



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan - Key Factors

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## ABSTRACT

After two decades of conflict with the Taliban, they seized control of Kabul and proclaimed victory. The failure to establish a robust military force with high morale, significant casualties, and the economic toll of war, along with the inability to cut off the Taliban's financial support, USA's missteps in the conflict, corruption and ethnic biases within the Afghan government, the rise of extralegal governing bodies, shifts in the Taliban's military strategies and domestic policies, support from regional nations under the guise of combating ISIS, and USA's policy of appeasement towards the Taliban, all played pivotal roles in the Taliban's resurgence to power. With the international recognition of the Taliban government and continued global assistance to Afghanistan, the prospect of security and relative peace in the country remains viable.

**Keywords:** USA; Afghanistan; Taliban; ISIS; International community

## INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Mujahideen overthrew Dr. Najibullah's communist government and seized power. The lack of unity among the Mujahideen and their weakness in power-sharing and country management dragged Afghanistan into civil war. In such circumstances, the Taliban movement emerged to end the civil war and establish an "Islamic Emirate." Exhausted by war and chaos, people supported the Taliban, leading to their rapid capture of Kabul in 1996, renaming the country the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The Taliban governed Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Taliban support for extremist groups, their narrow interpretation of Islam, and the imposition of strict laws in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres led to their alienation by the international community and regional countries. This situation resulted in poverty, unemployment, and increased

migration of Afghans.

After the September 11 attacks, the United States launched "Operation Enduring Freedom" against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban on October 7, due to the Taliban government's support for Al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, under the pretext of legitimate defense. Consequently, the Taliban regime collapsed. With the support of the United States and the international community, the "Bonn Conference" was convened, laying the foundation for the post-Taliban order. Within the framework of the decisions made at the Bonn Conference, the Interim Administration (for six months) was established, with Hamid Karzai appointed as its head. The primary task of the Interim Administration was to establish political and legal order in Afghanistan, for which the Loya Jirga was convened. The Loya Jirga transformed the Interim Administration into a Transitional Administration (for 18 months) and



subsequently approved the Afghan Constitution in the next session. Elections were held based on the constitution, and Hamid Karzai was elected as the President of the country according to the people's vote, while the country's parliament began its activities. Furthermore, the judiciary, army, and police forces were formed, resulting in a relatively stable political-legal system based on the constitution of Afghanistan.

The United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, designated the Taliban as a terrorist group and did not allow them to participate in the Bonn Conference. Due to labeling them as terrorists, negotiations with the Taliban were terminated, and there was no adherence to the rules of war concerning their captives. This action by the United States led to criticism from the public and human rights organizations. The Taliban did not remain silent after their regime's collapse and continued their war using various tactics. When Barack Obama came to power in the United States, he changed America's strategy towards the Taliban. In this regard, Obama decided to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan by 2014<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, negotiations were held with the Taliban regarding the exchange of prisoners, and the Taliban were allowed to open a "political office" in Doha.

When Donald Trump came to power in 2016, he sought a solution for the withdrawal of American troops. In this regard, the Trump administration decided to engage in negotiations with the Taliban unconditionally. To demonstrate its seriousness, the United States appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan Pashtun descent, as the chief negotiator and special representative of the U.S. Department of State for the Afghan peace process. Khalilzad urged Pakistan to release Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to expedite the peace negotiations. After two years of negotiations, the Doha Agreement was signed on February 29, 2020, between the United States and the Taliban in the absence of the Afghan government. In the Doha Agreement, the Taliban pledged to sever ties with terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda. In return, the United States committed to withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan within 14 months and ceasing aerial operations against the Taliban. During the 14 months, intra-Afghan negotiations commenced, resulting in the formation of the "New Islamic Government" in Afghanistan.

In 2021, Joe Biden was elected as the President of the United States, and in a speech on May 1 (the deadline for withdrawal under the Doha Agreement), he pledged to honor the Doha Agreement and withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Following this speech, the Taliban intensified their attacks instead of negotiating with the Afghan government. As a result of the Taliban's attacks, they gained control of most regions of the country, and with the departure of former Afghan President

Ashraf Ghani from the country, the Taliban entered Kabul in the presence of American forces in Afghanistan, once again seizing power.

### **Research objectives**

1. To understand why the government, which enjoyed the support of the international community and the United States, failed to resist this group and collapsed.
2. To know What factors contributed to the Taliban's return to power?
3. What is the future of Afghanistan with the Taliban regaining power?

This research endeavors to provide answers to these questions.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research on the key factors contributing to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is primarily based on analytical research, which includes books, newspapers, online journals, and national, and international publications focusing on Afghanistan.

### **Significance of studying the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan**

There are several reasons as to why the Taliban's return to power is an important topic for study. Firstly, it is relevant in the context of international relations. Afghanistan's strategic location has meant that both regional and global powers have sought to intervene in the country's affairs. The return of the Taliban implies a significant failure of the United States and its allies; this has led to strategic discussions in the international community. The implications of the Taliban's return are still being discussed and therefore, understanding why it happened is essential. Secondly, the Taliban as a group provides an intriguing case study within terrorism and political studies. The events and regime of the Taliban represent a challenge to established Western political theory, which is often based on concepts such as liberal democratic peace. The resources and safe havens that Afghanistan under the Taliban provided as a state sponsor of terror also challenge traditional methods of counter-terrorism. Studying the group and its successes can provide valuable insights into modern politics and the fight against terror. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the significance of the Taliban's return applies to those affected by its rule. It is crucial for the millions of Afghans who lived under the Taliban regime and who continue to live under the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. Understanding why and how the Taliban came to power can provide validation for victims and those living in fear and can inform aid and politics in the rebuilding of the country. In addition, it is important for global education, as providing

<sup>1</sup> Mehmet Seyfettin Erol-Oktay Bingöl, "Transition Phase in Afghanistan and Forecasts for the Post-2014 Period," *Gazi Academic Review*, 5(10), 2012, p. 177.



a comprehensive study of one of the cruelest regimes of the 20th century can act as a counterbalance to ignored or forgotten histories.

