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With additional assistance from the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers

Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs (JIPA)

600 Chennault Circle

Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6010

e-mail: JIPA@au.af.edu

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Evacuation Operations, Great-Power Competition, and External Operations Terror Threats in Post-Drawdown Afghanistan

Mapping Out the Path Ahead

AUTHORS: MAJ GEN BUCK ELTON, USAF, RETIRED, AND CPT JOSHUA FRUTH,
US ARMY RESERVES

EDITOR: DR. VANESSA NEUMANN

Within months of the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover, Afghanistan emerged as the global epicenter of human rights atrocities, terrorism, and hostile actions by our great-power competition (GPC) near-peer state adversaries, and organized crime in the forms of human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, and conflict mineral mining of rare earth elements (REE) that could prove challenging to US supply-chain resourcing and trade policy for decades to come. The domestic policy implications of the US withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the US-trained, advised, mentored, equipped, and financed Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) will also be the subject of policy discussions and military white papers for decades to come.

Our leaders cannot afford to look backward. Instead, we must understand the new operating environment and frame the threat landscape, which should incorporate three primary lines of effort (LOE): post-drawdown humanitarian aid and evacuations, confronting the GPC in theater, and countering nonstate armed groups and their operations. This white paper frames these three collective challenges to inform leaders and policy makers of potential solutions nested under current administration priorities, guidance, and policies.

Introduction: Proposed Priority Lines of Effort (LOE)

Priority LOE #1: Post-Drawdown Humanitarian Aid and Evacuation Efforts

The Taliban have implemented a style of governance reminiscent of medieval times. We are watching. In real time, one of the worst human rights atrocities

against underserved communities and vulnerable populations seen globally since the 1990s conflict in the Balkans or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group's claim of an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The first elicited involvement from the Clinton administration, while the latter resulted in a global "Defeat ISIS" campaign. Afghanistan's degraded financial system, skyrocketing unemployment, and food and medical shortages have resulted in a humanitarian crisis only rivaled in modern times by Venezuela under the Maduro regime.¹ Despite our hostilities with Nicolas Maduro's Bolivarian Revolutionary authoritarian regime, the United States announced on 22 September 2021 that we would provide \$247 million in humanitarian assistance and \$89 million in economic and development assistance to the most vulnerable Venezuelans.²

Under its strict Deobandi Salafist interpretation of Islam, the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" regime has implemented the most significant gender inequality measures anywhere in the world. Women and girls have lost basic rights, face education and employment restrictions, and have been subjected to increased physical abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. Members of the LGBTQ community; religious/ethnic/racial minorities, such as the Shiite Hazaras, Uighurs, and population groups from the Panjshir; and individuals who worked with US and NATO forces as diplomats, interpreters, law enforcement officers, and members of the military, all face an extraordinary risk of violence, torture, human trafficking, and execution.

The most immediate risk ahead of us is a ripe kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) environment, wherein the Taliban utilize other Sunni violent extremist organizations (VEO) as proxies to leverage a humanitarian crisis by holding American citizens (AmCits) and our special immigrant visa (SIV) allies hostage. This offers the Taliban the opportunity to enrich their coffers and gives its Chinese and Pakistani partners hostage-negotiating leverage in other major policy issues. In line with current US government policies on gender equality, violence against women, LGBTQ rights, and human trafficking, we should also prioritize evacuation of these population groups—lest we lose legitimacy in the international community for not defending underserved communities when it counts the most.³ We are additionally concerned about China's, Russia's, Iran's, and Pakistan's exploitation of the information environment, where they are messaging the world that the United States does not honor its responsibilities to its partners and allies.⁴ The continued evacuation of AmCits and at-risk Afghans must precede any other soft-power counter-Taliban and counter-Chinese malign influence efforts in and around Afghanistan to ensure these adversaries do not disrupt our larger priorities in the region, as the failure to do so could obstruct our ongoing efforts.

We can accomplish successful evacuations without military intervention or the use of private mercenaries, whose presence and operations within Afghanistan's geographic territory in a post-drawdown environment could instigate an international incident with GPC implications—particularly if done in a vacuum without official overt or back-channel coordination. Those private-sector organizations assisting in these efforts should be humanitarian-centric, apolitical, and nested within the official policies and priorities of the White House, Congress, and the interagency. Rescuing Americans and our allies from humanitarian crises should never be relegated to partisanship, and failure to do so would have geostrategic consequences that extend far beyond Afghanistan.⁵

The White House recently approved a proposal by the Joint Chiefs for public/private-sector partnerships to coordinate the evacuation of US citizens and Afghan allies.⁶ We strongly concur with this policy and believe that our first post-drawdown priority concerning Afghanistan must be to secure funding, intergovernmental diplomatic engagement, and interagency support to these public/private-sector partnerships. We envision this construct as focused on humanitarian assistance operations that lay the framework for post-drawdown evacuation efforts.

