



AFGHANISTAN
ANALYSTS
NETWORK

A Study of International Engagement in Afghanistan in the Period 2015-2021

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Roxanna Shapour

This paper brings together contributions from six senior AAN analysts, with each chapter offering its author's expertise, professional experience, and analytical rigour. Taken together, the chapters provide a broad examination of the international engagement, including Norway's, in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2021. This was a period marked by political divisiveness in Kabul, a war now largely fought between Afghans, a consolidation of corruption within the Afghan state, United States-Taliban negotiations that led to the virtually unconditional withdrawal of foreign forces, and eventually the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the establishment of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Each chapter addresses a distinct theme: democratisation and elections; the performance and decline of Afghan security forces, the international engagement on the economy and development; the complex pursuit of peace and reconciliation; and the struggle for women's rights and broader human rights. The epilogue offers an analytical perspective on what went wrong in Afghanistan and the deep-rooted dysfunction in both the government and the international intervention that supported it. It asks whether failure was inevitable in a system built on dependency and short-term priorities.

The aim was not to present a single, unified narrative, but for each contributor to approach their subject through their own lens, rooted in academic inquiry, extensive reporting and analysis, as well as practical engagement in Afghanistan. We hope the plurality of perspectives is one of the work's principal strengths, giving a richer and more nuanced picture than any single account could offer. In reading the different chapters, however, the reader can discern recurring themes – institutional fragility, the corrosive effects of corruption and the unintended consequences of foreign policy choices. The collapse of democratic credibility through flawed elections, for example, has clear parallels with the distortions of an aid-dependent economy and the fragmentation of peace initiatives. Likewise, the marginalisation of women's rights is not a stand-alone failure but is interwoven with wider issues of governance and power.

These chapters also speak to the tension between aspiration and reality. Time and again, international actors – including Norway – defined their engagement and activities in Afghanistan with well-intentioned objectives and even at times well-articulated strategies for lasting change. The intervention was certainly well-funded, with vast expenditures on civilian aid and military support. Yet in the face of entrenched power dynamics, competing agendas and the relentless pressures of the ongoing conflict, those strategies were often diluted, compromised or left incomplete. Also, it has to be said, some, perhaps many of the strategies were misguided or contradictory, or foundered because of policies and choices made in the early years of the intervention. Also, most members of the Coalition, including Norway, couched their actions with an eye to their relationship with Washington, and it

was Washington which drove the intervention. The authors are candid in tracing these shortcomings, and in doing so, help illuminate the broader challenge of conducting state-building and peace-building in such a complex environment.

This paper is not simply an investigation of Afghanistan's recent past. By allowing the evidence and interpretation of each expert to stand on its own, the work invites the reader to consider the many layers of causality, responsibility and consequence. It resists the temptation to reduce events to a single failure or to place the blame neatly in one quarter. Instead, it offers a more difficult but ultimately more honest reckoning – one that acknowledges agency on the part of Afghan leaders and communities, as well as the decisive influence of international policy and practice.

We hope that this report will serve as both a record that captures the perceptions and judgements of those who were closely engaged with Afghanistan during a pivotal era and as a resource that offers insights relevant to policymakers, practitioners and scholars grappling with understanding conflict intervention elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1.

THE FAÇADE OF DEMOCRACY: INSTITUTION-BUILDING AND ELECTIONS, 2015-2021

Thomas Ruttig

“If the first brick is uneven, the wall won’t be straight.” This Afghan proverb aptly describes the process of democratic institution-building experienced by Afghans from 2001 onwards. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell, and the post-2001 US-led intervention failed not because Afghans rejected democracy, but because the design of the reconstruction process and the institutions that emerged from it were flawed, informal power became entrenched and donor short-termism hollowed out the democratic institutions.

The 2001 Bonn agreement stipulated that Afghans would “freely determine their own political future” and elect a “fully representative government.” The framework for political institutions, designed to deliver on this promise, was set in the 2004 constitution. Ultimately, however, the institutional architecture established by Bonn and the 2004 constitution proved ill-suited to Afghanistan’s complex and fragmented political and ethnic landscape, shaped by decades of armed conflict and resulting deepened poverty.

FOUNDATIONAL DESIGN FLAWS

From the outset, Afghanistan’s 2004 constitution presented major structural weaknesses. It created an over-centralised and inflexible presidential system with too many powers concentrated in the executive, a weak parliament lacking meaningful oversight capacity and too few other functioning checks and balances. While the presidency was tacitly given to a Pashtun by the US-dominated donors at the 2001 Bonn conference, the non-Pashtuns held sway, with significant cabinet-level posts in the interim period and in parliament. From the start, this led to polarisation of the country’s political forces along ethnic lines. It laid the groundwork for (ethno-)political patronage and systemic corruption and contributed to conflicts between the executive and legislative branches, which frequently resulted in mutual paralysis.

Key constitutional provisions, particularly those related to the establishment of various elected subnational bodies – which would have been closer to the ordinary people than the central, Kabul-based, institutions – were never realised. District council elections, for example, were never held during the two-decade existence of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The powers and authorities of provincial councils remained ill-defined, leaving them in legal limbo. Powerful provincial councils emerged only where their heads

derived political weight from non-state (mainly factional) power networks. The lack of district councils was the formal reason why a Loya Jirga – a constitutional prerequisite for altering the constitution – could not be convened to resolve faults in the institutional architecture, particularly the post-2014 presidential election crisis. Instead, this often led to extra-constitutional political bargains, further weakening the constitutional setup. In the case of the election crisis, the two leading contenders were forced by the US to establish a National Unity Government (NUG), making the previous elections appear meaningless.

Despite promises made during the Constitutional Loya Jirga to allow future constitutional amendments as the situation evolved, no significant reforms were undertaken—either under President Karzai or during the 2016–21 period.

This chapter examines the post-2014 period—focusing on elections, institutional development, and the emergence of parallel structures of power. It examines how the Republic’s failure to build resilient democratic institutions and enforce meaningful electoral reform ultimately undermined its legitimacy and contributed to its collapse in 2021. (For more detail on pre-2016, see Thomas Ruttig’s separate paper based on his presentation on 16 January 2025 to the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan.)¹

AN OVEREMPHASIS ON ELECTIONS

Holding elections alone is not sufficient to make a democracy. The quality of elections determines how representative and legitimate the institutions emerging from them will be and how responsibly they will function between elections. However, by the time elections were held, international attention and funding were usually exhausted, leading to less emphasis on the functioning of the institutions between elections. The post-election drop in funding also undermined the continuity of Afghanistan’s electoral institutions.

In Afghanistan, electoral quality declined from one electoral cycle to the next, in terms of turnout, voter enthusiasm and security. The entire process – from candidate registration to polling station distribution and from the casting of votes to tallying ballots and data entry – buckled under the weight of massive manipulation and fraud. At the same time, the use of “increasingly sophisticated means of manipulating the system” intensified.² In the end, all post-2016 elections were neither free, fair, nor representative, and their results remained contested. This resulted in the further delegitimisation of the entire institutional setup of the state.

FAILED REFORMS, INCOMPLETE IMPLEMENTATION AND LEGAL AMBIGUITY

Despite an agreement on “fundamental” electoral reform immediately after the chaotic 2014 presidential poll and a new electoral law that was ratified in 2017, the 2018 parliamentary and the 2019 presidential elections saw little practical improvement. The wrangling over the reform, particularly over appointments to the main electoral institutions, delayed parliamentary elections for an unprecedented three and a half years,

¹ This section draws on several AAN elections dossiers (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

² Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, [Derailing democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an unstable political landscape](#), Columbia University Press, 2014, p9.

from spring 2015 to October 2018. In fact, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) was still busy sorting out the results of those elections when it was supposed to be preparing for the 2019 presidential poll. The reform process resembled repairing an engine while it was still running – another argument for creating a sound system from the start.

Based on the 2017 law, a clean-up of the voter registry was attempted, but it still contained significant irregularities. Millions of eligible voters were unable to (re-)register, particularly those living in areas controlled by the Taliban, who had declared an election boycott and followed up with attacks. For the first time, voter lists were linked to each polling station. Stricter penalties for “electoral *crimes*” and the reintroduced exclusion of candidates with links to illegal armed groups largely remained on paper; such groups continued to interfere in the voting in many parts of the country. The security threats also meant that international observers were almost entirely absent during both elections, further weakening electoral oversight. At the same time, the initial unity of Afghan election observer organisations under the Free and Fair Election Foundation (FEFA) had been lost, starting in 2009, with the establishment of competing organisations, some of which had been co-opted by powerful political players. The overwhelming number of political parties and candidates’ agents among the election observers provided little guarantee against mass fraud, as they often were themselves involved in influencing or intimidating voters and manipulating the electoral process.

The most visible technical reform, the Biometric Voter Verification (BVV) system and digital voting machines, introduced at the last moment to prevent the widespread fraud that had marred previous polls, was not fully implemented ahead of the 2018 parliamentary election. Technical failures on election day meant that the polls remained vulnerable to manipulation. Once again, electoral institutions lacked transparency, and essential data – such as voter turnout and the number of open polling stations – remained incomplete or contradictory. The widespread belief in a technocratic ‘solution’ had been illusory from the beginning, as the country lacked the necessary infrastructure, including electricity, in many places, and sufficiently trained personnel – while the key actors wanted to keep open the option to manipulate the outcome.

The 2017 electoral law proposed a shift away from the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system in favour of one more friendly to political parties. The very parliamentarians who had gained their seats through the old system, however, blocked its implementation. As a result, parties remained marginalised and, despite having a legal right to participate, excluded from the ballot in post-2014 elections. Their deliberate weakness blocked an important means of democratic participation for the wider population.

In the unchanged, polarised political landscape, no new political forces or faces were able to emerge. The old guard, mainly the surviving mujahedin leaders (‘warlords’) and some new players who profited from the West’s support, remained as influential as ever. Many paved the way for their sons and daughters to enter electoral politics or to gain lucrative appointments. Parliament became an attractive arena for wealthy businessmen. The contest for seats was heavily monetised and the line between politics and business grew increasingly blurred.

This entrenched a system in which only nominally independent candidates, backed by factional power or wealth, continued to dominate. A truly representative and competitive political culture never took root. Increasing political polarisation and pressure from the ‘peace process’ (the US-Taliban talks), resulting in fear of losing power in the ruling elites,

stood in the way of meaningful reform. This also resulted in an even lower quality of what would turn out to be the Islamic Republic's last cycle of elections and foreshadowed its end.

THE 2018 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The long delay in the parliamentary elections, finally held in 2018, was a sign of both institutional dysfunction and political deadlock. Earlier, in another extra-constitutional step, the sitting parliament's tenure was extended by presidential decree. The Afghan media had been asked by the authorities to keep quiet over security incidents for most of the election day so as not to scare away prospective voters.

Due to the patchy use of BVV, the IEC had to deal with inconsistent results, without having clearly determined which votes would be counted and which would be invalidated. As in previous elections, on election day in 2018, the unity of the election commissions and, altogether, the 'reformed' procedures faltered when technical problems occurred and they came under pressure from various contenders and their political camps.

Both commissions showed a general lack of transparency. Again, key figures – including the number of Afghans registered to vote and the turnout on election day, as well as the number of polling sites and their opening hours – remained incomplete or contradictory. Due to organisational shortcomings, voting in the capital Kabul and many other areas had to be extended for one day. For security reasons, voting in Kandahar province was delayed for a week after a high-profile assassination.

In a shock decision taken more than six weeks after election day, the ECC **annulled** all results for Kabul province – around one quarter of all votes cast. Earlier, Kabul's votes had already been recounted once. Final results for all provinces took seven months to compile.

Controversies between the IEC and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) repeatedly made outside involvement in the dealings between the two nominally independent institutions necessary.

Subsequently, all commissioners were again replaced after the polls, opening a new round of factional wrangling.

THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The 2019 presidential election suffered similar setbacks. It was delayed for five months and was marked by administrative chaos, technical breakdowns, mismanagement, manipulation and doubts about the impartiality of the supposedly independent election commissioners. In the run-up, there were strong indications of 'spinning' through social media. These included the use of bots, fake accounts and exaggerated claims, in order to create the impression of high pre-election mobilisation and to justify implausibly high turnout figures later.

Government employees, including school and university teachers, were hired as temporary electoral workers, thereby opening space for political influence.

Because of Taliban threats, many of the already drastically reduced polling sites (27 per cent fewer than in the previous election) did not open. Polling sites were largely limited to urban and district centres, except for the Hazarajat. This effectively denied large parts of the rural

population their right to vote. According to official figures, only around 1.8 million people, less than one-fifth of the country's 10 million registered voters and only around 12 per cent of the estimated voting-age population, participated in the poll – a historical low for Afghanistan.

In addition, the aftermath of the 2019 presidential election was marred by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It turned out to be the last election held under the Islamic Republic.

While BVV did prevent widespread ballot stuffing, it became a major source of contention. The above-mentioned technical issues forced a fallback to manual methods. After a flood of complaints, protests, recounts and audits, a large number of 'suspicious' votes were eventually accepted in a political deal. This tipped incumbent Ghani's share of counted ballots to over 50 per cent and averted a runoff. The final result was announced five months after the election and was summarily rejected by the runner-up. This led to a serious debate over the representativeness of the presidential election, triggering another prolonged political crisis.

This post-election conflict culminated in both leading candidates organising rival inaugurations in March 2020. Each went on to make unilateral appointments, further exacerbating ethno-regional polarisation. The political standoff did not end until nearly eight months after the election, following mediation from various Afghan leaders and pressure from international donors, especially the United States. The resulting power-sharing agreement resembled the post-2014 National Unity Government arrangement, albeit without the euphemistic title, and was followed by more wrangling over appointments and institutional paralysis. Again, this 'solution' was extra-constitutional. The conflict lingered to the end of the Republic.

Furthermore, before the presidential election, the US had exacerbated domestic political conflict by pressuring the incumbent to cancel the election altogether. It argued that it could stand in the way of a peace and power-sharing agreement with the Taliban negotiated in Doha. Meanwhile, opposition politicians reached out to the Taliban for separate deals, trying to secure a place in the future Afghanistan. When President Ghani, who sought a strong mandate for the envisaged negotiations with the Taliban, insisted, the US labelled him, not the Taliban, as 'the biggest obstacle for peace.' What turned out to be the last election of the Republic further weakened the president.

DEMOCRATIC IN FORM, AUTHORITARIAN IN PRACTICE

The repeated chaos in the 2018 elections, the fact that the 2019 election again failed to determine a winner and the subsequent need for international intervention led to a precarious power-sharing agreement. This laid bare, for a second time, how dysfunctional the country's political system had become. The establishment of a High Council for National Reconciliation after the inconclusive 2019 elections extended the factional contest to the institutions responsible for the peace process and undermined the prospects for a unified government to deal with the Taliban.

Parallel institutions and the façade of democracy were not only symptoms of the Republic's decline but also catalysts of the decline and ultimately its fall. They were like the fuel that kept the fire going – and the fire burned the whole house down.

After this disastrous electoral cycle, Afghanistan's façade of democracy now had visibly gaping holes on its outside. Three other elections due to be held in 2019 did not take place, due to a lack of capacity, resources, political will and security:

- The parliamentary election for Ghazni province, which was postponed in 2018 due to political and ethnic tensions;
- provincial council elections, which were overdue for a year at that point; and
- district council elections, initially scheduled to coincide with the 2018 parliamentary elections, were postponed due to a severe lack of candidates – only 40 of the country's 387 districts had an adequate number of contenders, and 120 had no female candidate.

Furthermore, institutions designed in the constitution to provide checks and balances, such as the Supreme Court, Senate and provincial councils, experienced further “sapping of their authority” as they were undermined by deliberate manipulation by presidents who enjoyed too much power. New institutions such as the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution (ICOIC) diluted rather than strengthened oversight.

From behind the democratic façade, authoritarian features emerged. In 2019, for example, the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) categorised Afghanistan as “authoritarian.”

PARALLEL INSTITUTIONS

Due to the inflexibility of the state set-up chosen in Bonn and during the Constitutional Loya Jirga and the institutional paralysis emerging from political polarisation, both post-2001 Afghan presidents, as well as chief executive Abdullah during the NUG, established various extra-constitutional institutions to broaden their personal leverage. This resulted in a system of decision-making that was non-transparent, centralised, and top-down, increasingly circumventing constitutional institutions.

In the Karzai years, this system was built around his kitchen cabinet in ‘the Palace’ and the unofficial advisory council of ‘Jihadi’ and other leaders, a body without fixed membership and defined rules. Through the ‘Jihadi’ (ie former mujahedin) leaders, some of whom doubled as self-proclaimed religious leaders and the highest authorities on everything ‘Islamic,’ Karzai attempted to lend not only political but also religious legitimacy to important decisions and to a government whose legitimacy was cast in doubt by the Taliban on religious grounds. Starting from there, they gradually established their hegemony over the post-2001 political system, in an antithesis to democracy.

This only partially changed under the NUG. While Ghani continued to rely on the ‘jihadi leader plus’ council, he did so to a lesser extent than Karzai had done. Instead, he appointed a number of sectoral High Councils, under his direct control, to officially monitor line ministries. This increasingly disempowered the cabinet, and, through it, undermined the power-sharing agreement with the 2019 election's runner-up. Simultaneously, parliament had to struggle with dwindling legitimacy as its elections, scheduled for 2016 according to the constitution, were delayed and a controversial presidential decree extended the old parliament's tenure.

Ghani's drive to rejuvenate his administration also brought individuals with hard, Pashtun ethnocentric views into influential, but non-elected positions at ‘the Palace,’ often from the Western diaspora, deepening existing polarisation.

In order to overcome the inability to convene a fully constitutional Loya Jirga, both post-2001 presidents invented extra-constitutional 'alternative' forms of loya jirgas when they deemed it necessary to create a national consensus "on the issues related to independence, national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and supreme interests of the country," as mandated by articles 110 and 111 of the constitution. The first one, the 2010 Consultative Peace Jirga (*De sole mashwarati jirga*), led to the formation of the High Peace Council (HPC), which was tasked with negotiating with the Taliban. In 2011, a 'Traditional' (Pashto/Dari: *duda'iza/an'anawi*) Loya Jirga discussed "the strategic relationships with the US" in general terms, followed by a Consultative Loya Jirga in 2013 about an Afghan-US Bilateral Partnership Agreement (BSA). Two more Consultative Peace Loya Jirgas were held, one in 2019 on the government's "peace roadmap" and another in 2020 on the question of releasing Taliban prisoners, following the US-Taliban Doha agreement, as a boost for peace talks. These bodies were largely handpicked, further undermining the legitimacy of a once well-regarded key institution.

The practice of using extra-constitutional means was indirectly legitimised by donor governments resorting to such 'shortcuts' in times of domestic crisis, such as the establishment of the 2014 NUG and the 2019 'power-sharing agreement' which included the reinvention of a quasi, but not fully, prime ministerial position, now called the Chief Executive.

The parallel system of decision-making established in Kabul reflected that elected constitutional institutions lacked legitimacy, also in the eyes of the rulers. It further resonated with the patriarchal substructures prevailing in Afghan society as well as authoritarian streaks and the patronage system that had pervaded the country's political culture during half a century of violent conflict. Dipali Mukhopadhyay described this situation in 2009 with the short formula "persistence of informal power in the formal Afghan state."³

At the same time, other parallel, informal structures of decision-making and conflict resolution, rooted in Afghanistan's traditions, existed at the local level, where they had survived the 50 years of conflict and enjoyed local legitimacy. Shuras and jirgas were male-only in most cases, but this could have been amended in the new legal framework, as has been the case, for example, in the establishment of quotas for women in parliament, other elected bodies and the Community Development Councils (CDCs). Instead, these voluntary and non-permanent structures were increasingly monetised, co-opted by the ruling elites and instrumentalised by the militaries of donor countries. This interference, along with the growing influence of local strongmen, who had not been disarmed and were linked to the elites, increasingly overrode their initial democratic content and potential.