### ***Key Factors Contributing to the Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan***

The conflict in Afghanistan, which has spanned over two decades, is marked by a series of strategic errors, deep-rooted political corruption, and evolving dynamics of warfare. From the failure to establish a resilient and ethically sound Afghan army to the staggering human and financial costs, each facet of this prolonged war reveals critical lessons and enduring consequences. Despite significant efforts, America struggled to dismantle the Taliban's financial networks and navigate the intricate web of ethnic prejudices and institutional corruption within Afghan politics. The rise of parallel governments and the Taliban's adaptive war tactics further complicated the situation, as did the shifting alliances and foreign support for the Taliban under the guise of combating ISIS. This analysis delves into these key areas, exploring the multifaceted challenges that ultimately contributed to the Taliban's resurgence and return to power in Afghanistan.

### ***Deficiency in Establishing a Resilient and Morally Uplifted Army***

After the fall of the Taliban regime, with the support of the United States and the international community, the foundation of a new national army was laid in Afghanistan. The United States, due to the presence of international forces in Afghanistan, adopted a "money-in-lieu-of-military" system instead of imposing a compulsory military structure. According to the initial plan of the United States, the number of Afghan military and security forces should not exceed 70,000. Furthermore, modern weapons and fighter jets were not made available to Afghan forces<sup>2</sup>. Providing security in a mountainous country like Afghanistan with this quantity and quality of troops was deemed impossible. When Barack Obama became the President of the United States, he promised to withdraw all his forces from Afghanistan by 2014. Obama sought to compensate for the military vacuum created by the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in two ways. In the first step, it was decided to increase the number of Afghan security forces. In this regard, the decision was made to elevate the number of Afghan troops to 300,000. These forces were supposed to have access to powerful and modern weapons through military training programs.

The next plan for the United States was the Petraeus Doctrine. General David Petraeus proposed a plan to fill the military vacuum created after the withdrawal of foreign troops, with the logic being "to secure villages, villages must

be armed!" Within the framework of this plan, individuals who had fought against the soviet Army and the Taliban (1994-2001) and had been disarmed as part of the DDR process were to be rearmed<sup>3</sup>.

In 2014, the United States ended its ground war against the Taliban and limited its role to training, equipping, and providing air support to Afghan forces. As part of this decision, the United States and NATO reduced their troop numbers from 140,000 to 14,000<sup>4</sup>. With these decisions, the United States completely handed over the ground war to Afghan forces. As the entire ground war was entrusted to Afghan forces, the Afghan government decided to increase the number of local forces (Arbakai). Under the "Local Forces Creation Plan," these forces were given military training and were supposed to operate under the control of the Ministry of Interior. However, the Afghan government failed to control local commanders. Due to the lack of livelihood and military equipment, local commanders resorted to extorting money from the people, and in some cases, they violated the dignity and honor of the people. The harsh behavior of local forces towards the people created a gap between the people and the government, leading the people to turn to the Taliban. However, it should also be noted that in some areas, local forces had achievements of their own.

According to information from the Afghan government between 2014 and 2018, approximately 45,000 Afghan forces lost their lives in the war against the Taliban, and thousands of security personnel deserted<sup>5</sup>. Various sources accuse Afghan and American officials of dishonesty regarding the number of Afghan forces. The Afghan government and American authorities reported the number of Afghan forces as 350,000. However, this figure was exaggerated, and there was no external verification. Afghan authorities inflated the numbers due to receiving funds from the United States. According to some Afghan security officials, the actual number of Afghan forces was not much higher than 150,000, and perhaps only 20% of them were willing to engage in combat. Some Afghan officials, including Khalid Payenda, the Minister of Finance in Ashraf Ghani's government, were unaware of the exact number of Afghan troops. He stated that Afghan authorities reported the number as over 350,000 due to receiving funds from the United States<sup>6</sup>.

In the Pahlavi era, the security forces fighting against the Taliban did not possess strong morale. Most of those

<sup>3</sup> Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, "From Arbaki to Local Police," Accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1342647.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Nuzar Shafi'i, "Explaining the Factors Influencing the Adoption of the Trump Administration's Strategy Towards Afghanistan," *International Relations Research Quarterly* 24 (2016): 109.

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, "Ashraf Ghani: 45 Thousand Afghan Forces Have Been Killed in the Last 4 Years," accessed February 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Ikram Andishmand, "Escape and Fall," 8 AM News, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://8am.media/fa/escape-and-fall/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Ikram Andishmand, *America in Afghanistan (America Der Afghanistan)*, Mayvand Publications, Kabul, 2003, page 109-110.



servicing in the Afghan security forces considered military service as a profession rather than a patriotic duty. However, the Taliban considered their war as "jihad" and referred to their fighters as mujahideen. In other words, Taliban fighters were motivated by ideology and belief rather than material rewards.

The morale of Taliban fighters was superior to that of Afghan military forces due to several factors. Widespread corruption among high-ranking government officials, security forces viewing their service as a means of livelihood, flawed policies of Karzai and Ghani administrations against the Taliban, the politicization of the Afghan army by government officials, and the cessation of airstrikes by U.S. forces against the Taliban hurt the morale of Afghan soldiers.