Priority LOE #2: Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan

The second and most significant risk in post-drawdown Afghanistan is the medium- to long-term ramifications of Chinese REE extraction as a primary LOE in China's geostrategic plan. The National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) released a report titled "Protecting Critical and Emerging U.S. Technologies from Foreign Threats" on 22 October 2021. The report outlined five critical emerging technologies "*that may determine whether America remains the world's leading superpower or is eclipsed by strategic competitors in the next few years,*" and included the following:

1. Artificial intelligence;
2. Bioeconomy;
3. Autonomous systems;
4. Quantum computing; and
5. Semiconductors.⁷

These areas of emerging technology focus require significant reserves of rare earths and a high availability of advanced semiconductors. China's planned REE mining operations in Afghanistan align with Beijing's intention to seize Taiwan for its semiconductor industry. Companies like Taiwan Semiconductor Manufac-

turing Company (TSMC) and United Microelectronics are dominant forces in the global semiconductor supply chain. While these semiconductor “microchips” are very small, they are comprised of numerous microelectronic components and REEs, including silicon. Silicon is required to manufacture the wafers (substrates or slices) of semiconductors used in integrated circuits and solar cells. Taiwan has an abundance of this material, and China intends to seize it.⁸ China is engaged in an operation to compete with the United States in emerging technology while also gaining control of global technology supply chains. China intends to couple these high technology efforts with its global telecommunications infrastructure development projects so that it not only controls technology hardware but additionally gains long-term control of the information environment.

China’s plans to seize Taiwan, lay telecommunications infrastructure around the world, and mine precious REEs are components of its larger malign influence plan. The US government must address with authorities, budget appropriations, and resourcing targeted as a functional problem set. If relegated to the geographic combatant command (GCC) areas of responsibility (AOR) construct, we risk limiting shared understanding and whole-of-government solutions to this global China-centric problem set via geographically siloed, canalized operations. Any prospective solutions should be nested within the framework of Executive Order (EO) 14017, America’s Supply Chains.⁹

Priority LOE #3: Countering Nonstate Actors, Organized Crime, and Terrorist External Operations

To accomplish its objectives in Afghanistan, China intends to financially incentivize Pakistan—and, by extension, Sunni VEOs, to mitigate the risks those insurgent groups present to REE mining operations. Sunni terror groups in Afghanistan will be dramatically enriched through these incentives, enabling the Taliban to maintain governance and provide safe haven for Sunni VEOs with external operations (Ex-Ops) ambitions to attack the United States, our allies, and our interests at home and abroad. Observers also expect these organizations to profit significantly from transnational organized crime, including cross-border weapons proliferation, rampant human trafficking, gemstone and mineral mining/smuggling, and money laundering to operationalize hostile state actions, organized crime, sanctions evasion, and terrorist financing. The Taliban is likely to consolidate, professionalize, and industrialize the narcotics trade, which, as of recent years, includes not only opiates but also hashish and industrial-scale methamphetamine production. The Taliban’s Islamic Emirate could potentially emerge in a short time as the world’s top drug cartel and narco-state.¹⁰

We are additionally concerned by the potential of the Taliban declaring an Islamic caliphate in a manner like ISIS. The global impetus for a Defeat ISIS–like coalition or US military re-engagement in Afghanistan is unlikely in the short term. The power vacuum, subsequent funding, and recruitment that would undoubtedly come from such a declaration by the Taliban would be a significant threat to the homeland. Thus, a post–US drawdown environment will provide insurgents with attack ambitions, with the power vacuum, protection, and funding needed to reconstitute, train, plan, and execute attacks on the United States and US and allied interests at home and abroad.

Section One: Post-Drawdown Humanitarian Aid and Evacuation Efforts

Without a US military presence, we are most immediately concerned with an environment ripe for imminent KFR events forming around AmCits, other Westerners, and Afghan SIV partners. Rampant human rights atrocities have been committed against underserved population groups that have been disenfranchised under Taliban rule. This includes women and girls—particularly those women who previously played prominent roles in society, such as judges, journalists, activists, doctors, and teachers. Additional underserved communities vulnerable for exploitation include religious, ethnic, and racial minority groups such as the Shiite Hazaras and Uighurs (who are not recognized under the Taliban’s brand of Deobandi Salafist Islam), members of the LGBTQ community, and prepubescent boys used as *bacha bazi* sex slaves.¹¹

Media outlets reported six airplanes carrying American and Afghan citizens were being held hostage at the Mazar-i-Sharif airport in early September 2021. The US Department of State indicated that the “Taliban will not let them leave,” and “The Taliban is basically holding them hostage to get more out of the Americans.” While speaking with Fox News television host Chris Wallace, Congressman Michael McCaul, the lead minority Congressman on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said: “In fact, we have six airplanes at Mazar-i-Sharif airport, six airplanes, with American citizens on them as I speak, also with these interpreters, and the Taliban is holding them hostage for demands right now.” He additionally added: “We know the reason why is because the Taliban want something in exchange. This is really, Chris, turning into a hostage situation where they’re not going to allow American citizens to leave until they get full recognition from the United States of America.”¹²

This incident should serve as a warning for the prospect of a more robust KFR environment to come. The Taliban have surely calculated the risks associated with

a large-scale KFR scenario and likely might be waiting for a post-drawdown environment where the number of AmCits and other Western citizens still in country has dwindled to low numbers to ensure they will not be met with a military response. If the Taliban engages in KFR operations, we suspect it may employ other Sunni VEOs—such as Islamic State–Khorasan (ISIS-K)—as proxy “strawmen” to provide a layer of separation and aura of plausible deniability around these operations.¹³ The more time elapses after the US withdrawal, the higher the likelihood of a KFR environment materializing. If this scenario were to play out, it could risk payments aggregating in millions of dollars or more, which could serve to further enrich the Taliban’s coffers and fund other Sunni VEOs with Ex-Ops ambitions. This scenario must be avoided. The best practice in the current operating landscape would likely utilize existing relationships between Westerners with surrogate networks in country to either move evacuees by land or to coordinate for chartered aircraft out of a major airport to another jurisdiction for medical screening and patriation administrative processing—but the latter risks a direct KFR-initiating confrontation.

