistan, President "Bush demanded only that the Taliban oust its leader, Mullah Omar, and cuts its ties to al-Qaeda. This was the option that the president of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, was eagerly pushing" (Kinzer, 2007, p. 276). The reason for this eagerness was because of the fact that it was Pakistan who had created and protected the Taliban regime and now, did not want to allow to be destroyed easily. "The rushed negotiations between the U.S and Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 changed Pakistan's behavior but not its interest. Supporting the Taliban was so important to Pakistan that Musharraf even considered to war with the U.S rather than abandon his allies in Afghanistan" (Rubin, 2007). Yet the failure of General Musharraf to persuade the Taliban leaders into turning Osama bin Laden over to the United States was the beginning of end for the Taliban regime. (Kinzer, 2007). As a result of the tragic death of Americans in the World Trade Center, public opinion in many countries also seemed readily accepting any American involvement in Afghanistan. Therefore, before the declaration of war, a lot of states besides NATO members had approved the attack of the US on Afghanistan and supported it in many respects. In these circumstances, no sooner had the US attacked than the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the protector of al-Qaeda, was terminated immediately. This rapid war continued just three months and "appeared to be highly successful from an American perspective" (Rogers, 2006). Thanks to the war, besides the termination of the Taliban regime, many al-Qaeda militants were killed or captured, and the US established two military bases in Afghanistan.

At first glance, this war seems a complete success; however, there is the other side of the coin in which highlights the fact that the action against the Taliban was the easy part. More complicated one was to decide what action to take as an appropriate next stage. It became clear in the fall of

2001 that the only choice for destroying the Taliban and al-Qaeda as well as stabilizing Afghanistan would entail at least two full divisions' worth of US and NATO ground forces, speedy and enormous reconstruction, and administrating the country perhaps for several years (Goodson, 2003). There were two alternatives, each loaded with long-term danger. President Bush chose the less risky one. He refused to send the American troops into the battle so that terrorist leaders could escape and much of Afghanistan was left in the hands of drug barons as well as fundamentalist warlords.

The other option would have been to start a complete invasion of Afghanistan and agree to maintain large numbers of troops there for at least many years. However, this option might have brought about to capture of bin Laden and his lieutenants, and also possibly put Afghanistan on a path to stability. Notably the US behaved remarkably ungenerous when it came to aiding Afghanistan. It produced less aid and fewer peacekeepers per capita than Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, or Rwanda. This made certain that Afghanistan would not recover, warlords would continue to control much of the country, the Taliban would reappeared as a fighting force, and bin Laden and other terrorist leaders would not be able to be captured. Most importantly, the drug trade would go increasingly main supporter of the country's economy. So much so that in 2004 Afghanistan produced 87 percent of the total heroin production in the world (Kinzer, 2007). Given the fact that heroin has been one of the most significant ways of funding of terrorism, it became much clearer that the route followed by the US in order to combat terrorism was not a bright one. Although it was so serious, senior Bush administration officials were never interested in the Afghan opium problem ever since 9/11. Indeed, the US found a way to avoid fighting against the Afghan drug lords from the very outset of the US military operations in Afghanistan in the fall and winter of 2001 (Risen, 2006). As if the US was aiming to disregard the harsh realities of Afghanistan. It later became clear that the Bush administration had decided much earlier to invade Iraq before the task against al-Qaeda was successfully completed. All these policies meant that not only was Afghanistan threatened by an unusual surge in opium production, it was also dangerously close to becoming a narco-state (Risen, 2006).

During the Afghan war, thousands of Afghans as well as outsiders were captured and put to the detention by the Americans. Some of them were important figures in the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Others were low-level combatants who were fighting on the wrong side when the US invaded. The rest were innocents gathered up either by mistake or because someone with personal enmity falsely accused them of being a fighter. Many were subjected to coercive questioning at the base in Balgram, Afghanistan. Hundreds were sent to Guantanamo base in Cuba. It was chosen because

the interrogation techniques which would be used might not legitimate on the soil of the US. Although the Bush administration claimed that the cruel interrogation techniques applied to the detainees were appropriate in light of continuing terrorism threat, they became a symbol of American's rejection of universal human rights values. Therefore, the following wave of anti-Americanism easily outweighed the value of intelligence that was garnered from violent interrogations (Kinzer, 2007, p. 277).