Franklin Feingold, a former White House official and professor of public and international affairs at Princeton University, stated, "The Afghan army had more confidence in NATO military forces than in their own government. NATO military forces had withdrawn about 10,000 of their soldiers from Afghanistan, but about 20,000 contractors, including technicians for repair, maintenance, and security providers for embassies, continued to support Afghan Air Force operations. When this support structure was withdrawn, the Afghan army lost its confidence to fight <sup>7</sup>."

Afghanistan's mountainous terrain is conducive to guerilla warfare. For ensuring security in such a country, the quality of the forces is more important than quantity. In other words, having fewer, well-equipped troops with modern weapons and a strong air force is more effective in securing Afghanistan.

Over the past 20 years, on one hand, the United States prevented the establishment of a well-equipped force with advanced weapons, and on the other hand, the optional military system (mercenary system) hindered the formation of a motivated and patriotic force. Considering the reasons mentioned, the Afghan forces were unable to resist Taliban attacks, resulting in the Taliban gaining dominance in Afghanistan.

### ***War Casualties and Financial Expenditures***

The research conducted by the Watson Institute and Brown University on the post-9/11 United States war efforts calculated that the United States has spent 6 trillion dollars. During this period, 800,000 lives have been lost. The war in Afghanistan is the longest in United States history, costing almost a trillion dollars. Besides the extravagant economic expenditures in the Afghanistan war, 2,400 American soldiers have been killed, 20,589 wounded, along with 62,124 Afghan forces and thousands of innocent civilians killed <sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> "The classified documents of the Afghanistan war reveal the common shortcomings of the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations," BBC News, Accessed February 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-50722928>.

In 2019, The Washington Post published a 2,000-page report containing classified documents about the Afghanistan war. In these documents, most U.S. officials admitted to losing the war and attributed the reason for the loss to providing false information to the American people <sup>9</sup>. Among the prominent lies were those concerning the economic expenditures of the Afghanistan war. After a long period, U.S. officials and the American people sought answers to the following questions: What achievements have we gained with the expenditure of billions of dollars and the loss of thousands of soldiers in the Afghanistan war? How can this war be brought to an end?

When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, he pledged to put an end to the longest war in American history. From Trump's perspective, the war in Afghanistan was foolish for America and had no economic benefit. Trump, being a businessman, viewed issues through an economic and commercial lens. In one of his speeches, Trump said, "The Afghanistan war reduced the Soviet Union to Russia. If we don't end this war, it will turn the United States into America." Trump's reference to the economic expenditures of the Afghanistan war and how it brought the Soviet Army to its knees and destroyed the Soviet Union.

The economy is one of the key parameters of power, and in the era, we live in, power and economy are necessary for each other. Instead of benefiting economically from the Afghanistan war, America spent billions of dollars on this war, which caused a financial backlash among Americans. In the Afghanistan war, not only America and its citizens were affected, but every country that participated in the Afghanistan war suffered. After the withdrawal of American forces, President Biden revealed that America was spending \$300 million per week on the Afghanistan war <sup>10</sup>. America was under pressure from its citizens and global opinion due to the economic expenditure of the war and human rights violations. Therefore, it decided that instead of sinking into the quagmire of Afghanistan, it would enter into a treaty with the Taliban and even accept the Taliban's resurgence. America's goal, in any way possible, was to end its longest war in Afghanistan.

### ***Failing to disrupt the financial channels of the Taliban and the mistakes made by America throughout the war***

In the war against the Taliban, the United States has mainly focused on killing and capturing their fighters, rather than pursuing serious actions against their financial resources. The approach to combating the financial resources of the Taliban has differed between the United States and the Afghan government. The Taliban has derived millions of dollars in revenue from drug trafficking and has sustained

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Account of America's longest war, Khorasan News, accessed February 16, 2024, <http://khorasannews.com/Newspaper/MobileBlock?NewspaperBlockID=734466>



its war machine with this money<sup>11</sup>. One of the reasons for America's presence in Afghanistan was to combat the cultivation, production, and trafficking of drugs. However, Afghanistan ranked among the top drug-producing and trafficking countries globally. Most sources attribute drug cultivation and production to areas under Taliban control. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, speaking at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in 2019 regarding the Taliban, stated: "The money the Taliban earn from drug trafficking strengthens their military capabilities. We need regional countries to collectively act against the drug trade to weaken this group<sup>12</sup>."

In the context of Afghanistan, some countries have resorted to paying extortion to the Taliban in exchange for the group refraining from attacking their troops. Information disclosed by WikiLeaks revealed instances where the Italian government provided funds to the Taliban to prevent attacks on its forces. Additionally, within their controlled territories<sup>13</sup>, the Taliban collected Zakat and tithe from the people and imposed taxes on vehicle movement. Furthermore, the Taliban derived substantial income from Afghanistan's mines.

During the conflicts involving the Soviet Union and the Mujahideen, Afghanistan saw the presence of a significant arsenal of weapons. Moreover, the Afghan government still lacked control over its borders, thereby transforming Afghanistan into a hub for arms smuggling. With the availability of funds, acquiring various types of weapons in Afghanistan became a straightforward affair. The Taliban utilized their revenue to purchase arms and fortify their governance territories.