US citizens, citizens of our Western allies, Afghans with SIV, and their families are in a unique risk category for violence and exploitation that should exceed our risk appetite and merit immediate action. Other population groups are also at risk of torture, violence, and sexual exploitation at the hands of the Taliban. At highest risk are women, girls, members of the LGBTQ community, and ethnic and religious minorities. These are communities that the United States and its Western allies defend and advocate for on the world stage. Any ongoing humanitarian assistance opportunities intended to aid these underserved communities would nest within current US policy. We must not miss the opportunity to do right by these groups at the time of their most dire need and comply with current US humanitarian policies.

To further enumerate the imminent necessity to extract our citizens and allies from country and support the most oppressed, let us explore the current human rights environment just two months after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan:

Human Rights Atrocities

- *Human trafficking*: Post drawdown, Afghanistan has emerged as the world’s most prolific human trafficking state, ranging from child soldiers and forced labor to child brides, sex slaves, and systemic rape by members of the Taliban.¹⁴
- *Women’s and Girls’ Rights, Exploitation, and Threats to Prominent Women*: It is the policy of the United States to champion equal rights for women and girls across the globe, and to end violence against women.¹⁵ Media reports and

numerous personal stories shared by victims and their families have revealed horrific treatment of prominent women by the Taliban. This specifically includes women who performed the duties of activists, those who have worked with the US Department of State, schoolteachers, medical doctors, judges, actresses, and journalists. Reported incidents and threats against these women include some of the following:

- The Taliban have banned education for girls over 12 years old. According to Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, who survived a Pakistani Taliban assassination attempt at 15 years old: “Afghanistan is now the only country in the world that forbids girls’ education.”¹⁶
- Women have been denied the ability to receive employment in the government but have been allowed to work in some fields, such as medicine, due to the Taliban’s religious views that medical care for females must be conducted by other females so that a man does not touch them.¹⁷
- In early September 2021, a dozen Taliban “special forces” ran into the crowd of protesting women in Herat and fired their weapons into the air, sending demonstrators fleeing.¹⁸
- Threats to women activists to “skin their children alive” in front of them, and then “rape them to death” in front of their husbands.¹⁹
- A woman was reportedly lit on fire for “bad cooking.”²⁰
- Prominent women have reported that the Taliban marked their homes with a large “X” to send a message to Taliban fighters that they are free to rape, kidnap, and harm these women as *qhanimat* (spoils of war).²¹
- *Child Brides*: Taliban fighters have reportedly gone door-to-door and forced families to give up their daughters as young as 12 years old to the Taliban for forced marriages or direct human trafficking. Taliban commanders allegedly ordered imams in various areas to bring them lists of unmarried females between 12 to 45 years old for their soldiers to marry because they viewed them as *qhanimat* to be divided up among the victors. There are also reports that some areas have been required to place a marking on the front of their home once their daughter turns 12. These children are sometimes forcefully married to men in their 50s or 60s and raped without consent. The penalty for families that refuse to comply with this was reported as death. Girls in ethnic and religious minority sects such as the Shiite Hazaras of Uruzgan and Daykundi, or the families of the National Resistance Force (NRF) resis-

tance fighters in the Panjshir, were reportedly trafficked into underground sex trafficking networks.²²

- *The Bacha Bazi Boys: Bacha bazi* is a slang term used in some parts of Afghanistan for the “dancing boys,” and refers to the sexual exploitation of male children forced into prostitution. Many of the boys exploited are prepubescent. Horrific stories have emerged over the years of little boys chained to beds and gang-raped to the point of near death. If these children survive and are released, they face public shaming and are often shunned from their community. In 2011, two US special forces soldiers severely beat an Afghan local police commander who, when confronted, laughingly confessed to having chained a 12-year-old missing boy to a bed and savagely raped him for weeks. Those soldiers were involuntarily separated and later reinstated, leading to US legislation named “Mandating America’s Responsibility to Limit Abuse, Negligence and Depravity.” This law became known as the Martland Act, which was named after SFC Charles Martland. In a post-drawdown environment, these efforts by the United States are invalidated in Afghanistan and could lead to greater *bacha bazi* exploitation.²³ Both the Martland Act and US policy on human trafficking support humanitarian assistance operations for these victims.
- *LGBTQ Community*: A Taliban judge issued an order that makes members of LGBTQ community eligible for the death penalty. The approved methods of execution are either by stoning or by dropping a nine-foot wall on top of the victim, burying him or her under heavy rubble in which he or she cannot escape, only to die of dehydration if the initial impact failed to cause immediate death.²⁴ The United States is a world leader in advocating for the protection of the LGBTQ community. Afghanistan is now the most dangerous place in the world for members of the LGBTQ community. The official US policy is that no one deserves to face violence for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our policies should match our actions by evacuating members of this underserved community.²⁵
- *Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Minorities*: The Shiite Hazaras of the mountainous areas of central Afghanistan; the Uighurs; the people of the Panjshir Valley; and other minority groups—or those persons in areas where there has been resistance to Taliban rule—face the highest risks of sexual assault, human trafficking, torture, and execution. According to the 20 January 2021, White House EO on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government: “It is therefore the policy of my Administration that the Federal Government should pur-