CONCLUSION

The 2018 and 2019 elections – plagued by fraud, exclusion and extra-constitutional resolutions – left visible cracks in Afghanistan's democratic façade. In the run-up to them, electoral reform, which had started in 2017 left key problems untouched. Donors, in particular, often handled them as 'technical' issues while they were deeply political. The conduct of the elections also highlighted the continued dominance of strongmen, the weakness of institutions and the inability and unwillingness to build inclusive governance.

³ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, [Disguised Warlordism and Combatantism in Balkh: The Persistence of Informal Power in the Formal Afghan State](https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800903345812), *Conflict, Security & Development* volume 9, issue 4, December 2009, pp535–64, DOI:10.1080/14678800903345812.

The key issue preventing this, as well as fair elections, was the failure to substantially disarm the parties to the previous factional wars earlier during the Bonn process.

In the end, elections alone were insufficient to provide Afghans with the democratic institutions stipulated by the Bonn agreement and Afghanistan's constitution. Given the multiplying faults and failures in their process and the lack of success in addressing them, this undermined the public's trust in the entire system. As USAID in Afghanistan observed in 2018, "Elections are not yet perceived by the public as an effective way to influence public policy."⁴ The Afghan public saw this situation much more clearly than Afghanistan's donors. While constitutional institutions were lacking, the powers-to-be – Afghan and non-Afghan – increasingly chose to rely on extraconstitutional instruments. This bolstered parallel state structures conceived by both 2001-21 Afghan heads of state, leading to Afghanistan becoming a façade of democracy laced with emerging authoritarian elements and, finally, contributing to state collapse.

There is "no evidence that ordinary Afghans were unprepared for democracy: they showed every sign of broadly supporting a system whereby they could change their rulers when necessary," as researchers Ahmad Shuja Jamal and Bill Maley wrote in 2023.⁵ As former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald Neumann, concluded in mid-2025, that a "realistic understanding of the time needed for social change, anti-corruption measures, and democracy to take root" would have been necessary for Afghanistan's post-2001 institution building and overcoming "the constant demand for rapid progress and the pretence that it was happening" while it was not.⁶

Afghanistan's collapse was therefore not inevitable. It was the result of leadership choices, both Afghan and international, that prioritised short-term fixes over building the democratic foundations that the Afghan public was willing to embrace.

⁴ USAID, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy: FY 2019–2023*, September 2018, p55, quoted in [Elections: Lessons from the U.S. experience](#), SIGAR, February 2021.

⁵ Ahmad Shuja Jamal and William Maley, *Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p35.

⁶ See Ronald Neumann's article, [Learning the Right Lessons from Afghanistan](#), published by The National Interest, 6 June 2025.

CHAPTER 2.

FROM TRANSITION TO COLLAPSE: THE DEGENERATION OF AFGHANISTAN'S MILITARY SITUATION, 2015-2021

Fabrizio Foschini

This report examines Afghanistan's security landscape between 2015 and 2021, tracing its evolution following the end of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its replacement by the NATO's non-combat Resolute Support Mission (RSM), with the accompanying withdrawal of almost all international combat troops and the assumption by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) of full responsibility for national security. Despite large troop numbers, at least on paper, the ANSF was plagued by corruption, poor leadership and reliance on foreign support, which undermined their ability to withstand a resurgent Taliban. Meanwhile, the Taliban exploited the situation, leveraging propaganda, local negotiations and weak ANSF morale. Ultimately, the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 was precipitated by the persistent and long-overlooked institutional weaknesses of the Afghan government, defective security sector reforms, strategic missteps and flawed policies by international actors, including the hasty, premature and unconditional disengagement, together with a highly adaptive and motivated Taliban insurgency. All of this contributed to the rapid fall of district after district in the spring and summer of 2021, culminating in the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

Six and a half years separate the changing of the guard from ISAF to the ANSF on 31 December 2014 and the political and military collapse of the Islamic Republic. Contrary to some expectations, the marked reduction in numbers and visibility of foreign troops after 2014 did not do away with some of the drivers of conflict, nor did it lead to a reduction in violence. Instead, the following years saw an intensification of the war and the most kinetic and decisive phases of the military confrontation, which finally led to the Taliban taking back power in August 2021.

Those years can roughly be divided into three periods:

- 2015-16: The Taliban capitalised on NATO's drawdown and switch to a non-combat role to escalate offensives in order to gain more territory and shake the morale of government forces;
- 2017-19: The Afghan government and NATO advisors partially stabilised the situation through quick fixes, but failed to address the overall shortages of Afghan security forces, while the Taliban kept consolidating and building up for the next phase; and

- 2020-21: The Doha Agreement and subsequent US and NATO withdrawal wrought significant changes to the morale and operational capacities of both the remaining parties to the conflict, undermining the ANSF and bolstering the Taliban. The Taliban launched a sustained final military push between April and August 2021, which brought about the Republic's collapse on 15 August 2021.

SHIFTING DYNAMICS: THE OPPOSING FORCES IN THE WAKE OF THE NATO DRAWDOWN

Afghanistan officially saw the end of the massive presence of foreign troops in key security roles across the country at the start of 2015. Over the previous three years, as part of their transition to a training and mentoring role, NATO troops had been gradually handing the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), established between 2003 and 2009, over to the Afghan authorities. Starting on 1 January 2015, training and mentoring would become their chief responsibility under the framework of the new Resolute Support Mission (RSM). Only the US military retained a 'can-be' combat role under its counter-terrorism Freedom's Sentinel mission. Whereas RSM was a firmly non-combat 'train, advise and assist' mission, the US's 2014 Bilateral Security Agreement with Kabul stipulated that both parties acknowledged that "U.S. military operations to defeat al-Qaida and its affiliates may be appropriate in the common fight against terrorism" (article 4, see text of the BSA and AAN analysis [here](#)).

After 2015, NATO troops would routinely provide fundamental military support to the ANSF, including the US repeatedly employing their airpower for striking at insurgents. However, their reduced numbers – around 13,000 in 2015 compared to the 130,000 of ISAF at its peak ([RSM Fact and Figures](#)) – and their concentration in a few spots, including Kabul and four out of six of the Afghan Army's regional corps headquarters, reduced their direct impact on the ongoing military confrontation. Their continued presence nonetheless guaranteed vital services to the ANSF in the form of airstrikes, airborne supplies, medevac, logistics, maintenance and administration. In doing so, they also addressed shortages and mismanagement in the chain of command and control of the security ministries, which often impaired the performance of the fighting units. The very flaws that the RSM should have eliminated through training, advising and assisting in the relevant ministries were instead addressed through continuous involvement. The presence of NATO forces thus played a crucial role in ensuring the ANSF's ability and motivation to continue fighting. This would become only too apparent in 2021 when the end of the NATO, and especially the US presence was a major factor contributing to the military collapse of the Republic.

The smaller number of RSM troops and contributing nations did not remove the coordination and leadership problems that had affected the ISAF mission.⁷ Contradictory military strategies and conflicting sets of priorities, not only among the NATO allies but also inside the government of the United States, became apparent, especially after Donald Trump took office in 2017. A 'mini-surge' that year saw around 4,000 additional US troops deployed to Afghanistan in an offensive capacity and increased the US command's power to launch airstrikes ([Washington Post](#)). This was followed by a hasty push for a complete

⁷ Sten Rynning and Paal S Hilde, [Operationally Agile, but Strategically Lacking: NATO's Bruising Years in Afghanistan](#), LSE Public Policy Review, 2022, 2 (3), p7.

withdrawal, which led to the [Doha Agreement](#) of February 2020. The agreement effectively bound the US not to attack the Taliban – it was followed by a significant reduction in US airstrikes – and the Taliban not to attack foreign forces, but allowed the group to keep attacking ANSF and Afghan civilian targets.

For the Taliban, the shift from ISAF to RSM represented a significant turning point in the conflict. The shift in the military balance allowed the insurgency to dramatically increase the pace of its activities, while also developing a more ambitious strategy aimed at territory control. The absence of NATO troops on the ground decreased the availability and effectiveness of airstrikes. This allowed the Taliban to concentrate forces and hold their positions with fewer risks. The asymmetric warfare between a guerrilla movement and conventional forces increasingly evolved into battles between evenly matched military units. Large swathes of territory openly and continuously held by insurgents appeared for the first time, even outside the latter's long-established strongholds. Indeed, the Taliban were able to keep expanding and consolidating into new areas across almost all provinces of the country. They could launch major coordinated attacks and briefly occupy even major cities, such as Kunduz, as early as 2015. Moreover, after Mullah Omar's death was acknowledged that year, the movement was able to overcome not only that potential internal crisis (read [AAN mapping](#) of the post-Omar Taliban) but also, in May 2016, the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansur, newly appointed as supreme leader, by a US airstrike ([The Guardian](#)).

The emergence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) cells in various provinces after 2015 further destabilised the security situation ([United States Institute of Peace](#)). ISKP managed to spread militant anti-government and anti-NATO propaganda and recruitment among groups not affiliated with the Taliban, destabilising new areas and bringing about unprecedented levels of brutality and sectarian violence, in particular towards Shia communities. In turn, the fight against ISKP emerged as a separate front for both ANSF/US forces and the Taliban. This development positioned the Taliban and the possibility of their return to power as the 'lesser of two evils' in the eyes of some countries in the region.

In 2014, the ANSF had peaked at over 350,000 personnel, with the army (ANA) outnumbering the police (ANP), which in Afghanistan is partly a paramilitary force. While this number fluctuated in later years, it was just above 300,000 in early 2021, with 187,000 ANA and 121,000 ANP ([SIGAR April 2021 Quarterly Report](#), p 66). On paper, this looks more than adequate to fight off an enemy which was rarely estimated to be even 60,000-strong, at least before opportunists joined en masse in 2021. However, doubts have been cast about ANSF numbers, with credible allegations that soldiers who had died, been demobilised or fraudulently included in the ranks in order for corrupt officials to pocket their salaries made up a significant proportion of the force ([AAN](#)). According to a SIGAR report from July 2020, between 50 and 70 per cent of all the policemen in the four southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul were ghost positions not actually filled by anyone ([SIGAR](#)).

Ghost soldiers were just one of the flaws haunting the ANSF. Appointments were determined by nepotism, political competition and the market: command positions were lucrative, fetching a high price because of the chance to profit from illicit gains, including selling supplies, weapons and equipment, often to the very insurgents the ANSF was fighting.

Corruption and capture of state positions had been inherited from the hurried post-2001 set-up during the first phase of the US-led intervention. These flaws, however, became chronic also because the Afghan government relied on dividing up political and military positions as the glue which maintained the fragile political balance and compromise between rival

factions. As in other government branches, this resulted in a lack of meritocracy and competence among leaders and, consequently, a lack of trust among their subordinates. The failure to improve the living conditions of soldiers, protect them in combat, or assist the injured and the families of the fallen – at a moment when the death toll for the ANSF was rising – led to a progressive deterioration of the morale of even the once promising ANA soldiers. High attrition rates combined with the generally low social status of recruits – who seldom re-enlisted – steadily eroded the ANA's fighting capacity.

FIGHTING FOR THE HIGHER GROUND: TERRITORY CONTROL AND THE STRUGGLE FOR MORALE

After 2015, one of the ANSF's chief problems became holding ground against Taliban offensives. Yet denying territorial control to the enemy remained one of the pillars of the government's strategy, even when this entailed keeping isolated and vulnerable positions. The Republic government felt that abandoning any portion of the country's territory to the insurgents would have strengthened the Taliban's claim as a rival claimant to power and challenged its legitimacy as the Afghan nation's sole recognised representative. The threat posed by the Taliban had a significant impact on the Republic's already fragile governance and control. This threat adversely affected various government functions, including education, policing, justice and public services, not only in Taliban strongholds but also in other regions. As a result, the government became increasingly ineffective and less proactive, leading to a further and steady decline in public trust and support. In many areas, the government became just a faction among others in popular perception, one that, even when not abusive or corrupted, often proved unreliable and weak compared to the Taliban or entrenched local networks.⁸

Regular soldiers from all over the country, poorly led, demotivated and unfamiliar with the physical and human terrain of the areas where they were deployed, often proved unable to withstand the increasingly determined efforts by the Taliban to capture district centres and towns. Every such Taliban occupation, although these were initially short-lived, proved a boost to the insurgents' morale and a blow to the government. Recapturing these villages or urban areas often required massive US airstrikes – at the risk of civilian casualties.

Over the course of two decades of foreign military intervention, one major issue with building Afghanistan's security capability had been determining which armed forces' model to adopt. Observers have commented on the excessive efforts to replicate the US military model, in terms of structure and weaponry, rather than building on what already existed in Afghanistan. This might have increased costs and the required timeframe for Afghan forces to stand on their own feet.⁹ On the other hand, when on the lookout for cost-saving solutions and quick fixes, the Afghan government and its NATO supporters repeatedly resorted to an array of militia programmes, supposedly based on locally pre-existing models such as the *arbaki*, a tribal police force which, as a temporary force under the command of a jirga, existed in some Pashtun tribal areas.

⁸ On the difficult co-existence of government and Taliban at the district level in the years between 2018-19 see the series of reports titled [One Land, Two Rules](#) by the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

⁹ John F Sopko and David H Young, [The Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Its Security Forces](#), SIGAR, 2023, pp17-18.

First established in 2010, the ALP (Afghan Local Police), set up by US forces within the Afghan Ministry of Interior, was the first nationwide programme that was fashioned on the experiences of raising earlier militias in a specific community and tied to a specific locality, such as the Local Defence Initiative (LDI) and Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP). It was able to recruit unprecedented numbers – over 30,000 by 2014.¹⁰ The ALP was supposed to draw on community strengths to resist the insurgents. However, its record as an effective fighting force was mixed, with some units committed to defending their community from Taliban inroads and others more interested in battling rivals, cooperating with the insurgents or furthering the economic interests of local strongmen who patronised them. This included narco-trafficking and illegal mining, with many units often committing abuses against civilians. The ALP was finally disbanded in mid-2020, but the strategy of using local units to improve defence capacities was not abandoned. A new unit, the Afghan National Army Territorial Forces, coming directly under the command of the ANA, had been created a little earlier and eventually integrated some demobilised ALP members (AAN). Other minor and less formalised militia programmes continued throughout the conflict, leaving the government and the US command walking a tightrope between mitigating the risk of local powerbrokers using them for personal (and abusive) purposes while also addressing increasing security problems caused by the insurgency.

The ineffectiveness of regular military units – and the limited operability and the often controversial profile of pro-government militias – led to a reliance on a few elite special forces units, tasked with troubleshooting in various capacities and across multiple theatres. These included the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) and the General Command of Police Special Units (GCPSU). The ANASOC, in particular, was, soon after its creation in 2011, entrusted with conducting major offensives and ended up being employed more as shock infantry troops – that is, tasked with bearing the brunt of the most brutal fighting – than for special forces operations.¹¹ That meant that these elite units faced near constant deployments and rising casualty rates. Rotations became increasingly hectic as the conflict intensified, outpacing their recovery capacity and the time-consuming process of selecting and training recruits.¹²

On the other hand, the focus on a few elite units allowed NATO mentors to tackle major issues affecting the ANSF's effectiveness, such as politically appointed cadres, corruption and insufficient logistics, by solving them through micro-management ad hoc solutions rather than by pushing for an increased ownership of the security sector by the Afghan government. This guaranteed the outstanding quality of the selected units in terms of leadership, morale and performance and also protected them against the political squabbles within the Afghan government, at the price, however, of keeping them highly dependent on their NATO counterparts, while the bulk of the average security forces

¹⁰ The CIA and US special forces also partnered with Afghan forces outside the Afghan government chain of command or only nominally within it, such as the National Directorate of Security 00 units and the Khost Protection Force. Such units had a controversial human rights record, with accusations of torture and extrajudicial detentions and killings (NYT). For a comprehensive review of Afghanistan's local and community-based security programmes, read this AAN/GPPi backgrounder: Kate Clark and Erica Gaston, [Literature Review of Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan Analysts Network, 31 January 2017.

¹¹ The special forces came to number around 20,000. SIGAR reported that by early 2017, they were conducting 80 per cent of all ANA offensive operations. [SIGAR Quarterly Report](#), April 2017, p95.

¹² Training recruits for the Police Special Units, such as the CRU 222, took almost one full year ([Task and Purpose](#)).

lagged behind. The Afghan government, meanwhile, continued to be a passive partner in developing and implementing the country's national security strategy, with choices or lack thereof based on the assumption that external military support would not end and influenced by internal competition among factions.

Developments on the insurgent side reflected the threats emanating from the special forces and the ALP, the latter especially effective at disrupting Taliban recruitment and influence in local communities. Members of the ALP became a major focus of Taliban attacks. They were singled out by the Taliban as an enemy to eliminate at all costs (AAN), especially in some Pashtun areas that were established insurgent strongholds and where pro-government communities would not be tolerated. In due course, the Taliban established their own special units capable of being deployed countrywide and acting independently from the chain of command of local insurgent networks (Radio Free Europe). The first and most important, the Sra Qeta or 'Red Unit', was announced in 2015. They were used as shock troops, or frontline assault infantry. The Red Unit was deployed against high-value government targets during major offensives, used to boost the morale of rank-and-file Taliban fighters and crush ISKP militants or renegade Taliban commanders.

Despite their growing confidence in conventional military operations, the Taliban retained many hallmarks of the asymmetric warfare that characterised the early insurgency. They continued to target the heart of Afghan cities with suicide attacks or car bombs in a gruesome competition with ISKP, which caused thousands of casualties. The assassination campaigns against government and pro-government actors also went on. In particular, they targeted political-military actors who, empowered by the state to act as the lynchpin between one or more local factions and the central government, denied insurgents control of specific regions. Such was the case of Abdul Razaq, who managed to challenge the Taliban's influence and capacity to operate in and around Kandahar, as well as perpetrate grave war crimes (see the human rights chapter of this report) before he was assassinated in October 2018 (AAN). Between 2020 and 2021, during the last stages of the conflict, there was a devastating campaign of mainly unclaimed assassinations in Kabul against civilian officials, social activists, judges, lawyers and media workers – many of them women – as well as off-duty pilots and other key military personnel. Most appeared to be perpetrated by the Taliban in a bid to sow terror and silence 'undesirable' and pro-government members of the city's civil society or 'encourage' them to flee the country (AAN and PBS).

The propaganda war played a major role in the final stages of the Taliban's return to power. The peace negotiations with the US resulting in the Doha Agreement of February 2020 and the inconclusive Afghan peace process in 2020-21 were both exploited by the Taliban as staging grounds to cast themselves as the winning side and to reach out to pro-government political actors in order to buy their support or neutrality.