### **After the War: Resurgence of Taliban**

Despite the very deep insecurity and instability throughout Afghanistan, there have been a few limited successes. For example, the first presidential and parliamentary elections in three decades were held, with fairly good participation by women, and women were elected to 25 percent of the seats in the parliament in the first election. However, both the first and second elections were flawed. Especially in the second election, in some districts, only a few women were seen voting. In the parliamentary elections, many human-rights violators and warlords were able to stand for election, and many won seats in spite of constitutional and regulatory requirements that should have disqualified them (Worden & Sudhakar, 2012). On the other hand, despite the fact that some construction projects, such as a new Kabul-Kandahar highway, completed earlier than it had been planned and, additionally, new hydroelectric dams, schools, courthouses, and administrative buildings were built across the country (Gannon, 2004) most of the international donors have not honor their promise and have not donor what they promised earlier to help Afghanistan become more stabilized and independent without getting international donation.

But the gains that have been made are in jeopardy, since the Taliban have begun to regain power gradually. One of the main reasons of this situation is that contrary to the claims of the US, in the 2001 Afghan war, the US "merely pushed the core leadership of al-Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan, with no strategy for consolidating this apparent tactical advance" (Rubin, 2007: p.2). The United States did not "provide those Taliban fighters who did not want to defend al-Qaeda with a way to return to Afghanistan peacefully" (Rubin, 2007: p.2). Along with the illegal detention at Guantanamo Bay and Bagram Air Base, this policy caused the fighters to become refugee in Pakistan with al-Qaeda and they became open to be used against the United States and its allies within Afghanistan. As a result of this policy, over the last years there has been an escalation in violence. Innocent people are now being killed by suicide bombers around the country, even in the streets of Kabul, which were never seen before (Yeni bir kaynak )(Rubin, 2007). This outright violence has precluded the social and economic development of Afghanistan as well as political participation of many Afghans.

In 2007, Al Jazeera reporter James Bays, who spent two days with the Taliban in Helmand province, found that the group is running schools and medical facilities, and is traveling armed and unchallenged by NATO-led forces. According to Bays, although NATO forces are the master of the skies, large swathes of territory is under the control of the Taliban. When he traveled to, a town in the province with Taliban fighters, he noted that there were Taliban fighters with weapons everywhere and no sign of NATO or Afghan forces. They filmed from a vehicle, occupied by heavily armed Taliban fighters. The car drove straight past the compound housing British troops based in the town. The Taliban fighters claimed that the British soldiers were too scared to even leave their base. Bays added that he saw the body of a man hanged by the Taliban, accused of being an American spy. The local Taliban commander said to Bays that they appointed a governor in Helmand and were also running medical clinics and religious schools there (Boynton, 2007).

Another very fact is that despite Hamid Karzai's strong opposition, the United States overlooked the quiet reconstitution of the Taliban in Pakistan so long as Islamabad granted basing rights to the U.S troops, pursued the hunt for al-Qaeda leaders, and shut down A.Q. Khan nuclear-technology proliferation network. But five years later, the Taliban has broadened and deepened their presence in the Pakistani border region with the help of Pakistani Intelligence Agency (ISI). Even if the United States and ISAF forces defeated Taliban insurgency in many engagements, the continued sanctuary provided to Taliban in Pakistan has prevented real victory (Rubin, 2007). It was obvious that the Bush administration had to be tough against the Pakistani government on this issue, in order to cope with the Taliban insurgency and stabilize Afghanistan.

### **A Deal with the Devils: Warlords**

Another very risky issue for the United States was that the decision of reinstating several warlords in Afghanistan in an effort to promote democracy and stability in the country. At first, the planners of war in Pentagon presented Afghan war as a model of future warfare. This model comprised the United States' novel use of special operations forces, precision weapons, and indigenous allies. For this war, the meaning of indigenous allies was the Northern Alliance which involves the warlords (Biddle, 2003).

These warlords, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Muhammad Fahim, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Burhanuddin Rabbani returned the power despite the fact that all of them share responsibility for the very violent killing of civilians in the 1990s. They maintained private armies and, as aforementioned, gained a great deal of money from illegal opium trade. Yet after the invasion these men were at the same table with the United States, the United Nations, and other decent member of Afghan government to share power as if they were not those who caused so much misery for their people before the



Taliban. There was a sense of déjà vu which was so strong that the United Nations' former special envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi needed to warn that the situation in Afghanistan was reminiscent of what was seen after the establishment of mujahideen government in 1992 which opened the doors for the Taliban to come to power a few years later (Gannon, 2004).