sue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our government.”The whole of our government includes the Department of State, USAID, and numerous other agencies with international mandates. Thus, we should apply this thinking beyond our borders and back humanitarian assistance operations that support the protection and evacuation of these underserved communities vulnerable under a Taliban-led Afghanistan.²⁶

- *Violence Against Males Who Have Worked with US Forces:* Men who have worked with Western forces have publicly and on widely disseminated videos been executed by being shot in the back of the head or having their throats slit and/or have been brutally tortured, including being lashed hundreds of times. The severity of the lashings in some cases was so severe that it caused internal bleeding and damage to organs.²⁷ Our intelligence community and military rely on international relationships built on trust. For us to maintain that trust in the international community, we must maintain our promises and support those who have fought side-by-side with our military personnel, including those who have operated as translators or information sources to our intelligence community. Failure to extract these personnel could damage the reputation of the US intelligence community in the international community for decades to come and could degrade our capabilities to build relationships and surrogate networks.
- *Extreme Poverty and Cash, Food, and Supply Chain Shortages:* The general humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is rapidly deteriorating, with citizens running out of fiat currency and unable to withdraw additional funds from the nearly defunct banking system. Additionally, foreign aid is far short of necessity, and many Afghans are unable to find employment. The United Nations’ World Food Program indicated that nearly the entire population of 40 million people could fall below the poverty line in coming months, and that 95 percent of Afghans are not getting enough food to eat. Unfortunately, this has led to reporting that some families are so desperate, they have given up their children to pay off debts, leading to broken families and human trafficking concerns.²⁸

Prior to the Taliban takeover, health clinics were dependent on foreign funding. Currently, most of these clinics are running out of essential resources and basic medicines. Many doctors and nurses have not been paid in months.

Advocacy organizations are urging other countries to continue providing humanitarian aid. “To pause the lifesaving funding because we’re still negotiating female rights would be utterly wrong,” said Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council. The United States halted its aid to Afghanistan upon leaving the country but has since announced it would send \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance.²⁹ Engaging Afghanistan with humanitarian assistance—such as medical aid, food, and clean drinking water—could enable negotiating leverage to facilitate evacuation operations and other policy issues, while also limiting the potential of engaging in direct terrorism financing.

The aggregation of these human rights atrocities perpetrated by the Taliban in the power vacuum of the US withdrawal should be countered strongly by the United States and its allies. Before considering punitive economic levers, such as sanctions, we should first prioritize evacuating AmCits, SIVs, prominent women, and their families, all of which face the greatest danger under the Taliban’s regime. The completion of such a humanitarian operation presents the United States and our allies with options to leverage all our soft-power authorities and capabilities for nonmilitary intervention. Those options are discussed in the *Policy Recommendations* section of this white paper.

Section Two: Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan

Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan: China–Pakistan Strategic Overview

China and Pakistan stand to gain the most from the Taliban’s rapid takeover and ongoing governance of Afghanistan, while Russia and Iran may stand to lose more than they had anticipated. Beijing and Islamabad have both made public statements in support of the Taliban’s new Islamic Emirate regime and appear to have synchronized messaging in the information environment. Both nations provide humanitarian aid to support the Taliban’s legitimacy and governance. China and Pakistan have mutual interests in Afghanistan that include the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); REE extraction; and countering India, the United States, and NATO in the region. These LOEs are contingent upon the stability and security assurances offered through partnerships that China and Pakistan maintain with each other, the Taliban regime, and other major Sunni VEOs operating in Afghanistan.

Beijing’s priorities in Afghanistan include China’s CPEC/BRI interests, securing REE mining, and countering the Afghan-based Uighur ethnic minority and are likely to include the projection of regional airpower through Bagram Airfield.

China has previously attempted mining projects in Afghanistan that have been hampered by security concerns. China perceives an incentivized Pakistan as a key ally to help manage REE mining security concerns associated with various Sunni VEOs operating within Afghanistan, due to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service's longstanding and well-established relationships with al-Qaeda (AQ), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Taliban. While the Taliban does not recognize the Uighur Muslim minority, other VEOs might feel differently about China's dehumanizing treatment of an estimated 3.5 million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps across Xinjiang, China. Beijing likely feels generous in financially incentivizing Pakistan (and by extension various insurgent groups) not to obstruct China's efforts, with the understanding that Beijing's control over rare earths—coupled with its efforts to control the global semiconductor industry—would have numerous geostrategic ramifications in emerging technology and supply chain controls. Countering these Chinese malign influence and supply-chain controls has direct implications for Pres. Joe Biden's EO 14017, which provides for interagency authorities focused on China-centric supply-chain risks.³⁰

As China attempts to instill controls with Pakistan and the Taliban to ensure that no other great power gains a foothold in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, there may be a limited window of time available to prevent this hypothesis from fully materializing. We view Pakistan as a “gatekeeper” for Chinese operations in Afghanistan. Soft-power actions that deter hostile Pakistani operations that violate US national security interests may help amplify effects to deter and degrade Chinese GPC malign influence and REE mining operational successes in Afghanistan.