Requests for a reduction of violence by all sides featured prominently at the negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Doha; however, attacks against Afghan forces and civilians multiplied immediately after the deal was signed (AAN). The Taliban likely sought to test whether the US withdrawal was truly irreversible. When Washington did not renege on the agreement and rethink its future military footprint in light of the insurgents' more aggressive posture, the Taliban concluded that they could move forward with their military offensive. Its main enemy had chosen to 'de-fang' itself and leave the

battleground in a nicely timetabled withdrawal. On the ground, a decrease in US air raids translated into higher casualties for government forces as the Taliban could now amass more troops and engage in more prolonged attacks.¹³ Isolated government bases and checkpoints had to be abandoned or were overwhelmed, as the Taliban concentrated on attacking rural areas rather than major urban centres, more for strategic purposes – denying the ANSF ground supply routes – than in compliance with the clauses of the Doha Agreement. This increased pressure on the struggling Afghan Air Force to step up air supply missions. The Air Force was highly dependent on foreign assistance, as most of the maintenance responsibility was still managed by foreign contractors and its operational capacity was fatally compromised as soon as these were withdrawn in May 2021.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

The situation that emerged by mid-2020 dealt a blow to the already shaken morale of the ANSF rank and file. A series of last-minute sweeping changes in the ANSF leadership by President Ghani failed to root out long-sedimented abusive practices inside the security forces and instead deepened mistrust and a lack of coordination among their ranks at the height of the Taliban's final offensive. For example, the sacking of around one-third of the country's district police commanders in October 2020, and their replacement by young special forces officers, in the hope of eliminating corruption and curtailing the reach of criminal networks inside the police, meant also severing the connections between the police chiefs, the local communities and powerful jihadi networks, whose support for the Republic rather than the Taliban often hung in the balance.¹⁴

The fate of the Republic, already jeopardised by the numerous announcements of timelines for international troops' withdrawal and in the absence of a real strategy or sustainable progress in security, was sealed in the four months between April and August 2021. Newly-elected US President Joe Biden announced that the withdrawal would effectively take place per the Doha Agreement, with only a few months' delay to the original schedule, so that the deployment would officially end on a date precious to the Americans, 11 September¹⁵. The other NATO countries had little option but also to withdraw as they were reliant on the US for air support and force protection.

The subsequent Afghan government's frantic attempts at building a last-ditch line of defence proved too little, too late. The government tried only half-heartedly and at the last minute to play the card of the so-called 'public uprising forces' (*Bakhtar*). In June 2021, several former jihadi leaders, mostly with a background in the United Front/Northern Alliance, which had fought the Taliban in the 1990s, called for a mass mobilisation among their constituencies to stem the tide of the Taliban advance there. The central government, looked supportive, but retained its suspicion of such projects.

¹³ NATO airstrikes dropped from 7,243 in 2019 to 1,631 in 2020, with almost half of the latter taking place in the first two months of the year, that is, prior to the Doha Agreement. See John F Sopko and David H Young, [The Factors Leading](#), p16.

¹⁴ Meddling in the ANSF appointments by President Ghani was also politically motivated and often hurt ethnic sensibilities. See Timor Shahrani, [What Went Wrong: The 2021 Collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces](#), Afghanistan Analysts Network, December 2022, pp20-21.

¹⁵ In Doha, it had been agreed that, provided the Taliban kept their commitments, US troops would be withdrawn by 1 May 2021. In April, Biden moved the date to the anniversary of the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on the US ([US Department of Defence](#)) before, in July, bringing it forward to 31 August ([Associated Press](#)).

Minimal funds and weapons were allocated to regional strongmen in the few parts of the country they still controlled to raise militias and organise resistance. Even fewer were delivered. With few exceptions, these attempts failed to achieve momentum. Moreover, the Taliban final offensive targeted first the northern part of the country, where existing anti-Taliban networks had the best chance of mobilising local support, thereby eliminating the main potential threat outside the ANSF before it could even be mounted ([AAN](#)).

By May, the Taliban had occupied several districts in key strategic areas such as Baghlan and Laghman, effectively cutting communications between Kabul and the remaining main republican strongholds. The Taliban's progress was initially both played down and bitterly contested by the government: special forces led offensives were mounted to retrieve fallen districts, often resulting in bloody death tolls. The capacity of the overstretched special forces to mount such operations decreased through June and July, together with the overall fighting spirit of the ANSF, once the US decision to withdraw, even in the face of an emerging Taliban victory, was confirmed. Subsequently, the Taliban used local elders to parley with the ANSF garrisons they besieged, playing on their sense of having been left to look after themselves by the high commands: many who had initially put up a spirited resistance were thus eventually convinced to surrender ([New York Times](#)).

Several other factors had sapped the general will to fight: many inside the higher civilian and military echelons had alternative options for survival abroad, while, during the previous months, the Taliban had pre-emptively contacted, co-opted or bribed many local elders and government officials. The latter's defections or negotiated surrenders now took place at the right moment and contributed to the increasing collapse of morale and confusion in the government ranks as the enemy's advance progressed ([Washington Post](#)).

Altogether, by 2021, the ANSF's superior strength in terms of numbers and equipment compared to the Taliban existed only on paper. While the Taliban benefited from increased numbers, equipment and leadership quality, with the withdrawal of NATO troops and the foreign contractors who ran most of their operation planning, maintenance and logistics, the Afghan forces could hardly operate for any sustained period. In particular, the air force and the special units, which represented the only assets guaranteeing some residual military superiority over the Taliban, were worn out and ultimately disabled by fast-paced and sustained operations.

The quick meltdown of the ANSF was not entirely unpredictable to anybody familiar with its long history of flaws, but proved especially outrageous to distant observers and became a favourite tool for some politicians in NATO countries to justify the abandonment of their mission objectives, simplistically blaming the failure on the unwillingness of the Afghans soldiers to fight for their own country. More realistically, the final collapse of the Republic was an outcome of the failure of political leadership, including the US and its allies, to resist the urge to switch from conditions-based to a time-based withdrawal in the face of domestic public opinion and budgetary considerations, as well as the failure of the Afghan side to acknowledge the changing situation and prepare accordingly.

THE LEGACY OF NORWAY IN AFGHANISTAN'S SECURITY

The role of Norway in ISAF and RSM is difficult to separate clearly from the overall achievements and failures of these two missions. In the period before this study, Norway

was in charge of the PRT in Faryab.¹⁶ The province was challenging from the start, with the majority Uzbeks divided along rival political affiliations, a minority Pashtun community reeling from the fall of the Taliban's first Emirate and feeling disenfranchised by the new balance of power, and conservative religious networks opposed to the foreigners' presence. The province was one of the first areas in the north to see Taliban resurgence and serious security problems; this, together with Norway's comparatively small military expenditure in Afghanistan, did not make it possible for the country to make a significant difference there. Later, within the framework of RSM, Norway provided a limited number of personnel, ranging from 75 to 100, with activities concentrated in Kabul.

Norway's specific contribution is probably best displayed by its role in developing a major constituent of the General Command of Police Special units (GCPSU), Crisis Reaction Unit 222 (CRU 222).¹⁷ Norway's role in this respect began in 2007 when the Norwegian Special Operations Commando (FSK) established Task Force 51, which was sent to Kabul to train a counter-terrorism force selected from the ranks of the Afghan police. The Army and Navy (MJK) Norwegian special forces trained the CRU 222 for several years on a rotating basis with the US, New Zealand and UK. After 2012, they took the lead responsibility for training and mentoring.

As the quick reaction unit responsible for answering insurgent threats in and around Kabul, CRU 222 came to play a pivotal role in reducing the impact and casualties of high-profile attacks by both the Taliban and the ISKP, in close collaboration with its Norwegian mentors.¹⁸ Over the years, its performance was praised and it came to be regarded as one of the most capable ANSF special forces units. This, in turn, spurred a blurring of the lines between policing and military operations. Together with the other constituents of the GCPSU, CRU 222 soon became an essential part of the COIN, or counterinsurgency strategy, conducting high-risk arrests and carrying out raids against insurgent and narcotics targets. Like other special forces units, it was also increasingly called upon to fight Taliban offensives against government territory directly.¹⁹ This situation of constant engagement caused a high attrition rate both in terms of casualties and mental stress.

Although the unit functioned well, its leadership structure and logistics faced the same challenges as other ANSF elite units, as its ability to continue receiving resources and operating ultimately depended on the higher echelons of the Ministry of Interior, prone to political lobbying and corruption. Its remaining fighting potential, a result of the years-long efforts to develop it, was lost to the cause of the Republic when the political leadership fled Kabul abruptly in the early hours of 15 August 2021. Special forces still defending the capital, such as CRU 222, were issued with either no orders or contradictory orders and were among the last units to disband in the following days.

¹⁶ While Norway was initially not keen on participating in the PRT-based model of dividing the country into zones of responsibility, it eventually accepted it. The PRT system revealed in due course its many flaws and faced increasing difficulties with the expansion of the conflict and the implementation of the COIN strategy. The Norwegian model tried to keep a clear separation between the military and civilian sectors, which, however, proved especially difficult in the context of its PRT in Faryab province.

¹⁷ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, [A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001-2014](#), Official Norwegian Reports, NOU 2016 (8), pp73-74.

¹⁸ Jostein Mattingsdal, [Beyond Firepower: Building Trust and Partnerships in the Fight Against Terrorism](#), in *Terrorism in Transition* (working title), James P Welch (ed), 2025.

¹⁹ [Police in Conflict: Lessons from the US experience in Afghanistan](#), SIGAR, June 2022, pp212-213.

CHAPTER 3.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT ON ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN 2015-2021: AID, DEPENDENCY, AND COLLAPSE

Kate Clark

INTRODUCTION

2015 marked a significant break from Afghanistan's initial post-2001 period. As the year began, President Ashraf Ghani had been in office for just a few months, following Hamed Karzai's 13 years rule. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had, after a four-year transition, handed over security responsibility to Afghan forces, and most international troops had left. Foreign aid had also fallen dramatically from its peak during US President Barak Obama's 'surge' years, when the swelling of US troops to 100,000 was matched by a 'civilian uplift', both aimed at defeating the Taliban insurgency.²⁰ Little of that may appear relevant to the economy, but in fact, 2015 was the point where the Afghan state should have begun to take seriously the decline in outside support if it was to manage that decline and maintain public services and a healthy economy in the long run.

As 2015 began, the economic foundations of the Afghan state, its economy and the livelihoods of Afghans were actually very shaky. Until then, the Afghan authorities had little reason to even think about taxing its citizens. Civilian aid had paid for up to 90 per cent of government spending and military aid had paid for the armed forces and the war. The vast amounts of unearned income had not only stymied the development of accountable or representative government – more on which, below – but also fostered what was touted as economic growth, but would ultimately prove illusory.

This report details the decline in foreign income after 2015 and how it led to slower economic growth and greater poverty. It explores failed attempts to take public finances in hand, with corruption pervading the state, and how donor efforts – fragmented, driven by their own political priorities and characterised by wrong-footed technical fixes – failed to exert meaningful pressure on the Afghan elite. The government's capacity to deal with the Taliban insurgency was undermined and Afghanistan was left vulnerable to catastrophic economic collapse and the immiseration of the population when the unearned foreign income did dry up, overnight, on 15 August 2021. The collapse, when it came, was the logical conclusion to years of denial, greed and the illusion that the 'rent' would never stop.

²⁰ See SIGAR's 11 September 2011 report, [The U.S. Civilian Uplift in Afghanistan Has Cost Nearly \\$2 Billion, and State Should Continue to Strengthen Its Management and Oversight of the Funds Transferred to Other Agencies.](#)

NORWAY'S APPROACH TO AID

In 2015, Norway designated Afghanistan a 'focus country', one of a handful of nations worldwide selected for being of particular importance for its development aid. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 'Proposal to the Storting for budget year 2015' (AI-translated and sent by a commission member) said Afghanistan was in "a crucial phase in its development" and that development policy must:

Support processes that enable developing countries to become middle-income countries. Good governance, inclusive economic growth, increased trade, investment, innovation and entrepreneurship are prerequisites for creating growth and achieving lasting poverty reduction. Solid social institutions, economic and political openness, protection of private property rights, separation of powers and a well-functioning rule of law are conditions for sustainable economic development.

Norway contributed 1.7 per cent of all development aid in 2015-21, a little more than Denmark and slightly less than Sweden ([Aid Atlas](#)) and 2.3-3 per cent of humanitarian aid annually – continuing up to the present ([UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service](#)).

Unfortunately, as this chapter of the report will show, Norway's thoughtful aspirations and best intentions were undermined by the ineluctability of Afghanistan's political economy. In the years after 2001, Afghanistan had become the world's most extreme example of a 'rentier state', where unearned foreign income, known as 'rent' because it is not the result of work or risk, dominated the economy and government finances. In Afghanistan's case, the rent was made up of three elements – civilian aid, military aid and spending by the foreign armies deployed to the country, all of which Norway contributed to, albeit as a junior player: the US, as in 2001-14, dominated the direction of travel.

AN ONSLAUGHT OF RENT

Large amounts of rent distorted the political institutions, political culture and economy of the Republic. Afghanistan has always received some rent over the centuries. Indeed, it was fundamental to its emergence as a state.²¹ However, after 2001, it became, as one former government advisor described it, a "rentier state on steroids." The dynamics of rentier states are well-established in the literature. Because there is little need for governments to collect taxes, citizens are not motivated to demand representative and accountable government. Indeed, the foreign states or companies supplying the income often have more influence over the government than its own citizens do. As the state allocates resources, this strengthens vertical, patron-client relations. 'Court politics' are promoted: when an individual "feels his benefits are not enough, the solution of manoeuvring for personal advantage within the existing setup is always superior to seeking an alliance with others in similar conditions."²² This dynamic hampers the development of horizontal organisations around shared economic interests, such as trade unions or political parties. The rent artificially strengthens the domestic currency, sucking in imports and pricing

²¹ Barnett Rubin, [The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System, Second edition](#), Yale University Press, 2002.

²² See Giacomo Luciani, 'Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework', p76, a chapter in one of the seminal works on rentier state theory, edited by Luciani and Kazem al-Beblawi, [The Arab State](#), Routledge, London, 1987.

exports out of the market and ultimately weakening domestic production. The state has little incentive to develop property rights and the rule of law that enable a market economy to flourish and thereby generate profits that can be taxed. It is immediately apparent, therefore, that Norway's aspirations for development, outlined above, would be at odds with Afghanistan's political economy.

More recent interrogation of rentier state theory has refined it, tracking how rent reinforces whatever political structures and cultures it finds.²³ In Afghanistan's case, the post-2001 rent came to multiple actors. Moreover, they were largely strongmen and leaders from the old armed factions who had captured ministries, district and provincial governorships and leadership positions in the security services off the back of the United States' toppling of the Taliban. Their access to foreign income then allowed them to consolidate their positions and by the period under study, they still largely formed the elite, albeit with a few sons or occasionally daughters, and some technocrats, who had also managed to get into the top ranks.

The political repercussions included the drive towards what Ruttig refers to in this paper as the development of an "untransparent, centralised, and top-down system of decision-making that circumvented constitutional institutions" where "individual party leaders in key positions of power inside the system, while their parties remained outside it." There were also economic consequences. Classic rentier theory, drawn from the experience of countries with a single ruling family or party, describes how some rent is typically distributed as public goods, such as education or healthcare, even while the elites enrich themselves. In Afghanistan, by contrast, those in power tended to use the rent to benefit their clients and supporters only. These were often categorised by ethnicity or tribe and led to the limited and siloed use of public goods and economic opportunities, rather than any broader benefit.

WHAT MADE UP THE RENT

By the start of 2015, the rent to Afghanistan had diminished, but was still vast. Any one of the three elements comprising it would have been enough to make the country a rentier state, defined by pioneer of the theory Giacomo Luciani as when a country's "revenues derive predominantly (more than 40%) from oil or other foreign sources and whose expenditure is a substantial share of GDP."²⁴ Afghanistan also easily fulfilled another measure – 'aid dependency' – because it was unable to "perform many of the core functions of government ... or the delivery of basic public services, without foreign aid funding and expertise," and where the proxy measure of aid being equivalent to more than 10 per cent of GDP was easily surpassed.²⁵

²³ This explains why Norway is the rarest of examples, a democratic rentier state; its rent, in the form of oil exports, came after democratic institutions were firmly established. It has not shown the 'classic' rentier dynamics. For more on this, see Naazneen Barma, '[The Rentier State at Work: Comparative Experiences of the Resource Curse in East Asia and the Pacific](#)', Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies (APPS), vol 1, no 2, May 2014, p257; and Kevin M Morrison, 'What Can We Learn about the "Resource Curse" from Foreign Aid?', The World Bank Research Observer 27, no 1, February 2012, 52-73, 56.

²⁴ Luciani, 'Allocation vs. Production', 72 [see FN 3].

²⁵ Deborah Bräutigam, [Aid Dependence and Governance](#), report prepared for the Division for International Development Cooperation, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sweden, 1999.

Foreign aid, which at its peak in 2009, amounted to the equivalent of Afghanistan's total GDP, had fallen to around 40 per cent of GDP in the later years of the 2015-21 period.²⁶ In the first decade of the Republic, it had also covered 90 per cent of government spending, down to 70 per cent in 2013²⁷ and up a little to 75 per cent in 2019 – usually considered the last 'normal' year before the Taliban takeover, ie without the Covid-19 related economic contraction and extra aid.²⁸ In 2019, total public expenditure equalled around 58 per cent of GDP, said the Bank, "far exceeding the usual level for low-income countries (or any country income group)," albeit heavily skewed towards spending on the war (30 per cent of GDP).

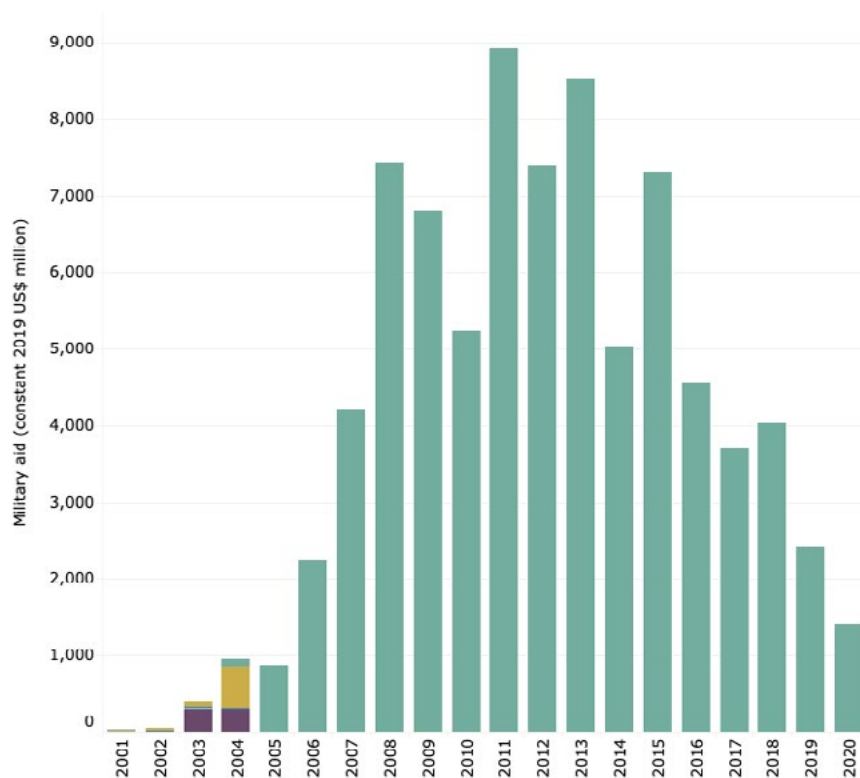


Figure 1: US military aid to Afghanistan, 2001-21. Source: Nan Tian, 20 Years of Military Aid to Afghanistan, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 22 September 2021. The colours refer to US funding streams.