“How exactly did things get so bad so quickly? How did the fall of Taliban lead to the return of the old status quo?” (Gannon, 2004, p. 2). The answer dates back to September 2001. Soon after the 9/11, the United States teamed up with the Northern Alliance to rout the Taliban and the al-Qaeda terrorists. However, some of the new allies of the America were the same guys who had wreaked havoc in Afghanistan before the Taliban and many of them were not less radical in their ideology than the Taliban. In addition to that, they saw their relationship with the United States a tactical one at best for gaining power. It meant that they would never keep their promise if the situation was against their self-interest. Thus, problems emerged even at the table of the Bonn accord, signed in December 2001 under the United Nations auspices. After the signing of the accord, since presidency belonged to the United States, there was really nasty horse trading among the member of the Northern Alliances for three other top posts: the foreign, defense, and interior ministerships. And they got these posts as a result of their ethnic identity and military power. As for the presidency, because Hamid Karzai did not have a militia of his own, the Northern Alliance agreed to the appointment of him, as interim president. In practice, it was clear that Karzai always had trouble to impose his will on those who had private armies (Gannon, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The primary reason why Bush refused the determined option of long-term engagement in Afghanistan was that his attention was concentrated on elsewhere. He was aware of the significance of stabilizing Afghanistan and would undoubtedly have been pleased to seize bin Laden and his henchmen, but his passion for these plans became less important beside his obsession with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. For the United States to begin a “sustained effort to pacify Afghanistan would have required a commitment comparable in scope to the multibillion-dollar, six-year-long campaign it waged to throw the country into chaos during the period of Soviet occupation in 1980s. Such an undertaking would have made it impossible for the US to conduct any other major military offensive at the same time. It would have forced Bush to abandon the idea of invading Iraq, something he was not prepared to do” (Kinzer, 2007, p. 278). Thus, Afghanistan has been abandoned to its fate.

Today, ISAF only operates in Kabul, which leaves the rest of the country at the warlords' mercy. There is also the problem of how to finance Afghanistan's reconstruction. The country has virtually

no financial resources. People see very little change in their daily lives. They lack food, shelter and work, and this situation has changed little since 2001. Not enough Afghan soldiers and police have been trained and they are not paid enough in wages, so they can easily be bribed. Meanwhile, commanders with private armies still rule large sections of the country, even though the militias have been outlawed. The U.S. military entered into agreements with many of these militias, allowing them to remain intact. The commanders protect drug smugglers and extract bribes and illegal “taxes” from people. There are kidnappings and assassinations. The United States is still cooperating vigorously with the same warlords who brought about instability and caused so much misery in Afghanistan in the past. It is impossible for the US with these men to bring stability and a real democracy in the future (Gannon, 2004).

A diplomatic strategy is needed to give the military operations persuasive political purposes, to aggregate the power of allies to main cause, to transform battlefield successes into peace. Sadly, neglect of these tasks, as in Iraq, has served to demonstrate the limits of the US’ military power, not its deterrent value. This is, however, far from the greatest irony of the current situation.

After Soviet occupation, Afghans suffered a humanitarian emergency while Afghanistan became a failed state. Yet the US and the other major powers have neglected Afghanistan constantly. Regional powers, especially Pakistan, but also private networks—smugglers, drug dealers, terrorists—treated it as an open field for manipulation and exploitation. The failure of major powers to come to the aid of Afghanistan provided ample time and opportunity for malign forces to exploit this situation in different ways. After the notorious Taliban era, henceforth, it is obvious that whether the Afghan people will finally have a chance to live in a relatively peaceful environment or, instead, fall back into an abyss of violence depends on incalculable factors depends on the aims and objectives of major powers, especially of the United States. (Rubin, 1999).

In the competition with other nations for influence, the United States’ comparative advantages have been, and remain, her unmatched military capabilities, economy and leading role in scientific and technological innovation. The US miscalculated the power of Taliban and the situation in Afghanistan. As a result, increasing the military forces in Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, has not help the US so far to stabilize country in the short run. The US administrations, both Bush and Obama, did not understand that a mere course correction was not be sufficient to stop the country from sliding into chaos. The US and its allies must reconsider their policy and especially raise both the resources they promise to Afghanistan and the efficacy of using of those resources. There is a very serious and common perception among Afghans that Afghanistan has not been a high priority for the

United States for a very long time. As a result of this situation the Taliban has improved its position gradually (Rubin, 2007).

Finally, the US miscalculated Afghanistan, and misjudged its own capacity to achieve major strategic transformation easily in the country. While claiming to create a “new country”, on the contrary, it failed to transform the region and strengthened Iran. The region is still continuing to be a terror threat against the United States and its interests. In spite of all these facts the Obama Administration declared that it is ready to withdraw at the end of 2014 from Afghanistan. With a weak Karzai government and its fragile institutions what will happen after the US withdraw is a real and complicated question to everybody.

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