Concurrent to the US withdrawal, former President Ashraf Ghani fled to the United Arab Emirates.³¹ The Taliban almost immediately consolidated power over every province and district in Afghanistan, except for the Panjshir Valley. The Panjshir Valley, canalized between historically challenging mountainous terrain, served as the headquarters for the NRF, an anti-Taliban collective that includes former Afghan commandos and law enforcement officers. Former Vice President Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, the son of the symbolic leader of the same name known as the “Lion of Panjshir,” lead the NRF. Saleh and Massoud appear to have fled Afghanistan, and the Taliban have largely seized the Panjshir Valley, leading experts to believe that many of the group's remaining resistance fighters have left Afghanistan for neighboring jurisdictions, presumably to reconstitute. Open-source media articles, social media, and surrogate networks appear to have corroborated Pakistan's involvement supporting the Taliban militarily to degrade

the NRF's capability in the Panjshir Valley and help the Taliban consolidate power over this pocket of resistance.

Pakistan ISI Chief Lt Gen Faiz Hameed met Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul shortly after the US withdrawal. Within approximately one day of this meeting, the anti-Taliban NRF was attacked in the Panjshir Valley with kinetic airstrikes. Hameed was reportedly involved in these kinetic airstrike operations against the NRF. Analysts and open-source reports indicate that Pakistani special operations teams, ISI intelligence officers, and Pakistani Air Force assets collectively participated in this operation to degrade the NRF's capabilities to resist and reconstitute. NRF leader Ahmed Masood claimed that the NRF had been attacked by Pakistani Air Force drones using smart bombs (with guidance systems potentially given to the Pakistani Air Force by the United States) only one day after Hameed's arrival in Kabul. Masood also advised that Pakistan provided intelligence to the Taliban in the form of detailed aerial maps of NRF strongholds.³² Pakistan may have used MK-82 500-pound bombs using US Air Force-, Lockheed Martin-, and Raytheon-developed, GBU-12 and GBU-10 Paveway laser-guided bomb kits to strike the NRF in the Panjshir. The United States provided Pakistan with 1,000 such kits in 2010 to support Islamabad "in its offensive against militants on the Afghan border." At the time, the US military assistance had been branded as "underscoring Washington's role in backing Pakistan's months-long campaign against Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants." Then-Air Force Secretary Michael Donley had then stated that "the Pakistani Air Force was playing 'a big part' in operations against the Islamist extremists."³³ Pakistan has thoroughly and indisputably supported the Taliban, the HQN, and AQ for years.

Other rumors indicate that Pakistan used Chinese-provided CH-4 drones, which look nearly identical to the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper (likely due to China's constant theft of intellectual property). The presumption is that these systems are compatible.³⁴

China, Pakistan, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, AQ, the HQN, and ISIS-K have formed an alliance that appears to be scoped around the extraction of Afghan-sourced REE by China. The aggregate valuation of Afghanistan's unmined REE ranges wildly from \$1–6 trillion USD. China has long maintained mining contracts in country but was obstructed by US/NATO presence and a deteriorated and disputed security environment. We assess China views a favorable post-US drawdown security situation for its REE mining as something it can "purchase" through Pakistan by requiring that Islamabad manage relationships with the various Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan on China's behalf.

REEs are essential to every technology that we value, ranging from satellites to cell phones, fighter jets, semiconductors, and elements of critical infrastructure. One of the REE-enabled industries we are most concerned about in a post-drawdown as it pertains to Afghan resources is the electric-vehicle battery (EVB) industry. President Biden signed an EO on 5 August 2021, aimed at making 50 percent of vehicles zero emission in the United States by 2030, aggressively increasing demand on electric vehicles (EV). According to the Pew Research Center, about 2 percent of new car sales are currently electric.³⁵ Some states have set deadlines for when new gasoline combustion powered cars will no longer be allowed to be sold.

To implement President Biden's plan, we face significant obstacles in China's near-monopolistic control of 80–90 percent of the global EVB market. The two most critical resources that make up EVBs are lithium and neodymium. China is about to mine vast swathes of these two REEs from Afghanistan at a time when the American auto industry is rapidly transitioning to EVs.

The most common type of EVBs are lithium-ion and lithium polymer, due to their high energy density relative to their weight. As a result, lithium-ion battery technology has been prevalent in portable electronics, laptop computers, smartphones, and many other applications since the 1990s. While the global supply of unmined lithium deposits is still relatively ample, the bigger issue is that lithium reserves are depleting in areas where extraction is easier, leaving only marginal resources that cost more per metric ton to exploit than their relative value. By 2028, there is anticipated to be a global shortfall of 800,000 tons of lithium.³⁶ Exploiting Afghan-sourced lithium could further strengthen China's power over global supply chains. According to a Pentagon memo leaked to *The New York Times* in 2010, Afghanistan's Ghazni province has enough lithium to make it the "Saudi Arabia of lithium."³⁷ Experts agree that lithium and REEs are only economically viable in maritime shipping (not as air freight), and Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Here China has a significant advantage over the United States, as "the most accessible deep-water ports are the Chinese-built ports in Gwadar, Pakistan, and Chabahar, Iran."³⁸ Additionally, China maintains a territorial border with Afghanistan via Badakhshan Province, home to the Wakhan Corridor, which is a strategically important component of the BRI and CPEC trade initiatives. This means that China might be able to ship these minerals by land, avoiding costly air freight and maritime shipping options altogether.