As to military support to the ANSF, Figure 1 (above) shows the contributions of the largest donor, the United States, 2001-20; money diminished from 2016 onwards, but remained considerable. The more than 1.5 billion US dollars spent in 2020 is only small in comparison with the peak years – almost USD 9 billion in 2011 and over USD 8 billion in 2013. As for the spending by foreign armies, the sums are not known, but Adam Pain calculated that in the period 2000-09, it made up 86.8 per cent of unearned foreign income.²⁹

Economic growth in Afghanistan followed the money, both upwards and downwards. Figure 2 uses the number of international forces deployed as a proxy for rent: the mirroring of growth with deployment is evident. The major anomaly is 2011 when, despite high numbers

²⁶ World Bank, [Afghanistan Development Update: Setting the Course for Recovery](#), April 2021.

²⁷ Sarajuddin Isar, [Taxation, the prerequisite of state-building, an overview of tax system in Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, January 2020, p2.

²⁸ World Bank, [Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update](#), July 2019.

²⁹ Adam Pain 'Livelihoods, Basic Services and Social Protection in Afghanistan', 2012, p7.

of foreign troops, drought severely affected agricultural production; agriculture is a major and volatile component of Afghanistan's GDP.³⁰

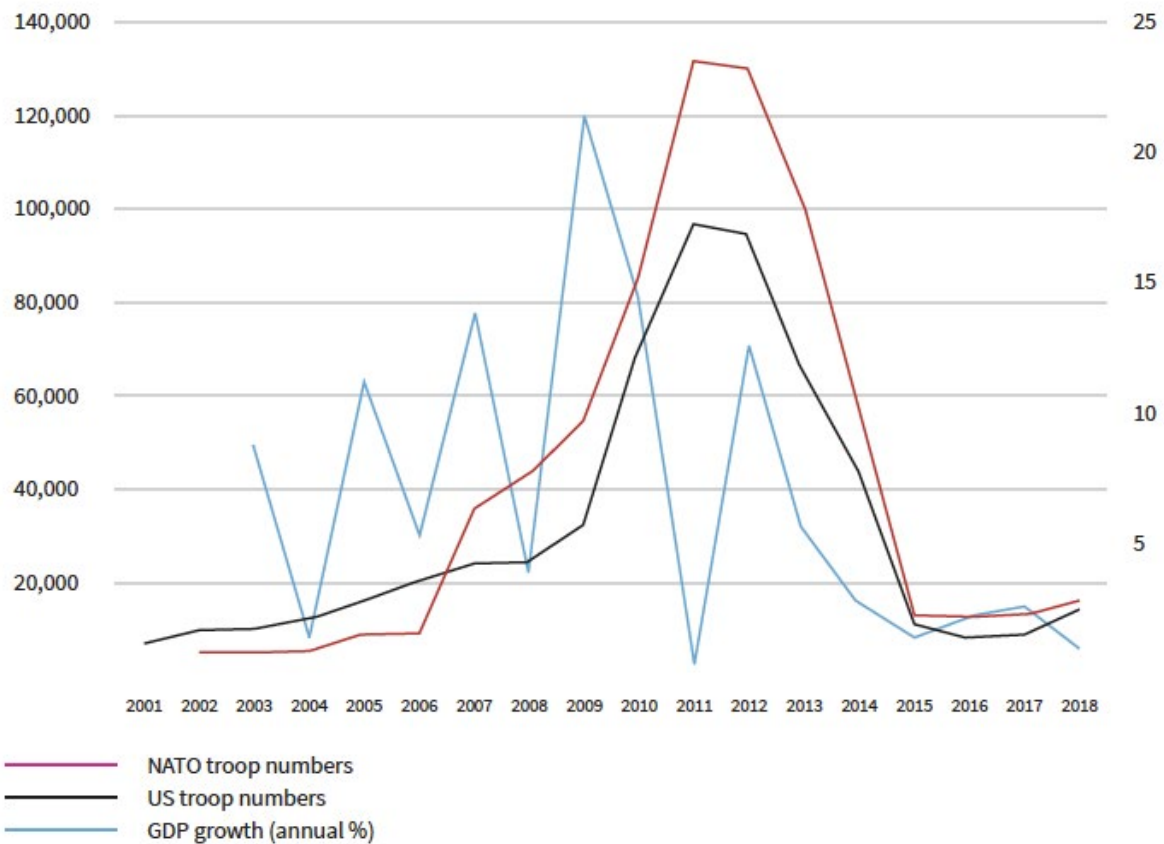


Figure 2: The deployment of international forces and economic growth in Afghanistan

Rates of poverty also mirrored the rent: in 2003, 51 per cent of the population was living in poverty, falling to 34 per cent in 2007/8, 38 per cent in 2011/12 (this was a drought year, so rural poverty pushed the national rate up, although the urban poverty rate was still much lower), and back up to 55 per cent by 2016/17.³¹

At the same time, during these years, for those with contacts or willing to use their political positions, the possibilities to access rent for personal gain were still legion. Much of this was corrupt, enrichment through 'ghost schools' or 'ghost soldiers' (when money earmarked for staff or services was pocketed and fake numbers reported), selling contracts, selling government jobs, selling food rations or bullets intended for soldiers or police, inflating costs for contracts and skimming off a percentage and the amassing of a proportion of the bribes or protection money taken at lower levels, for example at custom houses, or police checkpoints or demanded by police from shops and businesses.

³⁰ Original graph, with data sources detailed, in Kate Clark, [The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty and lack of democracy through the 'rentier state' lens](#), AAN, 29 May 2020, p17.

³¹ 2003 figure from World Bank, [Afghanistan – Poverty, Vulnerability, and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment](#), Washington DC, 2005, p83. Figures for other years from Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, [Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17](#), 2018.

Afghanistan's rentier economy was highly dysfunctional. In 2018, the [Bank](#) described the country's "undiversified productive base," how it was heavily reliant on foreign aid and public spending, with a private sector that was "extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture." Investment since 2001, it said, had "focused around the aid-driven contract economy" while private sector development was "constrained by weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment." The large trade deficit, at around 39 per cent of GDP, was funded, it said, "almost entirely by aid inflows."³²

That 2018 Bank report also described how, after "a sustained period of development progress," Afghanistan was "undergoing a difficult adjustment." Annual GDP growth had averaged at 9.4 per cent 2003-12, with:

Improved social indicators. ... School enrollment increased from 0.8 million to over 8 million and life expectancy from 41 years to 61 years over this period." However, "economic and social progress slowed following the drawdown of international security forces in 2011 and a contested political transition in 2014. GDP growth fell to 2.2 percent in 2016, recovering marginally to 2.6 percent in 2017.

The reference to the contested 2014 presidential election, and later in the same report, to large numbers of returning refugees, IDPs and the war all point to other factors that dampened or encouraged economic growth. However, the underlying pattern is clear and was to do with how much rent was coming into the country. That makes it questionable whether the improved social indicators could even be called development if they were so vulnerable to the foreign income going up or down.

By the final years of the Republic, things had barely moved on. "While the overall economic goal of the current US strategy is to move Afghanistan from being a recipient of assistance to an enduring economic partner," SIGAR wrote in its [30 April 2020 Report to Congress](#), it "remains impoverished, conflict-affected, and heavily aid dependent" (p131).

WHY WAS SO MUCH AID GIVEN?

Before moving on to the attempts that were made to pull the country back from the brink, there should be a word or two about the premise behind the large amounts of aid given to Afghanistan. International donors, wrote Astri Suhrke in 2005, acted in the belief that "international assistance has predominantly positive effects and – once it reaches a 'critical mass' – can turn things around."³³ It was a theory, she said, that then finance minister, Ashraf Ghani, pushed strongly. Yet, the aim – to speedily establish a cadre of educated, trained and 'capacity-built' Afghans, to construct roads, clinics, schools, an army and a bureaucracy, that would, along with elections, enable Afghanistan to 'stand on its own feet' – was sabotaged by the method itself. The huge external rents inevitably created a state and economy dependent on that money, helped to weaken domestic production, consolidated corruption within the state, increased the gap between people and elites, weakened accountability and normalised corruption.

³² World Bank, [Project Information Document/ Integrated Safeguards Data Sheet \(PID/ISDS\)](#), 11 September 2018, p3.

³³ Astri Suhrke, [When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan](#), The Christian Michelsen Institute/ Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2005, p1.

The civilian uplift that accompanied the surge in troops in 2009-12, wrote William Byrd, further increased and helped entrench corruption, threatening even the “relative ‘islands of integrity’” that still did exist in “a certain sector, ministry, or area of activity.”³⁴

FAILURE OF CONDITIONALITY AND MILITARY SUPPORT

It was always something of a mystery why the Republic’s donors could not curb corruption by conditioning support, given that the Afghan state and economy were so reliant on outside funding. There were multiple attempts to make aid conditional, as seen in the different donor conferences and accountability frameworks. In addition to criticism of the complexities and nature of the frameworks themselves there were more general reasons why donor leverage was weak.³⁵ The profusion of foreign actors directing civilian aid and military spending militated against common stands, especially as countries often had favourites among Afghan actors and overlooked their particular corrupt or abusive behaviour, or there were contradictory aims even among officials and generals from the same country: repeated attempts by US anti-corruption, law-enforcement and counter-narcotics agencies to hold particular individuals to account were hindered by the CIA or other parts of the US state protecting ‘their’ Afghans.

Donors also often sought technical solutions to problems, ignoring their political or economic basis, for example, training judges in human rights and anti-corruption, rather than looking at why or how they were able to take bribes. Another example would be the focus on the problem of ‘ghost police’, important though that was, while no concern was shown over who was appointed to be a general in the police force; this author, speaking to UNDP, which oversaw the multilateral mechanism to pay for police salaries and the Ministry of Interior, the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), and to some of the donors who paid into the fund, tried and failed to interest them in the re-appointment of police generals who had previously been sacked for stealing millions of dollars from NATO, or involvement in the drugs trade or for using torture. She was met with the argument that appointments were a sovereign Afghan matter, despite the Ministry of Interior being reliant on donors. This was also even though the police were fundamental to the whole Republic ‘project’: a police force, not only enabling but also committing crimes itself, encouraged support for the insurgency and undermined trust in the government.³⁶ The author notes that Norway did withhold funding for LOTFA in 2013 and 2014 over suspicions of corruption.

In the end, the message understood by the leaders and officials of the Republic was that the foreign money would never dry up: they looked to donors’ actions, rather than their rhetoric, threats and handwringing, to understand their intentions. Rarely was the threat to withdraw support acted upon, until 15 August 2021, that is.

³⁴ William A Byrd, [Economic Management in Afghanistan: What Worked, What Didn’t, And Why?](#), Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 2015, p12.

³⁵ SIGAR looked into why donors, despite their outsized financial clout, were failing to adequately address corruption in [Afghanistan’s Anti-Corruption Efforts](#), 6 November 2020, which was published ahead of the November 2020 donor conference. Khybar Farahi and Scott Guggenheim looked into successful and failed performance-based conditionality in their report, [Pathways for Post-Peace Development in Afghanistan](#), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), November 2020.

³⁶ For more on this, including why one rare successful attempt at reform of the Afghan state, the Ministry of Interior Pay and Rank Reform of 2005-07, did work, albeit not in the long run, see Kate Clark, [Reforming the Afghan Ministry of Interior: A way to ‘tilt’ the war?](#), AAN, 9 June 2017.

MINISTRY OF FINANCE ATTEMPTS TO REFORM PUBLIC FINANCES

As mentioned, 2015 was the point at which the Afghan elites should have begun to take seriously the decline in outside support. Most officials, politicians and generals remained complacent, but at the Ministry of Finance, under minister Eklil Hakimi, there were reformers who were acutely aware of the threat posed by declining aid and, indeed, of Afghanistan falling off a ‘fiscal cliff’. They recognised the urgent need to increase domestic revenues, ensure revenues reached the treasury and that scarce resources were spent on public services and worthwhile development projects and did not just go into the pockets of corrupt officials and contractors. They expected political fights to follow as the Afghan political elites – ministers, generals and MPs and their satellites of crony businesspeople, had become so used to easy money from the state.

The ministry managed to get double-digit rises in government revenues in 2015, 2016 and 2017, not because of economic growth, but due to new taxes and fees or increased rates introduced in 2015 (AAN). In 2017, a crackdown on corrupt practices at customs posts also increased that income stream (AAN). The government’s own revenue still comprised less than half of total expenditure, with the bulk still financed by aid, but it was heading in the right direction.

The other track to getting the public finances working was the budget. The Ministry of Finance, with its goal of radically overhauling and cleaning up Afghanistan’s public finances, produced the 2018 budget to international standards – it was transparent, realistic, and balanced – and provided citizens with the means for accountability as they could see where money went (AAN). The ministry aimed at cutting down on waste and limiting the opportunities for graft, focusing resources on where they were needed and on government ministries and agencies that had a record of spending money effectively. The budget was also a tool, then, for starting to clean up the whole of government by seeing where money was actually going. The finance ministry managed a relatively modest eight per cent reduction in the USD 800 million going to contingency funds, which could be spent without being accounted for and largely benefited President Ghani, and to a lesser extent Chief Executive Abdullah, and which were open to bargaining, rent-seeking and corruption. It got the approval of cabinet and the senate.

It was the battle with MPs, who had the power to both block budgets and dismiss ministers, including the finance minister, that really showed the extent of graft in the public finance system. The finance ministry had targeted ‘MPs’ projects’: this was a historical legacy of two billion dollars’ worth of ‘development projects’, introduced under parliamentary pressure in earlier years and agreed to by the executive without specific funding, typically with contracts and sub-contracts already ‘auctioned off’. The ministry only managed to dent, not get rid of the projects, but it made a start. Remarkably, when asked how the country was to pay for all the projects, one MP told AAN that the ‘international community’ should provide more funds.

The following year, Hakimi resigned. Many of the other reformers left the ministry in his wake. The man who had spearheaded reform of the budget, Khaled Payenda, later told AAN that he left after the president appointed a “friend” as minister: he and other resigning officials also knew “it was going to be an election year [and] the Ministry of Finance would have had to make some ‘compromises.’” (AAN). Revenues slumped (USIP) and when, in early 2021, Ghani brought Payenda back as Minister of Finance, he found most of the

reforms which they had “started in 2018 had been undone.” Payenda also walked into an impasse over the budget. He discovered that MPs had succeeded in getting their projects back into the draft budget and that allocations to contingency codes were still excessive. MPs and government were wrangling over the budget with “unprecedented acrimony,” wrote Roxanna Shapour (AAN). The violence of the conflict with the Taliban was then at its highest level since 2014, with huge numbers of civilians, ANSF and Taliban being killed and injured, and Kabul, itself, racked by the assassination of journalists, human rights activists and off-duty pilots and other military personnel. Trump’s plan for withdrawing international forces was also in full swing. Yet all those involved in the fight over the budget, wrote Shapour, were “seemingly oblivious to the ominous events unfolding around them.”

Payenda was not the only reformer in government in the years 2015-21, or indeed earlier. Others spoke in private at the time of the pressure not to act, including death threats to themselves and their families, as they strove, as they saw it, to turn their country around. However, in a long interview following the fall of the Republic (AAN, AAN), Payenda laid bare much of the detail of the corruption and disfunction. “I did not know of a clean governor,” he said. In a bid to clean up customs, for example, he discovered just how many were taking a share of the bribes taken from traders: not only governors but also MPs, provincial council members, police, even journalists – who promised silence in return for not exposing the bribe-taking. “Everyone,” he said, “was corrupt, absolutely.” Research published in August 2021 also highlighted just how much customs revenue was going astray, about three-quarters of the money that should have gone to the state was going either to corrupt officials or the Taliban.³⁷

CONCLUSION

This report has focused on the underlying political economy of the 2015-21 period, rather than issues such as aid effectiveness, or disbursement rates, the aid priorities of Norway and other international players, or trends in maternal mortality or in start-ups, important though all these are in their own right. That is because by 2015, the Afghan state and economy had already been moulded by rentier dynamics and this affected everything, including political culture. Another pioneer of rentier state theory, Hazem Beblawi, posited the creation of a “specific mentality: a rentier mentality” that emerges when the relationship between work and reward is broken. That did seem to have taken root in Afghanistan.³⁸

In the early years of the intervention, people were shocked by the behaviour of the new administration and the sudden deep and invasive corruption; as one man in Kabul told the author in 2006, “The officials suck your blood. Even governors take bribes just for doing something legal.”³⁹ The sense of outrage among the excluded was eventually transformed into a weary resignation about the new reality. By 2015, a political culture was truly entrenched that encouraged graft and stealing from the state, individual enrichment at the

³⁷ This was a case study of Zaranj, in Nimruz province on the Iranian border, the fourth-highest grossing border crossing in the country: Alcis, David Mansfield and Graeme Smith, [War gains: how the economic benefits of the conflict are distributed in Afghanistan and the implications for peace. A case study on Nimroz province](#), Overseas Development Institute, August 2021.

³⁸ Kazem al-Beblawi, ‘The Rentier State in the Arab World’, pp49-62, in Beblawi and Luciani, [The Rentier State](#) [see FN 3].

³⁹ Clark, [The Cost of Support to Afghanistan](#), p22 [see FN 9].

expense of the common good, ignoring the people's needs and indeed, of seeing public service as the work of fools. Such a culture also assumed that the foreigners would always pay for everything and that looming threats – economic or military – could be ignored quite safely.

Even as the Taliban ratcheted up the insurgency in the Republic's final months, MPs and government were arguing over the budget, Ghani and Abdullah were wrangling over who would go to Washington to meet President Biden, and generals in the army were selling food rations and ammunition. None of these officials and politicians apparently connected their own survival with that of the state. Payenda, speaking after the fall of Kabul, described the atmosphere in the last weeks of the Islamic Republic:

For some of them, it was like a feast. When there were emergencies, the rules would be relaxed and we would give them black ops money. The [people in] the provinces – the governors and these commanders, the ministers – they loved it. Most of the money [earmarked for anti-Taliban uprising forces] did not actually go to the people involved. ... Many of us found out that we never had 120,000 soldiers. My conclusion right now, [is that] at best, [there were] maybe 40 to 50 thousand [army and police]. The rest were all ghosts.

Skimming off the money allocated for those non-existent soldiers, he said, ran all the way to the top: “Unfortunately, they did not see the urgency.” Indeed, in the last weeks of the Republic, those officials and politicians, who had for so long failed to connect their survival with that of the state, now connected the imminent downfall of the state with their need to steal as much as they could in order to secure their own survival – abroad. How easy, then, it was for the wolf at the door, ignored for so long, to get into the Republic's rickety house.

For Afghanistan, and the bulk of Afghans left in the country, the Taliban's victory meant the disappearance of all the rent overnight on 15 August 2021. The result was a catastrophic 29 per cent contraction of the economy.⁴⁰ Despite some of the rent coming back that winter in the form of humanitarian aid, Afghanistan's economy, its people's living standards and those socioeconomic indicators of development, have all yet to recover.

⁴⁰ “After a severe 20.7 percent GDP contraction in 2021, the Afghan economy contracted further by 6.2 percent in 2022.” World Bank, [October 2023 Development Update](#), p18.

CHAPTER 4.

THE FAILED PURSUIT OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION: LESSONS FROM PEACE EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Jelena Bjelica

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines international peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2021, including both official and non-official initiatives, as well as some grassroots actions. Afghanistan has experienced prolonged periods of unrest and conflict since the 1978 Saur Revolution.⁴¹ Over the roughly forty years between 1978 and 2021, the interests and motivations of the warring parties often shifted in response to local, regional, and global geopolitical changes.

While peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan have long been a priority on the UN agenda, they have never yielded significant results. Afghanistan came into the focus of international peacekeeping efforts at the beginning of the new millennium, just as the United Nations – founded, in the words of its Charter, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” by uniting “our strength to maintain international peace and security” – was exploring ways to reinvent itself, especially its Department of Peacekeeping Operations, in light of earlier missteps in the Balkans and East Timor.⁴² Lakhdar Brahimi, who led the review of the United Nations Peace Operations and was later appointed the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan,⁴³ came up with a different model of UN

⁴¹ On the pre-1979 origins of conflict and the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) that altered the country’s trajectory, see: Thomas Ruttig, [How It All Began: A short look at the pre-1979 origins of Afghanistan’s conflict](#), AAN, 19 January 2013; and Thomas Ruttig, [Between Reform and Repression: The 60th anniversary of the PDPA](#), Thomas Ruttig, 2 January 2025.

⁴² The Panel on United Nations Peace Operations was convened in March 2000 to assess the United Nations’ ability to conduct peace operations effectively, and to offer frank, specific and realistic recommendations for ways in which to enhance that capacity. See [Report of the Panel on the United Nations Peace Operations \(A/55/305-S/2000/809\)](#), known as the Brahimi Report, after the Algerian diplomat, Lakhdar Brahimi, who chaired the Panel.

Brahimi was also the United Nations Special Envoy for Afghanistan 1997-99 and the UN Secretary General Special Representative for Afghanistan 2001-04.

⁴³ See, Report of the Secretary-General, [A/56/681-S/2001/1157](#), 6 December 2001.

The core of the UN mission’s mandate proposed by Brahimi in 2002 entailed: (a) Fulfilling the tasks and responsibilities, including those related to human rights, the rule of law and gender issues, entrusted to the United Nations in the Bonn Agreement; (b) Promoting national reconciliation and rapprochement throughout

peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan – the so-called ‘light footprint’ approach. As a result, the UN was seen as “tiptoeing through Afghanistan.”⁴⁴

There were some early glimmers of what a UN-led initiative might have achieved. The UN Special Mission on Afghanistan (UNSMA), established by the UN Secretary General at the request of the UN General Assembly in 1993, under its last head, the late Francesc Vendrell, had made significant inroads in peace dialogue in 2000–01.⁴⁵ By November 2000, Vendrell had secured written commitments from the Taliban and Northern Alliance to engage in a process of dialogue under the auspices of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan ([A/55/548 - S/2000/1077](#), 9 November 2000). Vendrell maintained frequent contact with two warring parties until September 2001 (see the UNSG periodical reports [A/55/907–S/2001/384](#), 19 April 2001; [A/55/1028–S/2001/789](#), 17 August 2001).⁴⁶ However, after 11 September 2001, the Taliban went on to boycott the UN, specifically after the UN Security Council passed a resolution that condemned al-Qaeda and the Taliban’s support for them. As noted in the report of the Secretary-General, [A/56/681–S/2001/1157](#) from 6 December 2001:

My Personal Representative sought to convince the Taliban to consider various formulae that would allow them to participate in direct or indirect talks with the United Front ... The Taliban declined these invitations, refusing to attend any meeting at which the United Nations was present. They further declined, for the same reason, an invitation by the Government of Germany. ... [i]t became increasingly evident that the Taliban had no intention of pursuing the process of dialogue under United Nations auspices and that they would not accept the United Nations as an impartial intermediary.

After 2001, the UN was never able to match the level of progress in peace dialogue that Vendrell had achieved in 2000.

FLAWED BEGINNINGS: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), established by UN Security Council Resolution 1401 in March 2002, consolidated the UNSMA political mandate and all UN humanitarian, relief, recovery, and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan under one mandate. But by then, the UN had completely lost its peacemaking momentum. Furthermore, the Taliban’s refusal to attend talks at which the UN was present, combined with the new UN mission’s focus on transferring governing responsibilities to the interim Afghan government, and pressure from the United States, as the leader of the military intervention in Afghanistan, resulted in a fragmented political process. The main opportunities for an early peaceful settlement were missed, such as the Bonn Conference in 2001 and both Loya Jirgas in 2002 and 2003.

the country; (c) Managing all United Nations humanitarian relief, recovery and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan. See also the [UNSC Resolution 1401](#) (2002), 28 March 2002.

⁴⁴ Simon Chesterman, [Tiptoeing Through Afghanistan: The Future of UN State-Building](#), International Peace Institute, 2002.

⁴⁵ UNSMA was mandated “to canvass a broad spectrum of the leaders of Afghanistan, soliciting their views on how the United Nations can best assist Afghanistan in facilitating national rapprochement and reconstruction.”

⁴⁶ About the meeting between Mullah Omar and Francesc Vendrell, see also David Loyn, [Francesc Vendrell in Afghanistan 2000–2008: Talking to the Taliban, the Bonn Accords, and USA-Iran Talks](#), *Asian Affairs*, 53:3, 597-616, 2022.

During a brief period in 2005, there were some noticeable efforts to promote accountability in the policy debate on Afghanistan. Around that time, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) sponsored a national conference on truth-seeking and reconciliation. Following considerable international pressure, the Afghan government adopted its Action Plan for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation that focused on truth-seeking, institutional reform, and criminal accountability. However, on the national political agenda, priorities soon diverged. In May 2008, the Afghan parliament passed a general amnesty law for war crimes committed during the jihad years. Officially titled the National Reconciliation, General Amnesty, and National Stability Law, it came into force after it was published in the Official Gazette in December 2008 (Qaus 1387), despite then President Hamid Karzai saying that he never signed it.⁴⁷

As the conflict between the internationally backed Afghan government and the Taliban intensified in the second half of the 2000s, the pursuit of a peaceful political resolution resembled a window dressing exercise. In September 2010, then President Karzai established the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC),⁴⁸ tasked with negotiating with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. This was a move to please Afghanistan's largest donor, the US,⁴⁹ which hoped the HPC would function as an independent body. But the HPC ended up being a tool in Karzai's balancing act between the major ethnic groups and political factions.⁵⁰ In November 2010, a major news story broke ([BBC](#), [NYT](#), [The Observer](#)) about the secret talks that were unfolding for months between Taliban and Afghan leaders to end the war, only as it turned out, the United States and Afghan officials had been talking and paying an Afghan man who was an impostor. A man named Mullah Mansur, who represented himself as a senior Taliban commander and had met with President Karzai, was in reality an Afghan shopkeeper who had been living in Pakistan. Apparently, the UK played a role in the debacle, with MI6 acting as a key intermediary. Interestingly, around the time this news broke, the Norwegians established an official liaison with the Taliban political commission. This shows that, despite numerous coordination meetings between different embassies and international organisations held in Kabul, hardly anyone knew what the other was doing.

The Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process was launched in 2011 as a regional initiative to provide a forum to foster peace and stability and to promote the political and economic interests

⁴⁷ See Sari Kouvo, [After two years in legal limbo: A first glance at the approved 'Amnesty law'](#), AAN, 22 February 2010.

⁴⁸ See Martine van Bijlert, [Warlords' Peace Council](#), AAN, 28 September 2010; Thomas Ruttig, [Afghan Reactions to the High Peace Council](#), AAN, 14 October 2010; and Thomas Ruttig, [In Search of a Peace Process: A 'new' HPC and an ultimatum for the Taliban](#), AAN, 26 February 2016.

⁴⁹ Alex Strick van Linschoten, an expert on the Taliban, suggested NATO was stoking the reports of peace contacts to create a favourable backdrop to the December Afghan strategy review in Washington where the Obama administration would assess progress and make decisions on US commitments in Afghanistan, [The Guardian](#) reported on 24 October 2010.

⁵⁰ Former President Burhanuddin Rabbani was the first chairman of the High Peace Council. He was assassinated at his home in 2011. Later, the peace council was run by the incumbent Acting Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, the founder of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, Sayed Ahmad Gailani, who died in 2017, and former Vice President Mohammad Karim Khalili. President Ghani revamped the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) in 2016 to enable it to "more effectively" support the envisaged process. However, he ultimately decided to dissolve it in July 2019. See [Ghani Dissolves High Peace Council's Secretariat](#), Tolo, 27 July 2019.

of the regional countries.⁵¹ “It was meant to be a forum for discussing regional confidence-building measures and there were even hints at hopes that the Taliban might be ready to show a sign of conciliation at this occasion,” [AAN’s](#) Thomas Ruttig wrote. In the same year, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton promoted a revamped approach to Afghanistan, which she called “Fight, Talk, Build.” This approach combined continued American air and ground strikes against the Taliban, while at the same time pressuring Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to get them to the negotiating table.⁵² This period also saw the increase of US troops on the ground to more than 100,000 in 2011. In January 2012, the Taliban announced that they had struck a deal to open a political office in Qatar. A month earlier, in December 2011, the Karzai government had recalled its ambassador to Qatar, after hearing that Doha had agreed to host the Taliban office ([NYT](#)).

It took another year for the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US to reach an agreement regarding the formal opening of the Taliban office in Doha, often referred to as the Taliban embassy in Doha.⁵³ Several months later, in September 2013, the most senior Taliban member in Pakistan’s custody, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, was released. At the time of his arrest in Karachi in 2010, Baradar was the effective number two in the movement and de facto operational chief of the insurgency. Both the Pakistani and Afghan governments said that they believed his release would facilitate reconciliation ([AAN](#)).

In October 2013, for the first time, a senior Afghan made a public apology to those who had suffered at the hands of his paramilitary faction during the war. General Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the largely Uzbek Jombesh party, made the statement a day after registering as Ashraf Ghani’s running mate in the presidential election ([AAN](#)).

On 31 May 2014, the US and Taliban exchanged prisoners, after years of secret negotiations.⁵⁴ But despite these positive developments, no official talks, meaning Track One peace diplomacy, had taken place by 2014. [AAN](#) wrote at the time that this was due to “ambivalence in positions and the tendency for all parties to want to hold talks on their terms (the Taliban, the Afghan government and the United States).”

DIPLOMACY IN ACTION: NORWAY’S APPROACH

Peace diplomacy emerged as an important and visible element of Norway’s foreign policy after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Norway’s facilitation of Israel-Palestine peace negotiations in the early 1990s was the hallmark of this new approach in its engagement with

⁵¹ The [Heart of Asia](#) member states in 2011 were Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkey, with the US and twenty other countries and organisations serving as supporting nations in the process.

⁵² See, Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, [U.S. Seeks Aid From Pakistan in Peace Effort](#), The New York Times, 30 October 2011.

⁵³ The office officially opened on 18 June 2013. For details, see Chapter 9 in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence report “[A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014](#).”

⁵⁴ The Taliban released the captured US soldier, Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, in return for five Taliban held at Guantanamo Bay, including one of the movement’s founders, Khairullah Khairkhwa, and the former chief of the army staff, Mullah Fazl. See Kate Clark, [Bergdahl and the ‘Guantanamo Five’: The long-awaited US-Taliban prisoner swap](#), [AAN](#), 4 June 2014.

the rest of the world.⁵⁵ Additionally, Norway has also been one of the strongest advocates of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security since 2000.⁵⁶

In Afghanistan, Norway actively sought to influence US thinking on peace talks. Norway was one of the first international actors to facilitate dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban, playing various roles in peace engagement. The Norwegians established contact with the Taliban in 2006, according to the [Norwegian Government](#), and in 2007, according to [The New York Times](#).⁵⁷ Towards the end of 2010, the Norwegian Embassy in Kabul established an official liaison with the Taliban's political commission. This was one of the only notable international achievements in the first ten years of the international intervention in Afghanistan.

Norway was instrumental in facilitating the opening of the Taliban office in Doha and acted as a facilitator between the Taliban leadership and the Karzai Government and later the Ghani Government. It was also a channel between the US and the Taliban, and a facilitator of an informal, confidential regional dialogue on Afghanistan. The Norwegian peace track seems to have been among the most successful, [The New York Times](#) reported, although it overlapped with other initiatives and ultimately collapsed.⁵⁸

TURNING POINTS IN THE PEACE PROCESS, 2015–18

The peace dynamics were to change in 2015, as the NATO combat mission ended at the end of December 2014, and would take a quite different turn, with more frequent contact between the official representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban – so-called Track One peace diplomacy, and increased involvement from various international actors, including some 'non-traditional' peacemakers, such as China. Some meetings were also held in the spirit of Track Two peace diplomacy, as a form of peacebuilding that utilises unofficial actors, such as influential private citizens, former officials or officials acting 'off the record' within a conflict area, to convene, engage in dialogue, explore deep conflict dynamics and set the stage for a more peaceful future.

Between 2015 and 2018, several important meetings were held. Some of these were Track Two meetings, and some were aimed at advancing the specific agendas of individual countries. However, in retrospect, it seems that most, if not all, of these initiatives were fragmented, organised by individual entities or states. The lack of a single actor to coordinate and lead the talks, primarily the absence of the UN's involvement to facilitate peace talks, is also noticeable. Below are the key events and developments listed in chronological order as they occurred.

⁵⁵ See Government of Norway: [Norway's engagement in peace processes since 1993](#), last updated: 27 June 2024.

⁵⁶ Norway has been a strong advocate for the implementation of this resolution, incorporating it into its National Action Plans and actively promoting women's rights and participation in peacebuilding efforts.

⁵⁷ For details, see Chapter 9 in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence report "[A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014](#)."

⁵⁸ See Mujib Mashal, [How Peace Between Afghanistan and the Taliban Foundered](#), [The New York Times](#), 26 December 2016.

The first Pugwash Conference meeting in May 2015

The first [Pugwash conference](#), a non-official meeting on Security in Afghanistan, was held in Doha on 2-3 May 2015. This Track Two meeting, by its nature, involved more than 40 participants, all of whom represented only themselves and not any institution or group. It was repeatedly emphasised that the meeting was not intended to be a negotiation,⁵⁹ although it was the first international meeting that involved representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban, which ended with the release of the final statement.⁶⁰ A statement by the Taliban called the meetings “research conferences,” while Afghan government officials described them as “scientific discussions.”⁶¹

Several presentations and interventions were made by individuals affiliated with various Afghan parties and groups, as well as civil society members (including three women) and representatives from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Thus, the discussion represented a wide range of opinions, always keeping in mind its non-official character. The meeting ended with a [statement](#), which, among other things, said that “bringing about peace in Afghanistan and ending the conflict was wholeheartedly supported by all the participants” and included a commitment to the right of women to education. The participants also agreed that “in general, the peace process should be speeded up!” and that “some would welcome the possibility of talks between the Taliban and the Government.” Finally, the statement gave official recognition to the Taliban office in Doha by saying it played an essential role in organising the meeting.

Although the meeting lacked official political breadth, it was the first of its kind that brought the representatives of both warring parties to the table and in 2015, having the two sides talk to each other was seen as an immense achievement. The presence of women delegates as well as some positive statements from the Taliban on women were noteworthy, though treated with caution by others ([HRW](#)).

Oslo talks June 2015

The first all-female delegation of its kind met with the Taliban in Oslo in June 2015. Most female participants remained anonymous, though Shukria Barakzai was among the delegates; she told reporters afterwards that “Afghan women defended their rights with courage” (BBC). However, others feared that separate channels of engagement would be less productive than meaningful representation of women in negotiations.⁶²

Murree talks in July 2015

The four-hour meeting on 7 July 2015 in the mountain resort city of Murree, an hour’s drive from Pakistan’s capital, Islamabad, was the first significant effort to open Track One peace negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban officials. Pakistani officials brokered the meeting after months of intense effort by President Ghani to get them more

⁵⁹ See the Pugwash report: [First Doha Meeting on Security in Afghanistan](#), 4 May 2015.

⁶⁰ See Thomas Ruttig, [Pushing Open the Door to Peace? Pugwash organises next round of Taleban talks in Qatar](#), AAN, 31 May 2015.

⁶¹ Rod Nordland, [Afghan and Taliban Representatives Meet in Qatar](#), The New York Times, 3 May 2015.

⁶² A 2014 Oxfam report noted that despite consistent rhetorical commitment from the Afghan government and internationals, women’s involvement in negotiations was largely symbolic.

centrally involved in the peace process, as well as a series of less formal encounters between various Afghan officials and Taliban representatives in other countries in spring 2015.⁶³

These talks, also known as the “2+1+2” or “Murree Peace Process,” involved representatives from the Afghan government and the Taliban, with the Pakistani government facilitating. The meetings were a step towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan and aimed to open a political process with the Taliban. The Afghan delegation was led by the then Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Karzai – a prominent cousin of the previous Afghan president – and included a member of the government’s High Peace Council. The Taliban representatives included figures of seniority and authority, leaving no doubt that the Taliban had endorsed the meeting. These included Akhtar Mansur’s ‘chief of staff’ Latif Mansur and former head of the Taliban health commission Mullah Muhammad Abbas Akhund, also a member of the Leadership Council (*rahbari* or ‘Quetta’ shura).⁶⁴

The second Pugwash Conference meeting in January 2016

The second Pugwash meeting, held on 23-24 January 2016 in Doha, was also organised in the Track Two diplomacy format; however, it attracted less public attention. Although it brought together some 55 senior participants from a wide range of backgrounds to discuss the shared goal of peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, the meeting’s unofficial (‘academic’) character limited its significance as it focused on exploring current issues rather than serving as an official negotiation. However, the frequency of talks between different parties – normalisation of encounters – can be as important as official talks in the peace process.

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group meetings in 2016

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), comprising China, the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan, was established at the December 2015 Senior Officials Meeting of the Istanbul Process in Islamabad.⁶⁵ At the first meeting of the QCG in Islamabad on 11 January 2016, it was agreed that the aim was to revive the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The group met five times in Kabul and Islamabad in 2016.⁶⁶ It was, however, ultimately seen as a failure, which one analyst blamed on Taliban “recalcitrance” and Pakistani equivocation ([The Diplomat](#)).

⁶³ Mujib Mashal, [Taliban Are Talking Peace, Though Not With Afghan Government](#), The New York Times, 21 June 2015 and Joseph Goldstein and Mujib Mashal, [Afghan Officials and Taliban Meet in Possible Step Toward Peace Talks](#), The New York Times, 7 July 2015.

⁶⁴ Borhan Osman, [The Murree Process: Divisive peace talks further complicated by Mullah Omar’s death](#), AAN, 2015.

⁶⁵ “At various stages, China tried to mediate conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan and between the Afghan government, coalition forces and the Taliban. It did so through both confidential and public meetings, bilaterally (with the US, Pakistan, and Afghanistan), trilaterally (China-Afghanistan-Pakistan, China-Afghanistan-US), and quadrilateral,” Barnet Rubin, [Chinese Peace-making Efforts in Afghanistan](#), The Stimson Center, 23 September 2024.

⁶⁶ Hasib Danish Alikozai, [Pakistan Hopeful, Afghanistan Skeptical of Reviving Taliban Peace Talks](#), Voice of America, 13 August 2016.