During the war, America committed errors that the Taliban exploited as propaganda against the United States and its supported government, portraying them as fodder for their recruitment campaigns. Among these errors were killing innocent individuals, invading people's privacy, and disrespecting Afghan soldiers. Although America later recognized its mistakes and attempted to prevent their recurrence, incidents like the burning of the Quran at the Bagram Air Base in 2012 occurred. Subsequently, nationwide protests erupted in Afghanistan, resulting in the loss of 35 lives. Then-President Barack Obama apologized to the Afghan people and government for the incident. Such occurrences repeated over time<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Dadfar Sepenta's, Account of the Longest Color War, Politics in Afghanistan; Narrative from the Inside, Azam Publications, Kabul 2017, page 530.550.g, USA

<sup>12</sup> "Antonio Guterres: The Taliban have increased their fighting power with the money obtained from drugs," Accessed February 18, 2024, <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/30285997.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Fazl Ahmad Manawi, "Afghanistan Awaits 2014: The Taliban Organization and New Groupings Toward a New Political Trend," Center for Middle Eastern Studies, no. 52, vol. 5, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Dadfar Sepenta's, Account of the Longest Color War, Politics in Afghanistan; Narrative from the Inside, Azam Publications, Kabul 2017, page 530.550.g, USA

Additionally, American troops often targeted Afghan women during the war, a reprehensible act in Afghan culture. In America's military strategy, killing five civilians for one Taliban or al-Qaeda fighter was considered permissible in emergencies. America frequently targeted civilians under the pretext of terrorism, sometimes even targeting Afghan security forces. The killing of civilians during the war repeatedly incited anger among Afghan citizens and government officials.

The Taliban capitalized on America's mistakes to alter the mindset of the Afghan people. Consequently, they persuaded a portion of the Afghan population regarding the legitimacy of their war against America and its supported government. Through their propaganda, the Taliban garnered support from rural Afghan communities, strengthening their position with each passing day.

### ***Ethnic Prejudices and Institutional Corruption in Afghan Politics***

The government, which took shape with the support of the international community and the United States, not only failed to combat corruption within governmental institutions but was itself a source of corruption. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai once stated, "If you take bribes, don't transfer the money abroad<sup>15</sup>." In the words of Saadi, "If a monarch eats from the orchard of his subjects, the slaves will pull up the trees from the roots." When the head of state normalizes bribery, what expectations should one have from their subordinates? Consequently, the aid provided for the Afghan people was not properly distributed and utilized. In collaboration with foreign donors, government officials transferred the funds meant for the poor people of Afghanistan abroad and added them to their foreign accounts. Afghanistan topped the list of the most corrupt countries in the world in terms of corruption.

Corruption within the country's judicial and legal institutions had reached its peak. Afghan citizens resolved their disputes in Taliban Sharia courts due to corruption in the judicial and legal institutions. For example, in a legal dispute involving one lakh (100,000) Afghani, Individuals paid bribes equivalent to the value of their rights but still did not receive their due rights. In some cases, even if the court ruled in favor of the rightful owner, government officials lacked the executive ability and means to enforce and recover the rights. The Taliban swiftly resolved such disputes and adapted their court rulings accordingly.

Besides corruption was rampant, with unemployment rates exceeding 50% and literacy rates (reading and writing) below 40%<sup>16</sup>. Billions of dollars in aid were provided, yet

<sup>15</sup> Mehrabad Al-Din Mashid, "Presidential Evasions of Responsibility in the Position of Father of the Nation." Accessed February 17, 2024. <http://archive.mashal.org/content>.

<sup>16</sup> Hunger crisis: the number of unemployed has increased from 9 million to 18 million, Accessed February 17, 2024. <https://www.etilaaatroz.com>



half of Afghanistan's population lived below the poverty line, with most being unemployed youth. Before mechanized agriculture, modern agricultural courses were taught in Afghan universities. However, due to the lack of modern production tools, many youths remained unemployed upon graduation. Ethnic favoritism within government agencies was at its peak, with officials often prioritizing hiring individuals from their ethnic group. Some youths, despite obtaining sufficient grades, were not employed due to their ethnicity, leading them to join the Taliban out of resentment and revenge.

When the government failed to provide basic services to the people and mismanaged the aid funds by transferring them abroad or distributing them among sycophants, people turned to the shadow government, namely the Taliban. In other words, when foreign aid meant poverty alleviation, job creation, and education for the Afghan people and youth went unutilized due to corruption among Afghan rulers, people, consciously or unconsciously, turned more towards the Taliban as a result of frustration. Corruption within the Afghan government became the primary factor in the rise of the Taliban. Corruption weakened the Afghan government like a cancer and led to the collapse of the system.

### ***Ignoring Ground Realities: Afghanistan's System Formation and the Rise of Parallel Governments***

The legal and political order formed at the Bonn Conference, revolving around Afghanistan's constitution, did not align with the concrete realities of Afghan society. Instead of resolving Afghanistan's problems, it led to a political crisis in the country. According to Afghanistan's constitution, the president serves as the supreme commander of the armed forces and the head of state, with powers in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. However, the vice presidents, elected by the people like the president, had no defined powers in the law. In the past, vice presidents in Afghanistan prevented the emergence of powerful political parties. As a result, parliament, lacking powerful parties, could not effectively counterbalance the executive branch. In other words, instead of preventing government corruption, parliament became complicit in it. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country where no single ethnic group constitutes an absolute majority. Therefore, no single ethnic group can seize power solely through democratic processes. Consequently, leaders and other ethnic groups needed to form coalitions. The system envisioned by the former US ambassador and envoy in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, stipulated that the president and his deputies should be Pashtuns, while symbolic roles for deputies and the lack of delegated authority from the president to the deputies led to political instability. Since each deputy, being elected by the people, politically represented an ethnic group, this situation led to

a political crisis in the country. For instance, the leader of the Uzbek people Marshall Abdul Rashid Dostum, played a significant role in the 2014 elections, contributing to the victory of Ashraf Ghani. However, Ghani did not delegate sufficient authority to Dostum in governing affairs, leading to disillusionment among Dostum's supporters with the government. In summary, the post-Taliban political system failed to bring all ethnic and political groups under the government's umbrella, and some ethnic and political groups sought to undermine the government when they did not see their presence reflected in the government. Due to the weakness and lack of maturity in Afghanistan's political culture, even this destruction led to some extent to support for the Taliban.