Rare earth magnets are the main component of an EVB that deals with driving-range capability. Those magnets are made with neodymium, which is widely seen as the most efficient way to power EVs. Neodymium magnets can make the difference between an EV with a range between charges of 200 miles versus 600 miles. China

currently controls 90 percent of the global neodymium supply. Prices of neodymium oxide more than doubled during a nine-month rally last year and are still up 90 percent. In June, the US Department of Commerce said it is considering an investigation into the national security impact of neodymium magnet imports.³⁹

Global transition to EVs is estimated to require an 87,000-percent increase in REE supply by 2060.⁴⁰ Supply for the United Kingdom to transition its 31.5 million gasoline-powered vehicles to EVs would require 207,900 tons of cobalt, 264,600 tonnes of lithium carbonate, 7,200 tonnes of neodymium and dysprosium, and 2,362,500 tonnes of copper. The global REE supply requirements are 40 times greater, requiring mineral supplies to increase from 400 kilotonnes in 2020 to 11,800 kilotonnes in 2040 to cover the global demand posed by EVs.⁴¹ This dramatic increase poses numerous supply chain challenges that are currently centered around China.⁴²

This economic issue will inevitably become a national security disaster if not mitigated now. Supply-chain obstructions used as instruments of economic power can influence, intimidate, and alter the diplomatic and military policies of other nations. The Afghan/China REE issue is a recipe for economic disaster in the Western automotive industry. Coordination between Pakistan and the various Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan is a result of the wealth they project stemming from China to facilitate extraction of REEs.

The coalition of state and nonstate actors supporting Chinese REE mining operations maintains varying motivations, ranging from monopoly of REEs to trade routes, security, governance, financial profit, and ethnic cleansing. This section aims to provide a high-level overview of China's, Pakistan's, and the Taliban's priorities in this relationship. Subsequent sections provide corroboration, additional context behind these relationships, and an overview of the involvement of other Sunni VEOs.

China's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:

1. REEs: To provide for safe and secure extraction of precious REEs to influence, disrupt, and control supply chains that raise China's standing in global diplomatic, military, economic, and trade relations.
2. Security: Ensure safety and security of CPEC and BRI trade routes.
3. Uighurs: Deter, deny, and degrade the Afghan-based Uighur Muslim population; or worse.

4. NATO Deterrence: Counter the United States and NATO in the region, potentially to include securing Bagram Airfield to both project airpower and to embarrass and undermine the United States in the information environment.



Figure 1. Left: Open-source available images taken 2 October 2021, of Bagram Airfield, Parwan. Right: Aerial photographs taken shortly thereafter, proclaiming to indicate the presence of Chinese aircraft.

On the evening of 2 October 2021, photographs posted through open sources by Parwan locals showed Bagram Airfield lit up with lights at night. The base had not been illuminated since US forces cut the power to the base and abandoned it in the middle of the night. Open-source rumors and contacts in the area advised that the Chinese military had occupied the base to conduct “inspections” and were employing local Afghans for various functions around the base. Analysis of open-source aerial photographs resulted in claims that Chinese military aircraft had landed on Bagram Airfield. Rumors from locals indicated that the leader of Chinese intelligence met with Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in Bagram.⁴³

5. Counter India: Counter India in the region.
6. Pakistan as Proxy Manager: China intends to employ Pakistan as the “parent in the room” to manage and mitigate risks associated with various ethnic, religious, tribal, and organizational divisions that could degrade the security situation and disrupt China’s other priorities in Afghanistan.
7. Recognize Taliban: China intends to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and likely intends to foster friendly relations with other Sunni VEOs based in Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure China’s own security around REE extraction points and employ proxy forces to accomplish future Chinese gray-area initiatives in the region. Recent open-source intelligence reports indicate that the Taliban is engaged in high-level meetings daily at the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

Pakistan's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:

8. Trade Initiatives: Financial incentivization through CPEC and BRI trade initiatives with China.
9. Profit for Security: Likely financial incentivization to guarantee security of REE extraction points. China likely sees Pakistan as the preferred partner to manage and mitigate the complex cultural, tribal, historic, religious, and other divisions between Afghans and various insurgent groups (including the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), AQ, ISIS-K, HQN, and other VEOs) from security threats to major extraction projects.
10. IMF Loans: Hedging risks of adverse financial actions by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the West. The IMF is currently providing quarterly loan disbursements to Pakistan due to challenging economic conditions. If the IMF were to find Pakistan in violation of the conditions set forth in its IMF agreements, it could be detrimental to the Pakistani economy. Negative Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reviews (up to an including "blacklisting") and pressure from the West, which maintains significant clout and voting rights within the IMF, could lead to a high-risk economic environment for Pakistan, up to and including its de-risking from international financial markets and sanctions. The backing of the Chinese state, its banking, and trade relationships, provides Pakistan insurance against worst-case economic conditions that may be more probable considering recent derogatory revelations about Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan.⁴⁵
11. Afghanistan as a Proxy State: We believe Pakistan views a Taliban-run Afghanistan as a potential proxy state, and Islamabad is leveraging the ISI and the HQN terrorist group to instill Pakistan's influence into the Taliban-run government. Islamabad was the first to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but Pakistan's involvement in ensuring the Taliban's victory was far more nefarious than that.