The peace deal with HIG in 2016

On 19 September 2016, a peace agreement was signed between the Hezb-e Islami faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (often abbreviated as HIG: Hezb-e Islami-ye Gulbuddin) and the Afghan government.⁶⁷ Gulbuddin Hekmatyar made a vague apology to those hurt in the war, though the Chair of the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission, Simar Samar, insisted he should apologise specifically to those killed by his forces ([ToloNews](#)). The formal process began on 18 May 2016 when the two delegations, representing the insurgent faction of Hezb-e Islami and the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) respectively, initialled a draft peace agreement. Discussions with Hekmatyar's group had, however, been initiated in 2008 and had included dozens of meetings between it, the US and the Afghan government.⁶⁸

The European Union took public credit for the deal. The 2023 European Parliament Report on lessons learned from Afghanistan said:

*EUSR [Franz-Michael] Mellbin's role in this was significant, as the EUSR position allowed him to act on behalf of the EU and intervene at moments when the peace deal was close to collapsing. As one Senior EU diplomat stated, 'We did it, not others. We made it happen, and you can hardly find a trace of it anyway. The EU brokered a peace deal ... It played a very significant role in showing the Afghans that peace is possible.'*⁶⁹

The deal was dismissed by some, however, as relatively insignificant given the weakness of HIG's military forces by 2016 ([VOA](#)), as well as being decried by civil society for disregarding Hekmatyar's long history of war crimes allegations ([Diplomat](#)). Hekmatyar was removed from the UN sanctions list and returned to Kabul in May 2017. However, he never managed to have a 'grand return' into Afghan politics, despite his much-touted physical return to Kabul after 20 years, which was broadcast live.⁷⁰ He ended up being a sidelined political figure both by the Republic and later by the Emirate.

Kabul Process on Peace and Security Cooperation in 2017-18

The Kabul Process on Peace and Security Cooperation consisted of two meetings held in Kabul in June 2017 and February 2018, involving more than twenty international organisations and countries, but no Taliban representatives. The meetings were presented as a relaunch of the 2008 'Kabul Process', an Afghan-led initiative aimed at fostering peace and security cooperation within Afghanistan and with neighbouring countries.

President Ghani spearheaded the Kabul process that was meant to ensure that the peace process and negotiations with the Taliban, which in 2018 were imminent, involved the Afghan government. The primary goal of the two conferences was to explore ways to find a

⁶⁷ See Dr Oz Hassan, [Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security](#), European Parliament, January 2023.

⁶⁸ "Contacts with US officials were initiated even earlier, in 2008. That year, the Hezb-e Islami faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar published its outline for a peace plan and two years later it handed over a 15-point plan to the government. ... [I]t was not until spring of this year that a deal finally looked imminent. The negotiations that culminated in the current draft agreement started in March 2016, and in April, HIG dropped its most substantial [condition for an agreement](#), the withdrawal of foreign troops; chief negotiator Karim Amin called the full withdrawal of foreign troops a goal, rather than a condition for an accord." Borhan Osman, [Peace With Hekmatyar: What does it mean for battlefield and politics?](#), AAN, 29 September 2016.

⁶⁹ See Dr Oz Hassan, [Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security](#), European Parliament, January 2023, p50.

⁷⁰ [Afghan warlord Hekmatyar returns after 20 years](#), France 24, 4 May 2017.

mutually agreeable venue for peace talks and to signal the US to keep the Afghan government in the loop. The meetings were also seen as a demonstration of support from a broader international community to the Afghan government's efforts to achieve peace. The fissures in the Afghan polity that were always a feature of the Republic hardened after the 2014 election into the barely disguised power clash within the so-called National Unity Government, which exemplified the failure of Afghanistan's political leaders to find collective purpose, even when threats to the Republic were so existential ([International Crisis Group](#)).

The final declaration of the second meeting (text here) concurred "that direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban—without any preconditions and the threats of violence—constitute the most viable way to end the ongoing agony of the Afghan people."

However, as is evident in hindsight, the Kabul process had little bearing on the Doha process negotiations between the US and the Taliban, which excluded the Afghan government. It did, however, contribute to a general atmosphere that was gearing up toward the political settlement with the Taliban, even as confidence in the Republic's role waned.

The Helmand Peace Initiative of 2018

The Helmand Peace Initiative was led by relatives of victims, activists and other residents from Helmand – both men and women – who began a sit-in for peace following a car bomb suicide attack in Lashkargah in late March 2018 that left dozens of civilians injured or dead. As a genuine grassroots movement,⁷¹ it deserves mention in this list, if only to show the general atmosphere in the country in the spring of 2018, several months before the first ceasefire and subsequent start of the US-Taliban negotiation. By April 2018, sit-ins in support of the Helmand protesters had been organised in Herat, Nimruz, Farah, Zabul, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni, Paktia, Kunduz, Kunar, Nangrahar, Balkh, Parwan, Daikundi, Maidan Wardak and Jawzjan – 16 in total.⁷² On 13 May 2018, seven protesters from Helmand began a protest march towards Kabul in temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius while keeping the Ramadan fast. They demanded a ceasefire,⁷³ which was finally agreed upon between the Afghan government and the Taliban about a month later and lasted from 12-19 June 2018.

DIALOGUE AND DEAL-MAKING: THE US AND THE TALIBAN IN DOHA

Although the Eid ceasefire of June 2018 was the first public display of both the Afghan government's and the Taliban's willingness to negotiate, the talks, which began a month later in July, in Doha, were held only between the US and the Taliban. Norway was one of

⁷¹ There were two other grassroots Afghan movements worth mentioning here, although neither of the two could be characterised as a peace initiative. The Afghanistan 1400 Movement was launched in 2012 by a group of bright young Afghan professionals aiming to break the mould of Afghan politics. See Rachel Reid, [Afghanistan 1400: The dawn and decline of a political movement](#), AAN, 24 March 2021.

The 'Enlightening Movement' was a grassroots civil disobedience movement primarily composed of Hazaras. It emerged in 2016 in response to the Afghan government's decision to reroute a planned electricity transmission line away from the Hazara-dominated areas. Thomas Ruttig, [Power to the People \(2\): The TUTAP protests](#), AAN, 16 May 2016.

⁷² Ali Mohammad Sabawoon, [Going Nationwide: The Helmand peace march initiative](#), AAN, 23 April 2018.

⁷³ Ali Mohammad Sabawoon, [Peace \(hopefully\) for a few days: A ceasefire for Eid as Helmand marchers approach Kabul](#), AAN, 11 June 2018.

the few countries that participated in these negotiations.⁷⁴ Although the State Department stated that “any negotiations over the political future of Afghanistan will be between the Taliban and the Afghan government,”⁷⁵ the Afghan government never officially sat down with the Taliban at the negotiation table in Doha.

The exclusion of allies “radically changed the calculations of all actors and altered their incentives”, Professor Bill Maley wrote.⁷⁶ “This was especially the case when Khalilzad abandoned a defensible ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ formula in favour of a two-stage process in which a bilateral US-Taliban agreement would precede any discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government,” Maley noted.

Between October 2018 and February 2020, the United States and Taliban representatives held nine rounds of negotiations, mainly in Doha, while the Afghan government remained mainly in Kabul.⁷⁷ After the eighth round in August 2019, the two sides had a draft agreement ready for signature. But the US President abruptly called off talks and cancelled the signing. The process was revived in February 2020 with a ninth round of negotiations, and the two sides signed the agreement on 29 February. This agreement, signed by the US and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, provided for a complete withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan within 14 months following the announcement of the [joint declaration](#) and for the launch of intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government on the exchange of prisoners.

The fact that the Doha talks sidelined the Afghan government and excluded all other allied governments is generally viewed as its most significant flaw. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the principal negotiator of the first Trump administration (2017-21), agreed to frame intra-Afghan negotiations in the vaguest possible terms. For example, point 4 of Part Two of the joint declaration says:

To create the conditions for reaching a political settlement and achieving a permanent, sustainable ceasefire, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion with Taliban representatives on confidence building measures, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides.

The US approach to negotiations with the Taliban contributed to the public perception of the disempowered Afghan government, kept other countries involved in Afghanistan at bay and gave credibility to the Taliban that was not matched in reality in the international political forums, such as the United Nations. The secretive nature of the process kept the public out of the loop, while giving the negotiators a public accountability carte blanche, in the sense that there was nobody they were accountable to. While this approach might have been favoured by the United States for its own reasons, it disempowered the Afghan people, as

⁷⁴ The pursuit of peace and stability in Afghanistan remained at the top of the Norwegian foreign policy agenda after the US and Taliban signed the agreement. See the 20 November 2020 [statement](#) by Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ine Eriksen Søreide, and [Communiqué of the Special Envoys and Special Representatives of the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States on the Afghan Peace Process](#) from 7 May 2021.

⁷⁵ Taimoor Shah and Rod Nordland, [U.S. Diplomats Held Face-to-Face Talks With Taliban, Insurgents Say](#), The New York Times, 28 July 2018.

⁷⁶ William Maley and Ahmad Shuja Jamal, [Diplomacy of Disaster: The Afghanistan ‘Peace Process’ and the Taliban Occupation of Kabul](#), *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 17(1), 32-63, 2022.

⁷⁷ Prof Michael Semple et al., [An Independent Assessment of the Afghanistan Peace Process June 2018-May 2021](#), Edinburgh: Political Settlements Research Programme, 2021.

much as it did their perception of their government being in control. Women were almost entirely excluded from formal negotiations.⁷⁸ Finally, the Track Two talks, which could include non-governmental actors and women, could have complemented this process and, by extension, made it more inclusive. There was also a failure throughout to engage meaningfully with transitional justice, despite the consistent warning from many in civil society and some in the Afghan government that without a gnarly and probably lengthy attempt to reconcile competing narratives and visions for the country, a lasting peace would be elusive. The lack of Track Two talks was the final nail in the coffin of the peace process. For Afghans, the peace process became an alienating and obscure idea until it eventually died off.

WHAT THE 'PEACE PROCESS' LEFT BEHIND

Peace negotiations in Afghanistan have consistently been a fragmented and disappointing affair. They failed to deliver the peace settlement that would benefit all Afghan people and instead birthed an authoritarian regime, while Afghanistan remains a deeply divided society with suppressed human rights, especially women's rights. For women, despite years of pledges of support from diplomats (and to a certain extent, their own government) about their participation in peace talks and protection of their rights, found these were ultimately token gestures, easily forfeited in favour of the appearance of progress.

Some argue that the US' 2014 signal of a withdrawal, without any conditions or progress towards intra-Afghan talks, as well as its 2020 deal with the Taliban – also focused on withdrawal, rather than achieving peace in Afghanistan – rendered the Afghan government's position and its attempts to negotiate with the Taliban untenable. However, even with the leverage of the US military, the former Republic never succeeded in presenting as united a front as the Taliban did, ultimately sabotaging its own best interests in favour of factional self-interests. Arguably, while the Norwegians worked hard for peace in Afghanistan, they were also part of the problem of competing to lead a process, which essentially should have been led by the UN, the organisation which was created precisely for that purpose.

Afghanistan's peace record is a poignant reminder that, no matter how well-intentioned, uncoordinated and non-transparent peace efforts by individual actors tend to serve more as self-interest than as genuine contributions to lasting peace and stability. As we know from past examples, peace negotiations and diplomacy were most successful when they involved all countries and the UN as their vehicle. For example, the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, led by the former President of Finland, Matti Ahtisaari, who was appointed the UN Special Envoy at the time. Although Kosovo may not be a major success story in international peacekeeping and the status settlement negotiations, it remains an example of what can be achieved to stop the armed hostilities when international efforts, both military and diplomatic, are coordinated and combined. The latest UN attempts to appoint a Special Envoy for Afghanistan⁷⁹ and to revive the second phase of the Doha Track One process (the intra-Afghan dialogue) illustrate the difficulties in achieving it after the fact.

⁷⁸ See Farkhondeh Akbari and Jacqui True, [Bargaining with Patriarchy in Peacemaking: The Failure of Women, Peace, and Security in Afghanistan](#), *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol 4, issue 1, January 2024.

⁷⁹ Roxanna Shapour, [From Doha to Doha: The contest over a UN Special Envoy lingers as discussions and disagreements drag on](#), AAN, 1 March 2024.

CHAPTER 5.

SPEAKING OF RIGHTS, TOLERATING ABUSE: THE LIMITS OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA IN AFGHANISTAN

Rachel Reid

On paper, Afghanistan made great strides towards improving human rights, particularly in areas such as protections relating to violence against women, child protection and detainee rights. However, these improvements were rarely matched by changes in behaviour or tangible benefits in people's lives. The repressive rule of the Emirate so quickly tossed aside these legal advances, that they can seem futile now. But if one sets hindsight aside, the Afghan human rights movement has much to be proud of. With some support from several international allies, including, to some extent, Norway, Afghan human rights defenders have achieved a great deal. Nonetheless, there are foundational flaws which cannot be overlooked. This section will discuss those failures and offer a more nuanced view of the human rights gains. Any claims of achievements will be modest, set in the heavily weighted context of a fragile state plagued by conflict and corruption.

FOUNDATIONAL FAILURES: MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE

From a human rights perspective, the international engagement was tainted from the outset by alliances with serial Afghan human rights abusers. Some of the foreign forces themselves also perpetrated war crimes. In the case of the US military and CIA's use of torture and rendition, they were authorised by the executive. While some international allies, including Norway, sought to, they were nonetheless intertwined with the coalition nature of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the US-led counter-terror mission and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Military goals also tended to distort civilian efforts, particularly when development and humanitarian work were framed as 'stabilisation' efforts (ODI, Rand). Of particular concern, Norway was an early adopter of a US-led intelligence sharing platform, CENTER ICE, which pooled signals intelligence (Intercept, Spiegel).⁸⁰ As AAN reported in 2011, signals intelligence played an outsized role in targeted killings, including by leading to the wrongful targeting of civilians (also discussed below).

This is not merely a historical matter. Many assumed that US forces were responsible for the worst abuses because of their notorious detention abuses as well as their overall force

⁸⁰ See this leaked document which discusses Norwegian special forces and intelligence involvement in CENTER ICE: [New Tool Put Into Play In Afghanistan](#), Snowden Archive, The Intercept, published 15 August, 2018 (document date: 3 March, 2006).

strength. However, recent investigations have implicated British and Australian special forces in serious violations, including the unlawful killing of detainees. A [UK independent inquiry](#) is currently investigating the deaths of 80 Afghans killed by UK special forces, mainly in Helmand province and mostly involving detention operations, that show hallmarks of executions. A [BBC](#) investigation suggests the real number may be far higher. Similarly, an Australian government [inquiry](#) found evidence that Australian special forces murdered 39 people and mistreated two others. That number is also likely to be higher, as acknowledged by the head of the Australian armed forces, Angus Campbell ([ABC](#)). It has taken well over ten years for some of these crimes to emerge, which inevitably raises concerns about how many more are yet to come to light.

The casual (and at times criminal) resort to lethal force is far more disturbing, given the poor intelligence underpinning the so-called Joint Prioritised Effects List (JPEL) – the questionable ‘kill/capture list’ – which drove what a senior US military adviser described in 2011 as “an almost industrial-scale counterterrorism killing machine” ([PBS](#)). Many of those targeted in ‘kill/capture’ operations, detained at Forward Operations Bases, in Bagram or rendered to Guantanamo, were not, in fact, members of the Taliban. A classified study by the US Center for Naval Analyses into hundreds of civilian casualty incidents found that 50 per cent involved misidentification.⁸¹ At times, misidentification may have been due to human or signals errors, or the result of malign intelligence, where international forces were hoodwinked into detentions or assassinations by rival factions.⁸² There has not been a meaningful reckoning with these grave failings by individual militaries or NATO.⁸³

Afghan security forces – trained, mentored and supported by international allies – and militia forces with a less clear chain of command (also supported by international allies) were also frequently implicated in serious human rights abuses.⁸⁴ For example, according to a [NYT investigative report](#), security forces under the command of Abdul Razeq in southern Afghanistan were implicated in the abduction, killing and torture of many hundreds of Afghans. Yet, Razeq remained strongly allied to the US.

Against this troubling backdrop, it is reasonable to ask whether Norway, which participated in a military coalition, intelligence sharing and joint operations with allies mired in grave breaches of international law, could have seen, said and done more to halt the abuses.

⁸¹ The US rendition programme implicated at least 54 countries, according to a [2013 study](#) by the Open Society Justice Initiative.

⁸² The study by Larry Lewis focused on hundreds of incidents in 2007-09 and 2010-11. An interview by the author with Lewis in 2016 featured in this report: [The Strategic Costs of Civilian Harm](#), Open Society Foundations, June 2016, p19. See also p18 for an example of malign information. See also, [The Afghanistan Papers – At War With The Truth](#), The Washington Post, 9 December 2019; or Mike Martin, *An Intimate War*, Hurst 2014, pp 2, 3, 234, 237, 239.

⁸³ The intelligence weakness that undermined the kill/capture strategy has received little attention in the public sphere. NATO conducted a lessons learned exercise in 2021, which was classified, but did not appear to tackle war crimes and intelligence failings, based on publicly available summaries of the report (from [NATO](#), and an article published by the Atlantic Council: [I wrote NATO’s lessons from Afghanistan. Now I wonder: What have we learned?](#) published on 11 August 2022). The United States set up an [Afghanistan War Commission](#) in 2021 to review the war in Afghanistan from June 2001 to August 2021, which is ongoing at this writing, but in the current political climate in the US, it seems unlikely to result in a balanced assessment or policy impacts.

⁸⁴ See [“They’ve Shot Many Like This” Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces](#), Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2019; or Andrew Quilty, [The CIA’s Afghan Death Squads – A U.S.-Backed Militia That Kills Children May Be America’s Exit Strategy From Its Longest War](#), The Intercept, 18 December 2020.

An emblematic compromise where human rights values were sacrificed for perceived military security relates to the widespread phenomenon of the sexual abuse of boys, known as *bacha bazi*, which was frequently witnessed by international forces who appear to have mostly chosen to avoid conflict with Afghan partners perpetrating the abuse. A 2025 study published in a US Army War College journal, looks at the legacy of trauma in UK soldiers who chose not to confront their partners. An earlier academic work published by a Norwegian journal in 2018 showed Norwegian forces chose not to stop the abuse by Afghan forces when they witnessed *bacha bazi* in the early years of ISAF. Similarly, in 2015, the *New York Times* revealed that it was a de facto US military policy to ignore *bacha bazi*. This is disturbing from a human rights perspective, in all phases of the international military relationship with Afghan forces, whether it was paying for, partnering with, training or mentoring those Afghan police or soldiers abusing boys.

FOUNDATIONAL FAILURES: POLITICAL

The international political engagement on human rights in Afghanistan has been widely criticised for sacrificing human rights principles in favour of counterterrorism priorities or elusive notions of peace or stability. Plenty has been written on this subject, but it is worth noting a few of emblematic human rights debacles. First, there was the ushering in of notorious war criminals into besuited positions of power by diplomats and UN officials from the Bonn conference onwards.⁸⁵ Second, the transitional justice agenda, ambitiously laid out after a national consultation by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in a national action plan in 2005, was effectively abandoned in favour of ‘stability’.⁸⁶ Third were the persistent resistance from troop-contributing nations to support international justice efforts that might have implicated their own forces, despite the evident shortcomings in their own military accountability. This continues today, with several troop-contributing nations resisting efforts at the UN Human Rights Council to create an impartial, independent mechanism to gather and preserve evidence of war crimes for fear that it might entail scrutiny of their own records.⁸⁷ This partiality is also reflected in the decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to deprioritise crimes by international and the Republic’s forces⁸⁸ – ostensibly for resource reasons, although most analysts assume some political motives. This is particularly unfortunate, as former Afghan government actors are among those perpetrators who are most vulnerable to capture and, therefore, prosecution, compared to Taliban and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) suspects. Also, the lawyers for those rendered and/or tortured by the CIA or US military already have detailed dossiers that they could present to the court. Similarly, although millions were spent on anti-corruption efforts, they favoured priority areas for donors, such as counter-narcotics and the extractive industry, rather than the staggering kleptocracy

⁸⁵ See this paper by AAN’s Kate Clark and Stephen Carter, *No Shortcut to Stability – Justice, Politics and Insurgency in Afghanistan*, Chatham House, 2010.