Another factor that undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government was the conduct of fraudulent elections, which resulted in the establishment of extra-legal governments. In 2009, elections were held, and the Independent Election Commission declared Hamid Karzai as the winner<sup>17</sup>. However, Karzai's main rival, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, refused to accept the election results. Under pressure from the international community, the Election Commission acknowledged fraud in the elections and announced plans for a rerun. Dr. Abdullah, due to the chairman of the commission's refusal to resign, boycotted the elections. Some sources suggest that Dr. Abdullah's withdrawal was in favor of Hamid Karzai. With the support of the international community, the Election Commission declared Karzai the winner. The constitutional law did not anticipate the fate of elections if a leading candidate did not participate in the second round. Although the Election Commission interpreted the constitutional law with external support and announced Karzai as president, its subsequent reversal under external pressure challenged the legitimacy of Karzai's government.

In the presidential elections of 2014, no candidate was able to secure fifty-one percent of the votes in the first round. According to the provisions of the constitution, a runoff election was held. In the runoff, the two leading candidates were Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah. The Independent Election Commission initially declared Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai as the winner. However, Abdullah Abdullah refused to accept the results due to widespread election fraud. The country was on the brink of internal conflict, and the primary supporter of the Afghan government, the United States, intervened. Secretary of State John Kerry intervened between the two candidates and temporarily resolved the political crisis. Kerry disregarded the people's vote and constitutional provisions and, utilizing America's power and influence, imposed a "unity government" on the people of

om/102912/hunger-crisis-number-of-unemployed-has-increased-from-9-million-to-18-million/

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah will not participate in the second round of elections; Holding the second round or the interim government? Accessed February 17, 2024. <http://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=4481>



Afghanistan<sup>18</sup>.

According to John Kerry's plan, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani became the President and Abdullah Abdullah became the Chief Executive of the country. The ministries were divided equally between the two candidates. The fact that both Ghani and Abdullah possessed executive authority and sidelined the Afghan constitution in the formation of the National Unity Government led to political disagreements. Ghani cited constitutional authority for the president's powers, while Abdullah referred to the political agreement text. In the 2019 elections, the same scenario repeated, and the government was formed not based on the people's vote but under the pressure and mediation of the United States. Based on the agreement reached, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani became the head of the government, and Abdullah Abdullah became the head of the High Council for National Reconciliation<sup>19</sup>.

The National Unity Government, established against the Afghan constitution and the will of the people under pressure from the United States, lacked legal legitimacy. Furthermore, the National Unity Government failed to fulfill the promises made to the people and politicized security institutions, with security sector ministries taking orders from two different individuals, undermining the government's integrity. Since the government was not established based on the people's vote but by the United States, the Taliban questioned its legitimacy and did not engage in serious negotiations with it. The lack of legal and political legitimacy of the government is one of the fundamental factors contributing to the resurgence of the Taliban.

### ***Taliban war tactics and changes in their ethnic politics***

Although the Taliban regime fell in 2001, the group managed to maintain its presence in Afghanistan through its rhetoric and activities. Given Afghanistan's mountainous geography, the Taliban resorted to guerrilla warfare tactics, including hit-and-run strategies. They employed tactics such as planting mines along roadsides, assassinating government officials, conducting suicide attacks, embedding their affiliates within Afghanistan's government system, and carrying out operations with these individuals. As a result of these attacks, the Taliban inflicted significant casualties on both foreign and Afghan forces.

During the spring, summer, and fall seasons, the Taliban intensified their battles against Afghan and foreign security forces, while in the winter, they focused on recruiting, training, and equipping their forces<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> What will be the main structure of a "national unity government"? Accessed February 14, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/fa-af/a-17785066>

<sup>19</sup> Abdullah and Ghani finally reached an agreement on the formation of a government in Afghanistan, BBC News, Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-52696851>

<sup>20</sup> Zahid Arya, what is the Taliban's strategy and fighting methods? Accessed February 14, 2024. <https://8am.media/fa/what-is-the-talibans-strategy-and-methods-of-warfare/>

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan's regime was shaped based on liberal democratic values under the support and pressure of the United States and the international community. The transfer of power was based on democratic principles, including popular sovereignty, freedom of speech and media, human rights, women's rights, and the activities of political parties and civil institutions. However, the Taliban, without believing in these values, instrumentalized them to achieve their goals. They utilized media freedom to showcase their operations as demonstrations of power to the Afghan people and the world. Additionally, they used the crimes committed by foreign forces during their operations against innocent people to challenge the legitimacy of foreign forces' presence.

From a rhetorical perspective, the Taliban labeled the presence of foreign forces as occupation and declared their war against foreign forces and the US-backed Afghan government as "jihad." Some segments of the Afghan population fell under the influence of the group's propaganda and extended their support to them. In every negotiation and platform for the withdrawal of foreign forces and the establishment of an "Islamic Emirate," the Taliban set their red lines<sup>21</sup>. From the Taliban's perspective, the Afghan government lacked decision-making capability, and thus, they never engaged in serious negotiations with the Afghan government.

In addition to their military tactics, the Taliban changed their national policy to expand the war throughout the country. Initially, they pretended to be composed solely of Pashtuns to the general public. This was because all their leaders and commanders were Pashtuns. Later, due to the spread of war across the country and the shift of the conflict from the south to the north, they decided to recruit individuals from other ethnic groups in leadership positions and among the fighting forces. By employing this tactic, they recruited soldiers from Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik ethnic groups. As a result of this recruitment strategy, the Taliban expanded their sphere of influence and strengthened their presence. For example, recruiting Tajiks and Uzbeks, caused the fall of Badakhshan province, even though the majority of its residents are also Tajiks. After coming to power, the Taliban appointed Qari Fasihuddin, a Tajik from Badakhshan, as the chief of their army. Through rhetoric, operations, changes in national policy, and adaptation of laws in their controlled areas, the Taliban established and expanded their presence in Afghanistan day by day, paving the way for their eventual return to power in Afghanistan.