Taliban Islamic Emirate's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:

12. Funding: The Taliban-led regime runs the risk of not being recognized by most of the world's nations. Perhaps more significant, Afghanistan may become a fully sanctioned jurisdiction. Financial institutions around the world will de-risk Afghanistan, leaving the country isolated from the international banking system and unable to receive IMF loans and international

infrastructure and development projects. Economic investment is the single most important factor in the Taliban's ability to maintain power and govern. The Taliban do not care about the REEs present in their country. This is a regime that has perpetrated some of the worst human rights atrocities in our lifetimes. It is not concerned that those REEs should belong to the Afghan people. Instead, the Taliban will receive significant financial incentives from China to ensure the security of Chinese REE mining operations.

13. **Governance:** The Taliban's primary concern is to instill governance. The Taliban lacks an understanding of how to employ all the various levers and agencies of government to effectively manage a society. They lack the knowledge and experience to perform simple governance tasks, such as managing international airports and airspace deconfliction. The Taliban will seek China's and Pakistan's assistance to perform these vital functions.
14. **Deterrence:** The presence of great powers like China and regional powers like Pakistan in a Taliban-run Afghanistan serve the Taliban's desire to deter US and NATO forces from returning militarily to Afghanistan in the event the West reconsiders the withdrawal in light of potential future deteriorating human rights conditions, Ex-Ops terrorism activity, or GPC concerns. Based on its history, the Taliban will remain cautious of any powerful nation's military operating within its borders. However, unlike the Soviet Union and United States, the Chinese and Pakistanis are recognizing the legitimacy of a Taliban-led government. So long as their stance remains the same, the Taliban are expected to allow for a continued presence of Chinese and Pakistani forces where it benefits the Taliban's priorities.

GPC in Afghanistan: Russia, Iran, Turkey Strategic Overview

The Russians realize that Beijing oversees this Afghanistan-based coalition that includes Pakistan and four Sunni VEOs. Moscow also realizes that Pakistan is the indirect gatekeeper, and that is why the Russians approached Pakistan about security cooperation going forward.⁴⁶ The Russians will attempt to engage the Pakistanis in their long-term goal of pursuing the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) oil pipeline and may be concerned about Chinese influence being used to discourage Pakistani and Afghan involvement in this project. Moscow will reinforce Russian relationships with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to hedge against these concerns and ensure that a diminishing security environment in Afghanistan does not spill over into Russia. Moscow is attempting to publicly portray itself as a neutral player whose priorities in Afghanistan will not under-

mine other great powers, but Russia may find that its influence in Afghanistan has waned considering Chinese economic programs that leverage Pakistan and Sunni VEOs as proxies to achieve Beijing's own priorities.⁴⁷

Iran had high hopes for a relationship with a Taliban-run Afghanistan. However, cracks are already beginning to emerge in that plan. Chief among Tehran's goals was for the Taliban to be recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan globally, for Kabul's assets to be unfrozen, and for Afghanistan to maintain access to the international financial system. Historically, Iran has used *hawala* auctions in both Afghanistan and Iraq to trade its battered Iranian Rial (IRR) currency (also known as the Toman) for other fiat currencies, such as the US dollar.⁴⁸ However, it does not appear that the international community will recognize the Taliban, that the Taliban will be able to access Afghan assets frozen by the IMF, or that Afghan financial institutions will be able to clear the US dollar—all of which effectively serve as a death sentence for any financial institution with a global correspondent capability. Just a few years ago, punitive damages to Pakistan's Habib Bank Limited (HBL) by the New York Department of Financial Services (NYDFS), which included fines of \$225 million USD and the loss of its New York correspondent clearing branch, were detrimental to the Pakistani banking system and economy. The Afghan banking system is far more vulnerable now that Pakistan's system was then. Due to its own US-sanctioned, severely degraded economy and currency, Iran acutely understands the soft power of the US financial regulatory system and sees Afghanistan's loss of USD clearing as a critical fail point in Iranian-Taliban relations.⁴⁹