⁸⁶ See Barnett R Rubin, *Transitional Justice and Human Rights in Afghanistan*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, May 2003, pp270-273.

⁸⁷ Author interviews with human rights defenders and government officials, 2020-25. For more on the independent mechanism, see *Questions & Answers on the Establishment of an Independent International Accountability Mechanism for Afghanistan*, Human Rights Watch, 26 November 2024.

⁸⁸ See The Pre-Trial Chamber II’s *Response to the Prosecution’s “Request to authorise resumption of investigation under article 18(2) of the Statute.*

that hollowed out the Afghan government, blighted the lives of millions of Afghans and eroded public trust (NBC).

NORWAY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Norway prioritised stabilisation and peacebuilding in Afghanistan, treating human rights as a cross-cutting issue. This makes a meaningful assessment of its contribution to human rights difficult. Politically, it seems fair to say that in the period under study its foreign policy prioritisation of peacebuilding overshadowed its leadership on human rights-based issues. It was best known for promoting engagement with the Taliban, including through its office in Doha.⁸⁹ This stance inevitably put Norway at odds with many Afghan human rights defenders, who remained unconvinced about hopes for a reformed 'Taliban 2.0'. Shaharзад Akbar, who led the AIHRC from 2019 to 2021, told AAN that Norway's focus on talking to the Taliban lost them a lot of trust in the human rights movement:

There was a negative perception of them being in the Taliban's corner. It seems a big cost for them to pay for just engagement with the Taliban. I'm not sure how much their engagement with the Taliban really advanced any human rights issues ... that shouldn't have been at the cost of having a very open and respectful relationship with civil society and the women's movement, which didn't always come across fully.

Norway went a little way to mitigate its misalignment with the women's rights movement on engagement with the Taliban by lending consistent support to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, including calls for greater participation of women in peace negotiations.⁹⁰ This amplified an important aspect of women's rights defenders' demands. International calls for women's engagement may have contributed to modest improvements in levels of women's participation.⁹¹ Ultimately, however, marginal gains in female representation with the Taliban in Doha could do little to mitigate the lack of concrete assurances on rights from the Taliban during negotiations. Perhaps there was little that could be done, given the disastrously weak negotiating position of the Afghan state after the US negotiated its own bilateral deal to fairly unconditionally withdraw international troops to an agreed timeline.

Norway was known for taking a principled stance several human rights issues, including media freedoms, civilian protection and the death penalty. Of note was that it called for legal proceedings against General Abdul Rashid Dostum in 2018, when he returned to Afghanistan after a year spent in exile evading rape and kidnapping charges.⁹² However,

⁸⁹ This study by Michael Semple, Ambassador Robin Raphael and Shams Rasikh described Norway as being "a particularly enthusiastic participant" in engagement with the Taliban's Doha office. See [An Independent Assessment of the Afghanistan peace process June 2018-May 2021](#), PSRP, July 2021, p7.

⁹⁰ For example, in the latter years of the Republic, Norway was one of the leading states supporting talks between the Taliban and the Republic, often stressing the importance of women's presence in peace negotiations (see this 2020 [statement](#) by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ine Eriksen Søreide).

⁹¹ A 2020 study by Oxfam found that women participated in only one in five talks, and of those, often in small numbers or at a marginal level. See [Because She Matters – Ensuring Women's Meaningful Participation in peacebuilding in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam International, Cordaid and Association for Inclusive Peace, September 2020 (hosted by Reliefweb).

⁹² Norway and the EU made a joint statement on Dostum: [Statement by the EU and Norway Heads of Missions in Afghanistan](#), EU External Action, 13 August 2018. For background on the story, see Rod Nordland, [Accused of Rape and Torture, Exiled Afghan Vice President Returns](#), The New York Times, 22 July 2018.

it had at other times taken a more ‘realist’ position on human rights when it felt its peace agenda was at stake, for example, Norway was among the countries that encouraged the suppression of a conflict-mapping report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).⁹³

As a donor, Norway did not allocate significant funding to human rights organisations, though it did support major humanitarian and protection efforts.⁹⁴ Its long-term support to the AIHRC was perhaps its most significant contribution to the human rights field. An assessment of the AIHRC and its donors is well beyond the scope of this section, but it seems reasonable to state that difficulties in the Commission reflected wider problems of the Afghan government and civil society, with patchy research and administrative capacity. However, politically and symbolically, it had an enduring importance to the wider Afghan human rights movement.⁹⁵

With hindsight, it seems worth asking whether, as a long-term supporter of the Commission, whose staff were among the most vulnerable in the country, Norway, like other donors and supporters, could have done more to support the AIHRC as the end of the Republic came into view.⁹⁶ For months prior to the collapse, the AIHRC had spoken to multiple donors about the need for assistance in evacuating vulnerable staff and securing vital documentation. Unfortunately, most were focused on their own evacuation.⁹⁷ Many vulnerable AIHRC staff were left behind, as was a large portion of sensitive archive materials.⁹⁸ Norway did give sanctuary to some women who had been involved in negotiations but largely prioritised evacuating Afghans who had worked with its military and embassy.⁹⁹

Norway’s financial investment in women’s rights seems to have largely gone through [UN Women](#), despite criticisms that dogged the agency in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ UN Women channelled its efforts through the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (which was also subject to criticism),

⁹³ [A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014](#), Official Norwegian Reports, 2016, p110.

⁹⁴ Review of OCHA’s [Financial Tracking Service](#), 2015–21. It was noted in [A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014](#) that Norway earmarked less than three per cent of its budget to human rights organisations (p108).

⁹⁵ The AIHRC skirted on the edge of being downgraded as a National Human Rights Institute for several years, after problematic appointments by President Karzai in 2013 ([AAN](#)). In 2019, a new leadership was introduced ([AAN](#)), with efforts made to resolve problems over financial oversight, administration, research and data security inside the Commission (interviews and conversations with former senior leaders within the Commission over many years, as well as evaluators and donors). This assessment rings true: “Despite its strong track record of success, the AIHRC remains woefully resource-challenged to perform,” in “Strengthening Human Rights Monitoring in Afghanistan: AIHRC Project”, The Law and Order Trust Fund / Multi-Partner Trust Fund evaluation report, 2018 (on file with author).

⁹⁶ Interview with Shaharzarad Akbar, former AIHRC head, May 2025. There were calls for increased protection for the AIHRC from at least July 2020, after the murder of two AIHRC staff members. See, [APF calls for increased protection of Afghanistan’s NHRI](#), Asia Pacific Forum, 3 July 2020.

⁹⁷ See, “[The World Simply Gave Up](#)”: [International Law and the Role of Non-State Entities in Humanitarian Evacuations in Afghanistan](#), Leitner Center, September 2023.

⁹⁸ Interviews and conversations with AIHRC staff, 2020–21 (the author was part of a small, informal advisory group working with the AIHRC leadership during this time).

⁹⁹ Norway also evacuated several women’s rights defenders. See [Evacuated from the Taliban, Deactivated in Norway?](#), Menneskerettighetsfondet, August 2022; [Norway halts Kabul evacuation, says foreign minister](#), Reuters, 26 August 2021. Norwegian Directorate of Immigration [Circular GI-11/2022](#), 3 July 2022.

¹⁰⁰ For a review of Norway’s contribution to women, peace and security in the latter years of the Republic, noting its low impact, see [Norway’s Contribution to Participation in Peacebuilding - A Case Study Analysis from Afghanistan, Colombia and Nordic Women Mediators Network](#), Scanteam, 8 December 2021, p16. See also ‘A Good Ally’, footnoted above, p117. See also criticism of UN Women’s leadership in [Evaluation of UN Women Country Programme in Afghanistan](#), Sida, March 2018, p4.

with some support to the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and several other NGOs.¹⁰¹ Although AWN suffered from internal political rancour in its later years, common to many civil society coalitions, it was a hugely important amplifier for women's rights defenders and organisations. In hindsight, perhaps a sustained partnership with Afghan NGOs, including AWN – rather than working indirectly through expensive UN agencies and a weak ministry – may have been a better long-term investment.¹⁰²

Notably, one AAN author recalls, through personal experience in 2019-22, that Norway's interest in documenting international crimes was balanced in terms of dealing with perpetrators equally. This was in contrast to many donors who, as noted above, preferred to focus only on non-state actors, rather than acknowledge the unlawful actions by the Republic or their international allies. That said, Norway did not join the March 2025 call for an impartial, independent accountability mechanism made by 14 missions in Geneva, led by [Iceland](#), which would allow for longer term gathering and preservation of evidence of international crimes which took place in Afghanistan.

RELATIVE GAINS OF THE AFGHAN HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The period 2016-21, particularly relevant for this assessment, was marked by advance and regress in a number of human rights areas. Legislative or regulatory advances that did not result in significant behavioural reform. This, however, is very much to be expected, particularly in a fragile and conflict-afflicted country with only a semi-functioning state. The tenacity and skills of Afghan human rights defenders are evident in these faltering reforms.

Women's rights

Afghan women's rights defenders grew into a formidable force with an extensive domestic and international network adept at engaging with the media to promote and defend their causes. The individual leaders and their non-profit organisations were not without flaws, but they were also subject to constant and often highly personal attacks. They remained actively engaged in a constant battle against a deeply patriarchal culture and entrenched conservative factions in the government, parliament and regional positions of power: it is this context through which their achievements should be measured.

There were modest legislative gains and defensive achievements in 2015-21. In 2016, women's rights defenders and parliamentarians succeeded in holding off a concerted effort to strip key protections from the 2009 [Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#), including the minimum age for marriage, women's shelters and punishment for domestic abuse ([HRW](#)). In the same year, despite considerable opposition, an [Anti-Harassment Law](#) was passed by parliament and eventually, in 2018, approved by President Ghani ([ToloNews](#)). Serious cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence by high-profile men, however, saw limited results. The December 2018 revelation (by [The Guardian](#)) of sexual assault by the president of the country's football federation, Keramuddin Karim, is a notable exception. The revelations did result in an arrest warrant ([Pajhwok](#)), thanks in part

¹⁰¹ A Good Ally, p117 and Norway's Contribution footnoted above.

¹⁰² This may have been the case with Norway's longer-term support to IWA (A Good Ally, p119). The author collaborated with IWA for several years (2009-12). See praise for IWA's capacity in [IWA – SIGAR's Eyes and Ears in Afghanistan](#) (podcast transcript), Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Episode 9, March 2019.

to the presence of a former human rights commissioner, Farid Hamidi, as Attorney General. However, by 2020, Karim had evaded justice, reportedly hiding in Panjshir province, illustrating the weakness of state power ([Reuters](#)). It is worth recognising, at least, the courage of the women who allowed the lid to be lifted on this scandal, given the culture of taboo that surrounded discussions of sexual and gender-based violence ([AAN](#)).

The women's peace and security agenda saw a combination of modest gains as well as entrenched conservative resistance. The 2015 [Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security](#) was never fully implemented. The Republic's behaviour, in this regard, lagged well behind its policy commitments and women continued to be largely excluded from high-level talks, as noted above.¹⁰³ At the 2020 Intra-Afghan talks in Qatar, the Republic's 21-member negotiating team included just four women ([Al Jazeera](#)), while at the Moscow talks in March 2021, only one woman was invited ([The Diplomat](#)), an indictment of the tokenistic commitment of many governments to women, peace and security.

Many Afghan human rights defenders, including the AIHRC, placed great importance on working to shift attitudes towards a more rights-respecting culture. Some studies suggest that attitudes did become more tolerant, most notably the Survey of the Afghan People, the longest-running public perception survey in Afghanistan (from 2004 to 2019). In 2019, the survey showed that more than 86 per cent of respondents approved of women's education, with 76 per cent supporting women working outside the home. A February 2024 study by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS) suggested "a growing acceptance of girls not marrying until they were over 18," particularly among younger women with secondary education or above.¹⁰⁴ Of course, while it is possible to track attitudinal shifts, assigning causality is another matter, given the range of rapid social and economic changes in Afghanistan throughout the Republic, such as the expansion of media, literacy, and employment. However, the legacy of two decades of women's rights activism could be seen in spontaneous demonstrations organised by women who braved reprisals from Emirate enforcers ([HRW](#)). Their demand of "*Nan, Kar, Azadi*" (Bread, Work, Freedom) suggested a clear sense of entitlement to their rights ([Foreign Policy](#)).

Taking on torture

Efforts to combat torture are emblematic of human rights work that succeeded in winning legal reforms that did not translate into reducing abuse within the short term. However, this does not mean those efforts were wrongheaded: lessons from the global human rights experience, while far from conclusive, suggest that legislative reforms are necessary for putting in place practical measures that can reduce torture over time, such as access to lawyers or prison monitoring.¹⁰⁵

Torture was a widespread feature of Afghan detention facilities before, during and after the Republic. While UN and international diplomats raised this issue over many years, the US's

¹⁰³ There were two women on the High Peace Council, but their role was marginal. See Wazhma Frogh, [Afghanistan's National Action Plan: 'A wish list of many dreams'](#), LSE, 28 November 2017. See also, Heather Barr, [Women Excluded Again from Afghanistan's Peace Talks](#), HRW, 6 June 2017.

¹⁰⁴ See Mariam Safi, Evie Browne, Tony Kamninga and Ayesha Khan, [Changing social norms around age of marriage in Afghanistan](#), Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), February 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Justin Einolf, [After 50 years of global effort to abolish torture, much work remains](#), The Conversation, 18 December 2023. See also Richard Carver and Lisa Handley's book, *Does Torture Prevention Work?*, Liverpool University Press, 1 July 2016 pp45-105.

own record on torture in Afghanistan and Iraq undermined its moral authority. For Afghans, advocacy on torture was perilous work, but in 2008, a group of senior lawyers and human rights defenders found some protection by banding together to form the Detention Working Group (DWG). The DWG played a significant role in working with the Ministry of Justice to draft the 2017 [Law on the Prohibition of Torture](#), which was passed by presidential decree, as well as an [annex](#) later the same year, which provided a compensation provision.¹⁰⁶ This was followed, in 2017, by the [National Plan on the Elimination of Torture](#) and Afghanistan's accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture ([UNAMA](#), [HRW](#)).

UNAMA, which consistently documented levels of detainee abuse for over a decade, played an important role here, as did the AIHRC, which also provided detention monitoring. Scrutiny from the International Criminal Court of Afghanistan's willingness and ability to investigate and hold to account those responsible may have provided an incentive,¹⁰⁷ as might threats of funding cuts from the US Congress if torture practices were not eradicated ([AAN](#)).

While the legislative gains did not result in meaningful investigations or prosecutions, subsequent UN monitoring noted a relative decline in reported instances of torture ([UNAMA](#)) – though in the last year of the Republic, UNAMA was still finding that almost one in three conflict-related detainees experienced torture ([AAN](#)). Global experience, however, shows that eliminating torture is slow work. Afghanistan did at least demonstrate a course correction, thanks in part to Afghan human rights defenders exerting quiet pressure on their government, as well as drafting laws and regulations.

TAKING THE PRACTITIONERS' VIEW

Hindsight bias can lead to a gloomy determinism that not only was the corrupted Republic destined to implode, but the efforts made towards a more rights-respecting legal and cultural paradigm were also destined to fail. It is tempting to see legislative and regulatory gains through this gloomy light, since they were mostly not matched by action. This view, however, overlooks the complex and incremental nature of human rights work. A more realistic practitioners' view accepts that human rights work is comprised of advances, failures and defensive actions, on a long road towards reform. Despite working in very hostile conditions, Afghan human rights defenders frequently risked their lives to promote and protect human rights, including even now under the Emirate. Their persistence, under intense and shifting political and social conditions, speaks to the ongoing relevance of their work. If change is mostly relational, there remains a cohort of Afghans committed to human rights.

¹⁰⁶ The Afghanistan Independent Bar Association provided the secretariat for the Detention Working Group, which also received technical support from the Open Society Foundations and The Asia Foundation.

¹⁰⁷ The ICC prosecutor asked [permission](#) to open an investigation in November 2017, including into torture by Afghan security forces, having engaged with Afghan officials prior to that decision.

EPILOGUE: REFLECTIONS AFTER THE REPUBLIC

Martine van Bijlert

The end of twenty years of militarised state-building in Afghanistan coincided with the collapse of the very Republic the intervention had ushered in and propped up. Countries like Norway, which had joined the Coalition in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, based on a desire to be “a good ally” to the US and within NATO, had struggled throughout the period with the fact that their role was limited and their overall impact difficult to recognise.¹⁰⁸ Real progress proved elusive and realities on the ground matched neither the Coalition’s intended policies nor the reported successes. Many of the problems had been known; Norway had been unusually candid about them in its 2016 report.¹⁰⁹ Still the swift and sudden collapse of the Republic in 2021 exposed the assurances of years past as even more hollow than had been realised earlier: the continued insistence that, although challenges remained, progress was being made; that success was still around the corner; and that any withdrawal would be conditions-based and would only happen when the country was ready.¹¹⁰

THE COLLAPSE OF AFGHANISTAN’S REPUBLIC: LONG-FORETOLD, STILL UNEXPECTED

There were many different ways in which the Republic could have ended. This specific flavour of collapse, swift and sudden, unexpected even to the Taliban, was largely shaped by the way the US handled its decision to end its military involvement in Afghanistan. Although the troop withdrawal was presented as part of a wider peace process, timelines were set independently of any progress on that front and the only condition put forward was for the Taliban to ensure that Afghan soil would not be used against the US or its allies. The Afghan government had been completely cut out of the talks; the Taliban had refused to acknowledge it as a party in its

¹⁰⁸ Mats Berdal and Astri Suhrke, [A Good Ally – Norway and International Statebuilding in Afghanistan, 2001-2014](#), *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 2018. See also the original 2016 [NOU report](#) and AAN’s 2016 discussion of it [here](#).

¹⁰⁹ “Already in 2016, [Norway’s evaluation] found that despite the country’s efforts, ‘the situation remains discouraging’ and that ‘overall, Norway’s contribution did not make a significant difference to the international mission in Afghanistan.” Blom, Rotmann and Weigand, [“Never Say Never.” Learning lessons from Afghanistan Reviews](#), February 2024.

¹¹⁰ NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg’s [press conference](#) on 15 February 2021: “So our presence is conditions-based. While no Ally wants to stay in Afghanistan longer than necessary, we will not leave before the time is right.” This mirrored similar NATO statements around the 2011-2013 – highly calendar-driven – transition process that ended the ISAF mission. See for instance [in 2010](#): “Transition will be conditions-based, not calendar-driven.”

own right and the US had implicitly made it clear it did not need much from the government either, not even its continued existence.

Just as the Bonn Agreement in 2001 had been a power-sharing deal rather than a peace agreement, the 29 February 2020 Doha Agreement, or “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” too had a much narrower scope. It was in essence a bilateral withdrawal agreement, allowing the US and its allies to step back from the battlefield, pull out their troops without fearing attacks and claim that the main objective of the two-decade involvement – security at home – had been achieved.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2021, international troops were indeed left alone, while the Taliban intensified and accelerated their attacks on government positions. Buoyed by a weakened adversary, they captured district centres, military outposts, revenue-collection points and finally provincial capitals in swift succession. The Afghan political leadership dithered, possibly expecting the US forces to step in after all, while what was left of the security apparatus fragmented and dissolved. With no mechanisms in place for swift and strategic decision-making and no clear lines of command and communication, forces that still wanted to fight found themselves besieged without guidance, backup or supplies.¹¹¹

Zaranj, on the border with Iran, was the first provincial capital to fall, on 6 August 2021. In the days after, all northern provincial capitals except Mazar-e Sharif were swiftly taken, undermining hopes of a possible northern anti-Taliban front. Herat and Kandahar, which could have been other government strongholds, fell on 12 August. By the morning of 15 August, six of the seven zonal army corps had either surrendered or dissolved and over twenty provincial capitals were in Taliban hands. Taliban forces started wandering into the outskirts of the capital.¹¹²

This was the moment those involved had expected the frame to freeze, with a standoff between the rump government in Kabul and the Taliban at its gates, while delegations engaged in talks. It was unlikely to have been a viable track, but Western capitals hoped it would have bought the international military time to leave, allowing their governments to wash their hands of responsibility for the fracturing that would now follow. Instead, President Ashraf Ghani and his advisers fled the capital, leaving Afghanistan without a government. The Islamic Emirate took over and international military and Taliban forces spent two uneasy weeks alongside each other, trying to manage the panicked rush towards Kabul Airport by Afghans desperate to leave.