<sup>21</sup> The announcement of red lines in the peace agreement between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban group, Pars Today, Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://parstoday.ir/dari/news/afghanistan-i96947>



### ***Support from regional countries for the Taliban under the pretext of combatting ISIS***

In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in the Middle East. In its ideological axis of the caliphate, ISIS pursued an aggressive policy. In other words, ISIS considered all Islamic countries as the territory of Islam, "Dar al-Islam," and its caliph as the leader of all Muslims worldwide. ISIS designated each Islamic country as its province and appointed its governor. In this regard, ISIS used the historical title of Khorasan to designate Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the countries of Central Asia, and part of China as the "Wilayat Khorasan" and activated the Khorasan branch in 2015. Hafiz Saeed Khan, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, was the first to raise the flag of ISIS in Afghanistan and was appointed as the governor of the Khorasan branch<sup>22</sup>.

Given the financial power of ISIS, the announcement of the death of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar after 2 years of secrecy led some Taliban leaders and commanders, including Abdul Rauf Khadim, to pledge allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, despite this, Taliban leaders considered ISIS a threat to themselves and did not pledge allegiance to ISIS. At that time, Taliban and ISIS fighters were active in remote areas of Afghanistan. These two groups posed a threat to each other<sup>23</sup>.

After the September 11 attacks, Russia, China, and Iran supported the United States and NATO in suppressing Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. For example, Russia opposed the establishment of US military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. After the defeat of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the United States did not withdraw from Afghanistan. The continued presence of the US in Afghanistan raised concerns for Iran, Russia, and China. The US justified its entry into Afghanistan as a fight against terrorism and extremism. However, this presence not only failed to eliminate terrorism and extremism but also led to their increase. For instance, in 2001, only Al-Qaeda was active in Afghanistan, but according to the information from the security agencies of the previous Afghan government, 21 terrorist groups were active in Afghanistan. With the presence of foreign forces, the activities of these terrorist groups, including the ISIS Khorasan branch, caused further concern for regional countries.

Afghanistan is vital for ISIS because by gaining control of Afghanistan, ISIS can easily penetrate Central Asian countries, Russia, China, and Iran. After 2014, Afghanistan was engaged in a war with the Taliban. When ISIS began its activities, Afghanistan's military capability for dual-front warfare was limited. Additionally, Russia, China, and Iran believed that countries with a military presence in

Afghanistan had fueled instability in regional countries, making ISIS thrive. For example, Iran and Russia repeatedly accused foreign countries with military presence in Afghanistan of supporting ISIS<sup>24</sup>.

The activities of the ISIS Khorasan branch in Afghanistan posed a serious threat to the territorial integrity and national security of countries such as Iran, Russia, China, and Middle Eastern countries. Due to Afghanistan's reliance on the United States and NATO for securing its borders, regional countries rushed to support and cooperate with the Taliban.

From the perspective of Russia, China, and Iran, the Taliban is ideologically and functionally opposed to ISIS. Unlike ISIS, the Taliban seeks to establish its desired government, namely the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, within the geography of Afghanistan and has no ambitions beyond its neighboring countries. Additionally, the majority of Taliban fighters are Afghans, and they interpret religion within the Hanafi Sunni tradition. Russia, China, and Iran, considering the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan and based on the logic of "choosing the lesser evil" and "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," supported the Taliban against ISIS instead of directly intervening.

The activity of ISIS in remote areas of Afghanistan posed a significant challenge to the Taliban. However, due to the threat posed by ISIS against regional countries, the situation turned into an opportunity for the Taliban. In other words, in the fight against ISIS, the interests of regional countries aligned with the Taliban, leading these countries to support the Taliban against ISIS. The Taliban, with the support of regional countries in the fight against ISIS, achieved success and gains. Even the United States acknowledged the positive role of the Taliban in defeating ISIS in eastern provinces of Afghanistan, claiming that at that time, the Taliban were not merely a terrorist group but terrorist eliminators. The Taliban's fight against ISIS and the support of regional countries not only strengthened the Taliban on the battlefield but also provided them with international legitimacy.

### ***Shifting Enemies: US Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Appeasement with the Taliban***

After World War II, the United States abandoned George Washington's "isolationist" policy and assumed the leadership of the West from Great Britain as the victor of the war. The United States established its hegemony based on "one enemy" and changed the enemy over time. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was perceived as the enemy, and the United States allied itself against the Soviet Union out of enmity/competition. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States sought to find another enemy. In the realm of intellectualism, Huntington in his book "Clash of Civilizations" introduced

<sup>22</sup> Introduction of ISIS Khorasan. Independent Farsi, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/172566/>

<sup>23</sup> Davood Azimi. Why are the Taliban's special forces fighting ISIS? BBC News, Accessed February 19, 2024 [https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2015/12/151222\\_zs\\_afghan\\_taliban\\_isis](https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2015/12/151222_zs_afghan_taliban_isis)

<sup>24</sup> Russia: America and NATO cooperate with ISIS in Afghanistan. Tasnim News Agency, Accessed February 23, 2024. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/05/02/2542915/>



Islam as the enemy of Western civilization. Phrases such as "religious terrorism - Islamic terrorism - international terrorism" entered Western political literature, and terrorism was declared the "enemy" after the September 11th attacks. In the Bush doctrine of "preemptive war" and the fight against terrorism, the United States intervened globally, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, and stationed its forces in various parts of the world for 20 years<sup>25</sup>.

While the United States was engaged in the fight against terrorism and other international issues, China expanded its economy using "economic globalization". The economy is one of the fundamental parameters of national power. Economic power paves the way for political and military power. China's economic power has led to its military and political power, causing serious concerns for the United States. Since the Obama administration, China has gradually become America's economic rival, and Donald Trump launched an economic war against China with his new mercantilist policies<sup>26</sup>. If we consider the statements of the Biden administration and the decisions of the National Security Council, China has been designated as America's primary rival<sup>27</sup>.

The United States, in response to the growing threat from China and the importance placed on the Indo-Pacific region, has chosen a policy of appeasement towards the Taliban. With this approach, the US has decided to end the war in Afghanistan. The goal of the appeasement policy towards the Taliban, coupled with offering rewards, is to reconcile the Taliban with the Afghan government and create an "honorable exit" opportunity for its forces.

When Donald Trump came to power, he proposed unconditional negotiations with the Taliban. In this regard, Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as the Special Representative of the US Department of State in Afghanistan and the head of the US negotiating team. After two years of intense negotiations, the Doha Peace Agreement was signed between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020. In the Doha Agreement, the US pledged to withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months if certain conditions were met. In return, the Taliban committed, including their ally Al-Qaeda, to sever ties with all terrorist groups and prevent them from using Afghan soil against the US and its allies. As part of the Doha Agreement, as a gesture of goodwill and to alleviate the mental pressure on the Taliban, 5,000 Taliban fighters were released from prison

in exchange for 1,000 Afghan forces<sup>28</sup>. Despite the Doha Agreement framework, the US suspended its operations against the Taliban's positions and decided to withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11 without a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

The Doha Agreement granted international legitimacy to the Taliban and established them not as a terrorist group but as an interlocutor with the most powerful government in the world, the United States. On the other hand, the Afghan government, as a party to the negotiations, was marginalized during the Doha peace talks. Even Khalilzad did not share the negotiation details with the Afghan government to appease the Taliban. He provided a copy to Afghan authorities and collected it back after their review, which weakened the legitimacy of the Afghan government<sup>29</sup>.

By signing the Doha Agreement with the Taliban, the United States effectively endorsed the end of the Ghani Republic and government in Afghanistan. Senior US military officials, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of CENTCOM, openly stated this during a question-and-answer session of the Senate Armed Services Committee and even labeled it a strategic failure for America. General Milley said, "The strategic failure in Afghanistan is a result of decisions made over the past 20 years." General McKenzie stated, "The fall of the Afghan government stemmed from the Doha Agreement. Signing the Doha Agreement hurt the Afghan government and its military forces." Lloyd Austin, the US Defense Secretary, agreed with McKenzie's analysis in the session, adding that it was committed in the Doha Agreement to cease US airstrikes against the Taliban. "So the Taliban got stronger, intensified their offensive operations against Afghan security forces, and Afghans were losing significant numbers every week<sup>30</sup>."

## DISCUSSION

After 20 years of war with the Taliban, the United States, for reasons explained, concluded that they could not defeat the Taliban entirely in Afghanistan. Therefore, they evaluated their withdrawal from Afghanistan in their interests and signed the Doha Agreement as part of their policy of engagement with the Taliban. Within the framework of the Doha Agreement, the United States committed to withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan if the Taliban

<sup>25</sup> Bush's security doctrine, escalation of the crisis, and growing international insecurities. Basirat News, Accessed February 26, 2024. <https://basirat.ir/fa/news/32749/>

<sup>26</sup> Mejjan Ghorbani, US-China trade war: its causes and consequences. Iranian Journal of Social Policy and Planning (SSPP), Accessed February 15, 2024. [https://sspp.iranjournals.ir/article\\_48006.html](https://sspp.iranjournals.ir/article_48006.html)

<sup>27</sup> "Is the US-China Strategic Competition a Cold War?" Atlantic Council. Accessed February 15, 2024. Available from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/g/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-the-us-china-strategic-competition-a-cold-war/>

<sup>28</sup> Jamshid Irani, "How and Why America and the Taliban Reached an Agreement." Independent Persian. Accessed February 27, 2024. <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/173181/>

<sup>29</sup> Haseeb Behs, "Doha Agreements; The government is divided into two camps." 8 AM News, Accessed February 27, 2024. <https://8am.media/fa/doha-agreements-the-government-negotiation-team-is-divided-into-two-camps/>

<sup>30</sup> Mohammad Ikram Andishmand, "Escape and Fall", 8 AM News, Accessed February 26, 2024. <https://8am.media/fa/escape-and-fall/>



adhered to their commitments. The goal of the United States in reaching an agreement with the Taliban was to facilitate peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government and to facilitate an honorable exit from Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement, on the one hand, provided international legitimacy for the Taliban, allowing their leaders to travel freely to regional countries. On the other hand, the release of 5,000 prisoners and the cessation of airstrikes against their positions by foreign forces in the context of this agreement strengthened the Taliban on the battlefield. Before peace negotiations between Afghan parties took place, the United States decided to withdraw all its forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.

The Taliban referred to the Afghan government as the "Kabul administration" and refused to negotiate with this government before the Doha agreement, considering it a puppet. Even after the Doha agreement, the Taliban were unwilling to engage in serious negotiations with the government. From the Taliban's perspective, negotiation meant surrendering power to this group peacefully. When the United States decided to withdraw unconditionally, the Taliban saw this as a golden opportunity and intensified their attacks. As a result, they first took control of districts and later entire provinces. With the disregard of the United States and the escape of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the Taliban seized Kabul in the presence of foreign forces, declaring victory in the 20-year war.