The hollowness of the assurances that the withdrawal would be “orderly, coordinated and deliberate,”¹¹³ conditions-based and not time-based, the hopeful predictions that Afghan forces would rally, the insistence after the fact that nothing had gone wrong, no mistakes had been made – all only amplified what felt like a distillation of the bewilderment that

¹¹¹ For on-the-ground details on how the Taliban took districts across the country, see Martine van Bijlert, [Afghanistan’s Conflict in 2021 \(1\), The Taliban’s sweeping offensive as told by people on the ground](#), AAN, 21 December 2021.

¹¹² Martine van Bijlert, [Is This How It Ends? With the Taliban closing in on Kabul, President Ghani faces tough decisions](#), AAN, 15 August 2021.

¹¹³ [North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement](#) of 14 April 2021. US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, at the accompanying [press conference](#), said the US would withdraw “responsibly, deliberately and safely.”

had accompanied much of the two decades of international involvement. How could it have gone so wrong, so quickly, when so many had genuinely tried?

THE ROOTS OF THE COLLAPSE

In many ways, Afghanistan's Republic had collapse baked into its system. Its political system was overly centralised. Its elections worked well as a means to channel political energies across the country, but had been talked up as vehicles of democracy, only to end in chaotic audits and internationally arbitrated deals, which damaged trust in the system. The administration was bloated, far beyond what the Afghan state could, by itself, ever finance. Its institutions were plagued by corruption and factionalism, inspired and enabled by massive aid flows and the impunity awarded, by both Afghans and internationals, to the politically powerful and those who could threaten violence (even though many outsiders tried to frame the mass money leakages as a quintessentially Afghan feature). Even towards the end, Afghanistan's security forces were unable to function without outside support, despite the nominal transition of command in 2014 and seven years of supposed training and support towards self-reliance. As Foschini noted in his contribution, "The very flaws the RSM should have eliminated through training, advising and assisting ... were instead addressed through continuous involvement." Or as noted by Clark, "the aim – to ... enable Afghanistan to 'stand on its own feet' – was sabotaged by the method itself. The huge external rents inevitably created a state and economy dependent on that money."

Post-Bonn Afghanistan had become a "rentier state on steroids," but the roots of the problem predated the regime. As noted by Hopkins, going back to the nineteenth century, "The [Afghan] state was never intended to serve the needs of its people, including establishing security within its borders. Of paramount importance to the competing imperial powers was the idea that it constrained insecurity within its borders. Most importantly, the Afghan state was never meant to be self-sufficient. Instead, it was designed to be reliant on surrounding imperial powers, especially financially. Thus, the first pathology of the Afghan state – bequeathed it by its imperial architects – was that it would be a fiscal sink."¹¹⁴

Although the intervention was presented as a break with history through which Afghanistan would become, at least relatively, modernised, democratic and self-sufficient, it was very much a continuation of the idea of a subsidised – geographical and ideological – buffer state. Central to both the beginning and the end of the post-2001 Republic was this focus on constraining insecurity within Afghanistan's borders. It was the justification for the intervention that birthed the new government – framed as an act of 'self-defence' to prevent further attacks emanating from Afghanistan – and it was the only condition put forward by the US for the withdrawal agreement that precipitated the end of the Republic.

Towards the end, there had been some hope that the perceived weakness of the Republic might, in part, have stemmed from an overestimation of the role and importance of outside support, and that the simplification that came with a diminished international involvement might focus minds and restore a sense of responsibility. This did not happen. Instead, as described by Clark, "Even as the Taliban ratcheted up the insurgency in the

¹¹⁴ Benjamin D Hopkins, [Afghanistan's Present Failure Lies in its Past Design](#), MERP, 18 January 2022.

Republic's final months, MPs and government were arguing over the budget, Ghani and Abdullah were wrangling over who would go to Washington to meet President Biden and generals in the army were selling food rations and ammunition. None of these officials and politicians apparently connected their own survival with that of the state." Nor did any of the officials seem to consider the survival of the state their responsibility.

This had long been a problem. During the twenty years of the intervention, an outsized part of the engagement with the Afghan government had focused on protecting it from collapse and coaxing it into governing, often through a complicated web of meetings, conferences and reporting obligations. Much of this was part of an image management campaign: there were domestic audiences that needed persuading that their money was well spent and that the mission could still be considered benign, successful and fiscally responsible. There was the 'struggle for hearts and minds' at the local level, with COIN operations that involved talking up local government service delivery, often provided by the military themselves. And since this was a battle that could not be won by military means alone, the military had often sought to win by looking like they were winning. Institution and capacity building was aimed at streamlining the interface with international partners and their projects, so that implementation goals could be met and reported on.

The fact that the bureaucracy survived the Emirate's takeover underlines that the Republic's main failures lay in the realm of leadership, an absence of effective oversight and a lack of political accountability and responsibility, rather than technical shortcomings. But this cannot be blamed on Afghan officials alone. Collectively, they had to endure twenty years of being told what to do, of being both sidelined and pushed forward as the Afghan face to policies they did not design, of being told to take political risks without adequate cover, of being humoured and given random advisers whose skills and agendas were unclear. There were, of course, many officials who took advantage of their positions, but there were many others who were serious and committed and who struggled greatly to keep trying. There was relatively little space for ambitious, articulate, intelligent people of integrity to be appreciated and heard, let alone given actual authority. Those who tried often did so at considerable risk and personal cost, making it particularly painful when it all collapsed so suddenly. Many of them have left, forming yet another wave of Afghans who need to rebuild their lives elsewhere, after the system that sustained them ceased to exist.

WHAT WAS LOST AND WHAT REMAINS

The fact that the Republic's leadership was often sidelined, humoured or otherwise preoccupied, did not stop the building of a bureaucracy, which – in technical terms – has largely survived the Emirate's takeover. Twenty years of international aid have thus allowed the Taliban to return to power using a far more effective apparatus than it had during its first Emirate and, quite possibly, than as used under the Republic. The institutions, mechanisms and structures considered key to the Emirate's survival and to the control of the population were immediately put to use. This included, in particular, departments that could be tasked with revenue collection, intelligence gathering, communication and religious surveillance. Practically all government institutions were enlisted in what the Emirate considers a cultural and spiritual war over Afghanistan's soul, spearheaded by the education and vice and virtue ministries.

Institutions that over the years had been presented as flagships of the democratisation project were dismantled, gutted or redirected. This involved, most prominently, the Ministry for Women's Affairs, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Ombudsperson's Office and the Attorney General's Office (which was turned into the Directorate of Supervision and Prosecution of the Decrees and Orders of the Supreme Leader). The reframed responsibilities of these institutions have been largely handed to the vice and virtue ministry, in keeping with the regime's religious outlook, as this ministry sees itself not only as responsible for the nation's dress and behaviour, but also as the custodian of the nation's rights and regulations and as the focal point for citizens' complaints.¹¹⁵

The starkness of this change from one system to another, with the new one seeking to eradicate all traces of what came before, is partly rooted in the fact that throughout the twenty years of international intervention there had been no middle ground, no contemplation of alternatives to either the sitting government or this particular flavour of free market democracy, and no space for autonomous political forces to emerge. Progress was presented as the Taliban's loss and the government's success, rather than belonging to Afghanistan's future.

One, of course, has to be careful not to overstate or romanticise the efficiency of the Emirate's bureaucracy. Its ranks are being filled with new appointments, skewed by religious and ethnic bias, men who often have little experience or relevant education (a parallel to the Republic's political and factional divvying up of posts and jobs). There are anecdotal but consistent, careful, complaints of corruption and extortion.

And while the gains of the last twenty years were routinely overstated, the losses after it came to an end have been huge: the progressive exclusion of women and girls from public life, the curtailment of rights and freedoms through religious and political surveillance and ethnic favouritism and the redefining of what education means, who it should serve, for what future it provides and to whom.¹¹⁶ And while the Republic failed to include large parts of the population, politically and economically, and allowed its strongmen (and sometimes women) to treat rivals and those without power with threats, violence and exploitation, there were many more opportunities to seek protection and patronage and to be part of a wide array of networks, than is the case under the Emirate. Life now, as a result, is bleak and feels very vulnerable for large parts of the population.

But not everything currently being grieved as a loss can be credited to the international intervention. The opportunities and freedoms provided by education or the greater public role for women were often created by individuals and communities themselves, battling to carve out a niche in the cacophony of projects, proposals and PR efforts. So many Afghans were involved in local reconciliation and community-building efforts, without the jargon and reporting obligations. The level of empathy and solidarity often found was remarkable and continues, where possible, to keep the country going, even now.

¹¹⁵ Martine van Bijlert, [How the Emirate Wants to be Perceived. A closer look at the Accountability Programme](#), AAN, July 2024, pp 11-14.

¹¹⁶ For more details on the Emirate's treatment of higher education see Said Reza Kazemi, [The Emergent Taliban Defined University](#), AAN, July 2023.

WHY WAS THIS SO COMPLICATED, AND OTHER QUESTIONS TO ASK

The story may have been apocryphal, but in the early years, I was told how an employee of a major international organisation walked into their boss' office one day, found them with their head on their desk, defeated, mumbling, "Everything is broken and we don't know how to fix it." This sense of bemused powerlessness – why is this so complicated, why is it not getting better despite the efforts of so many serious people? – hovered over so many meetings and conversations, even if it was often not articulated. It was a driver for deeper analysis, more upbeat assessments, calls for greater political will, calls not to abandon Afghanistan, to renew surges, or to cut loose and walk away. It was the question Afghans asked countless times: with so many troops, so much money, so many people pooling their expertise, how can the outcome be this shoddy?

Ultimately, it was not the lack of knowledge that led to failure – many of the problems had been known for years – but the continued pursuit of 'solutions' that did not match the complexity of the situation at hand.

From the beginning, the spectre of the 1992 collapse was held over discussions of how long to keep this level of military and monetary support going. The main alternative to staying the course, it was argued, was renewed civil war, dissolution and the reinstatement of a haven for international terrorism. The heavy investments in state-building and democratisation made it difficult to consider abandoning the project with so little to show for it. And with politics and counterinsurgency having become a game of image management, it had become difficult to be honest about how messy it all was and was likely to stay.

There were, of course, course corrections along the way. Counterterrorism gave way to counterinsurgency, as it became clear that military means would not solve a political problem. The prospect of talks with the Taliban became an option and then part of the overall strategy, not in the least through Norway's efforts early on. Corruption and predatory governance were recognised as destabilising forces and combatting them became a priority, at least for a while. Both the military and civilian sides invested heavily in 'granular' local knowledge, although much of that was in service of agendas that were not suited to the context or the lives of most Afghans. The course corrections often led to new misunderstandings or were dumbed down and later abandoned, when they proved too complicated.

By the time the National Unity Government (NUG) came around in late 2014, a deep scepticism had taken root across the country – against the president and his advisers, parliamentarians, politicians, the judiciary and the countries that were keeping the government alive. But the suspicions against the internationals, among those who had initially supported the intervention or at least given it a chance, started much earlier, probably around the time the various troop-contributing countries started taking over the PRTs, providing Afghans an opportunity to see what state-building and counterinsurgency looked like, up close. They saw, for instance, how rather than protecting them from the strongmen who had largely taken over the local government and armed forces, the

international military preferred to ally itself with these very commanders to ensure 'force protection.'¹¹⁷

At first, many Afghans thought the foreigners needed help and tried to explain what was going wrong and why. That gave way to puzzlement and then, slowly but surely, a conviction that the increased corruption, drug trade and Taliban encroachment must have been, at the very least, tolerated by the internationals, if not orchestrated and planned.¹¹⁸

One of the main questions that hovers over the intervention, now that it is over and countries like Norway are trying to make sense of the two decades, is not how money could have been better spent or government departments made to coordinate better, not how existing knowledge could have been better leveraged when decisions were made or projects designed, or how results could have been better communicated – although all of this has been argued and none of it is completely irrelevant. It is rather: What can be done when a large project like this is headed in a direction that cannot be easily walked back, and is in fact creating new problems of its own, but to abandon the effort would also make things worse, albeit in a different way? Or more concretely: What leverage points does a small country have in a joint intervention like this – an intervention that was flawed from the beginning, had an internal logic that counteracted the stated aims and defined success in ways that discouraged course correction, an intervention that was politically difficult not to join and became almost impossible to extricate oneself from.

The author of the 2023 review for the European Parliament, another candid report, concluded that the EU's involvement in Afghanistan suffered from both "failures of autonomy" vis-a-vis US foreign policy objectives and American power, and "failures of imagination" in trying to provide an alternative to US policy. He argued that the EU simply retreated into its identity as a 'civilian power', pursuing policies because "that is who we are' and 'that is what we do', rather than identifying the strategic terrain presented and asking 'will this work' and 'how will we adapt'.¹¹⁹

Many of the countries that joined the US and NATO in their military missions viewed themselves as "peace nations" and framed their involvement as such.¹²⁰ This self-

¹¹⁷ In a survey of PRTs in 2004, Kate Clark found that overall "they showed no interest in what they dismissed as 'green on green' conflicts and, at worse, allied themselves with local strongmen regardless of their record of abusing the population because this neutralised the threat to themselves." Kate Clark, [Talking to the Taliban: A British perspective](#), AAN, 3 July 2013.

¹¹⁸ "It is not the deluded or illiterate who are saying these things. They are educated people, who have been working with foreigners for years, in full support of their stated objectives and strategies. Their trust was lost, not because they had too little information about what the internationals are doing in Afghanistan, but precisely because they have witnessed for years how time is wasted, money misspent, advice ignored, and silly strategies pursued, while the country sinks into the mud. They have concluded that it must be intentional – any other explanation seems irrational and far-fetched." Martine van Bijlert, [Counterinsurgency in Kandahar, what happened to the fence?](#), AAN, 22 April 2010.

¹¹⁹ Dr Oz Hassan, [Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from twenty years of supporting democracy, development and security](#), European Parliament, 2024.

¹²⁰ "A peace nation is characterised as an internationalist approach that links the activist ambitions of small states in world politics to peaceful forms of foreign policy. Civilian and humanitarian means are emphasised over military instruments and diplomatic means are preferred to coercive ones. Moreover, the peace nation narrative includes attributes such as being a role model for other countries and making a difference in conflict-ridden areas. It is rooted in the liberalist idea that also the small state can contribute to making the world a better and more peaceful place [and] has been framed as a fundamental symbol

identification with internationalist and altruistic aims is a strong and necessary force in foreign policy, and the world would be a much bleaker place without it. But the deeply-rooted assumption, in particular among European and Nordic countries, that their involvement could only be, not just benign, but actively beneficial, often served to obscure the full range of the intervention's impact, including the fact that it had chosen a side and was exacerbating a conflict.

The exercise of trying to extract lessons and to imagine what could have been done better, tends to be inspired by the wish to have done good, and it should be, although humility is in order. One of the strands that is worth pursuing for a country like Norway is asking whether it could have played a greater role in the field of peace-building, human rights protections or another 'principled niche'. With its track record and reputation, had there not been scope for a greater role in seeking to open alternative avenues for actual peace talks, and for sounding the alarm when what wasn't peace was called peace? Was there scope to have joined hands with other like-minded countries (the Nordics or EU-plus), more than was done, and could that have helped? It would have involved charting a separate course where much of the conventional wisdom asked for unity and coordinated messages.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In the wake of the collapse of the Republic, there was a brief but deeply felt window of disorientation, a feeling of having been party to a sham. It seemed to ask for a reckoning, a deeper reorientation than had been the case so far, but the moment passed. Today, the international engagement with Afghanistan has resumed along familiar lines – minus the military presence and diplomatic recognition, but with many of the familiar dilemmas that come with supporting a government, albeit indirectly, that will not give the donors what they need.¹²¹ In practice, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is being propped up by indirect outside support, because the alternative – a complete collapse of the system – is considered a greater disaster for the population and, in particular, a greater threat to international security.

The early days of the Republic had been filled with a giddy kind of hope, a good-natured welcoming of internationals and a general willingness to give any system that might work and bring peace a serious try. There was nervousness too, the fear that this chance would be squandered. I don't think any of us could have foreseen how long and large the intervention would be, how deeply it would embed itself in Afghan society while remaining so much at its surface, or how fierce the fighting would become, out of sight of most of the cities, under the banner of keeping the peace.

Afghanistan's state-building exercise was launched in the late days of "the end of history", with its dreams of a unipolar world, centring around the idea of a free market democracy as the most desirable and stable political system. The 9/11 attacks facilitated the stark

of Norwegian national identity in world affairs." Roxanna Sjöstedt and Erik Noreen, [When peace nations go to war: Examining the narrative transformation of Sweden and Norway in Afghanistan](#), *European Journal of International Security* 6:3, 2021.

¹²¹ See for instance Kate Clark, [Bans on Women Working, Then and Now: The dilemmas of delivering aid during the first and second Islamic Emirates](#), AAN, 16 April 2023. See also, [Still Under Sanctions, Still Unrecognised: A dossier of reports on Afghanistan, international relations, and aid ahead of Doha III](#), AAN, 9 June 2024.

good-versus-evil rhetoric of the war on terror. The world is a different place now, but the potential for extreme polarisation and securitisation that was sown then has only increased.

The gains of the two decades of aid and military presence were often oversold, underdeveloped and purchased at great cost. When they did succeed, they often depended on the ingenuity, investment and risk-taking of communities and individuals on the ground. But the losses, now that the period has come to an end, are real: the exclusion of women and girls from public life, shrinking freedoms, the narrowing of political space and the erosion of educational opportunities. Many of these opportunities, especially for women and local communities, were created not by grand strategies but by people carving out space despite the pressures.

It is difficult to know what lessons there are to learn. In the future, countries like Norway may well find themselves in similar, even more uncomfortable situations: a junior partner in a militarised coalition dominated by a lead with outsized influence, with outcomes that do not match the rhetoric. Such ventures should be embarked upon, if at all, with a much greater sense of realism, an awareness of the dilemmas, and a preparedness to speak candidly about the complexities, the unintended or inexcusable consequences and the possibility of failure. But given the way politics work and how government departments are incentivised, this may be a very tall ask.

Although another Afghanistan-style intervention is unlikely, the challenges that plagued the effort remain highly relevant and may be very much amplified in the years to come. The challenge is to recognise them early and to speak up honestly and soberly.

The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is an independent non-profit policy research organisation. It aims to bring together the knowledge, experience and drive of researchers, analysts and experts to better inform policy and to increase the understanding of Afghan realities. It is driven by engagement and curiosity and is committed to producing analysis on Afghanistan and its region, which is independent, of high quality and research-based. We are committed to be *bi-taraf* but not *bi-tafawut* – impartial, but not indifferent.