The Taliban, due to their victory in the war against the United States, NATO, and the US-backed government in the nineties, are now more powerful. As a result, both domestic and foreign policies of the Afghan government will be defined in line with the objectives of the Taliban. Currently, there is no strong deterrent force against the Taliban within Afghanistan, as was the case in the nineties.

The Taliban have gained power through the use of force and now rule in Afghanistan. However, there are numerous challenges to the sustainability of Taliban power, and addressing these challenges can ensure their continued strength. One major challenge is gaining international legitimacy for Taliban power. In other words, recognizing the Taliban government as the representative of Afghanistan by regional countries and the international community. So far, no government or international organization has recognized the Taliban emirate formally. Governments and international organizations have outlined conditions for recognizing the Taliban emirate, including establishing an inclusive and comprehensive government, respecting human, and women's rights, allowing those who wish to leave Afghanistan to do so, and cutting ties with and combating terrorist groups, meeting the demands of the international community and regional countries.

The second challenge facing the Taliban government is the economic difficulties that the people of Afghanistan are grappling with. Afghanistan's economy relies entirely

on assistance from foreign countries and international organizations. With the rise of the Taliban to power, the United States, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and most European countries have halted their assistance to Afghanistan. Additionally, the United States has frozen Afghanistan's government funds. In practical terms, the Taliban constitute the Afghan government and are responsible for meeting the basic needs of the people. With each passing day, the people of Afghanistan become poorer, and the Taliban have not been able to address this problem. Afghanistan's economic problem will only be resolved when the Taliban secures international aid.

One of the challenges facing the Taliban emirate is the active presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. During the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, ISIS carried out suicide attacks near Kabul Airport, killing 13 American soldiers and injuring 17 others, including Afghans and Taliban fighters. ISIS continues to launch attacks against Taliban fighters and Shia, resulting in hundreds of casualties. Due to the poor economic conditions of the people, ISIS takes advantage of its ignorance and poverty, recruiting soldiers every day and strengthening its forces.

Another issue is the Taliban's approach to the achievements of the past 20 years. The new generation of Afghanistan has gained familiarity with global innovations and has enjoyed relative political, economic, social, and cultural rights. The issue of women's rights remains another facet of today's Afghan issues. In the nineties, the Taliban did not recognize the right of women to education, work, and property under a limited interpretation of religion. Over the past 20 years, under the banner of "positive discrimination" in politics, women have gained the right to education, work, and property. In the post-2001 era, women have been employed and have worked in key positions such as ministries, judiciary, presidency, embassies, and so on. One of the comprehensive conditions set by the international community for recognizing the Taliban government is respect for human rights and women's rights.

This means that the Taliban must recognize women's rights to education, work, and property. When taking over Kabul, the Taliban had announced a general amnesty, meaning that all those who worked in the previous regime were pardoned. While the declaration of amnesty is an important step, it requires practical implementation. Ensuring relative peace requires monitoring the implementation of this decree and providing job opportunities for former government officials and employees. In other words, the Taliban must embrace all their opponents and offer everyone job opportunities in the government. If in the Bonn conference, the Taliban were invited to participate as part of Afghanistan's reality, which we might not have witnessed today.

The Taliban government needs to take serious steps to address the conditions raised by the global community and



regional countries for their recognition, and international aid to Afghanistan should continue. Only then can security and relative peace be ensured in Afghanistan. Otherwise, there is a possibility of Afghanistan once again becoming a hotbed of terrorism, facing occupation, and engaging in another civil war. For now, the Taliban are in power in Afghanistan. Therefore, it is up to the internal players to decide which direction Afghanistan will take.

## ANALYSIS

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan is the result of a complex interplay of various factors that have enabled the group to regain power after two decades of conflict. Firstly, the Taliban's enduring resilience has allowed them to withstand extensive military operations and counterinsurgency efforts by the United States and its allies. Despite facing significant military pressure and suffering losses, the Taliban maintained their organizational structure, adaptability, and ability to exploit local grievances to their advantage.

Secondly, strategic alliances played a crucial role in the Taliban's resurgence. Over the years, the group formed alliances with various local tribal leaders, warlords, and militant factions, allowing them to expand their influence and control over territory. These alliances provided the Taliban with manpower, resources, and local support, strengthening their position on the battlefield and facilitating their territorial gains.

The withdrawal of foreign forces, particularly the United States, also created a significant opportunity for the Taliban to assert themselves. The Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban provided a framework for

the withdrawal of international troops. It paved the way for direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. However, the withdrawal of foreign forces also created a power vacuum that the Taliban quickly moved to fill, leading to their rapid territorial gains and eventual takeover of Kabul.

Additionally, the Taliban's refusal to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and their reliance on force and intimidation tactics further contributed to their resurgence. The group's uncompromising stance and military offensives undermined efforts to achieve a political settlement and reinforced their image as a formidable force capable of challenging the government's authority.

Looking ahead, the Taliban's ability to govern effectively and gain international recognition will hinge on their willingness to address key issues, including human rights, particularly women's rights, and economic development. The international community has clarified that any recognition of the Taliban government will be contingent on their adherence to these principles. Without meaningful reforms and a commitment to inclusive governance, Afghanistan risks descending into further instability and conflict, posing significant challenges to regional and global security.

Therefore, the Taliban must demonstrate a genuine commitment to peace, stability, and respect for human rights. The international community must remain engaged and provide support to efforts aimed at fostering a peaceful and sustainable future for Afghanistan, while also holding the Taliban accountable for their actions and commitments. Only through collective action and cooperation can Afghanistan overcome its challenges and build a better future for its people.