Iran's second hope for Afghanistan was to have an excellent trade partner. The ongoing violence and disenfranchisement of Shiite groups such as the Hazaras and population groups in Herat will be a major point of contention for Iran. Iran's power emerges from the religious leadership wing and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) ability to leverage a centralized command-and-control structure over hundreds of Shiite militia groups (SMG) globally. If Tehran were to ignore violence against Shiite groups in Afghanistan by the Taliban regime, Iran would risk losing legitimacy among hundreds of other groups that currently answer to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Tehran also hoped that the Taliban regime could serve as a mutual interlocutor to solidify a more robust relationship with China that would help Iran hedge against US and partner-nation scrutiny and to evade Western sanctions. However, Beijing stands to gain little from this relationship, and it adds a dynamic of complexity for China to have to play middleman in Islamic sectarian politics between Iran and Pakistan. While Iran publicly claims to be happy about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the post-drawdown environment may not have emerged

in the manner Tehran had hoped. US policy makers should keep this in mind in any ongoing discussions around a new Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran as a point of leverage for the United States that will make Iran more desperate for a resolution. In mid-October 2021, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was quoting Russian president Vladimir Putin's talking points on the prospect for the United States losing global legitimacy if it were to renege on the next JCPOA. Behnam Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow specializing in Iranian security and political issues at Washington's Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, indicated that Iran's "Eastern orientation" foreign policy intended to utilize Russia and China to "turn the superpower into the supplicant" and to "tempt Washington into premature sanctions relief." We believe Iran values Russian military influence and Chinese economic influence in such a scenario but may find a warmer partner in Russia than China for JCPOA relief talks.⁵⁰

We are beginning to see what appears to be further cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria, where both are supporting the mostly Shiite regime of Bashar al-Assad and countering new incursions of Turkey into Syria.⁵¹ If Moscow does not gain the foothold Russia hoped in Afghanistan due to China and Pakistan, it may pivot toward increased cooperation with Iran in the region. Tehran also may shift toward increased cooperation with Russia to ensure Iran's security interests and to increase opportunities for sanctions evasion, potentially going so far as to leverage Russia to assist in JCPOA negotiations on its behalf. It is important to remember that Russia and Iran also have mutual interests in the energy industry and in Venezuela, which has security and energy industry implications.

Russia in turn ironically may view the United States as an ideal partner on the Afghanistan problem set going forward. Moscow has likely assessed that the probability of the United States militarily re-entering Afghanistan in the short- to mid-term is very low. However, Moscow likely understands the US priority to evacuate AmCits and SIVs from Afghanistan and recognizes that the Afghan-bordering countries of Pakistan, Iran, and China are not friendly for US facilitated extractions. Therefore, Moscow may attempt to leverage Russian influence in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to aid US evacuation efforts in exchange for humanitarian aid, a seat at the table in JCPOA discussions, and security cooperation in Syria—up to and including the re-evaluation of the Assad regime by the United States.

Russia will likely use the Syria conflict to paint Bashar al-Assad as the victim of ISIS's re-emergence and reconstitution from its al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) days. Additionally, Moscow will highlight ongoing Turkish aggressions in Syria against Assad, while concurrently portraying Iran-backed SMGs as having played a pivotal role in ISIS-Core's defeat, portraying the Turks as undermining US relation-

ships with the Kurds, and using these points of justification to show mutual interests ahead of serving as a potential intermediary in JCPOA talks.

Separately, trade relations apparently halted between Iran and Turkey in mid-October 2021. This follows news that Turkey signed a trilateral defense agreement with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Iran immediately responded with the announcement of a bilateral security agreement with Armenia. These actions, taken in aggregate with the current security situation in Syria, portray a new era “Caspian Sea Scenario” with GPC implications. While Turkey’s agreement with the natural gas wealthy Shiite Azerbaijani regime no doubt caused shock and dismay in Iran, the situation also presents complex risks in the Caucasus region for Russia. We expect Moscow will seek considerable discussions with the United States on these issues for security assurances. These collective considerations could serve as part of Moscow’s indirect plan to counter Chinese GPC emergence that is beginning to encroach on Russia’s priorities, while still projecting strength, deterrence, and risk mitigation in the face of NATO.

Section Three: Nonstate Actors, Organized Crime, and Terrorist External Operations

I think the intelligence community currently assesses that both ISIS–K and Al Qaeda have the intent to conduct external operations, including against the United States, but neither currently has the capability to do so. We could see ISIS–K generate that capability in somewhere between 6 or 12 months. I think the current assessments by the intelligence community is that Al Qaeda would take a year or two to reconstitute that capability, and . . . we have to remain vigilant against that possibility.⁵²

—Colin Kahl, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy

The Hybrid Threat in Post-Drawdown Afghanistan

The funding of a terrorist organization is crucial to its ability to wage insurgency, and to plan and execute Ex-Ops attacks outside of its primary jurisdiction of operations. Our doctrinal and institutional views of terrorism and transnational organized crime have changed significantly since 11 September 2001. Back then, we viewed AQ as a group of mujahideen funded by wealthy Saudi oil financiers and networked through the Pashtun people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Twenty years later, we recognize the direct “hybrid threat” network convergence between terrorism and organized crime, such as drug trafficking. This has resulted in many terrorist groups themselves developing into hybrid threats that emit the characteristics of not only a terrorist group but also those of a criminal syndicate and/or elements of a hostile state actor. Certainly, in the case of the Taliban’s new Islamic

Emirate, the Taliban now clearly fits the characteristics of a drug cartel, terrorist group, and hostile state actor.

Hybrid threat is the network intersection between one or more state or nonstate threat organizations operating in at least two threat classifications. Those threat classifications could include terrorism; hostile foreign intelligence operations; organized crime in the form of drug, weapons, or human trafficking; or offensive cyber operations.

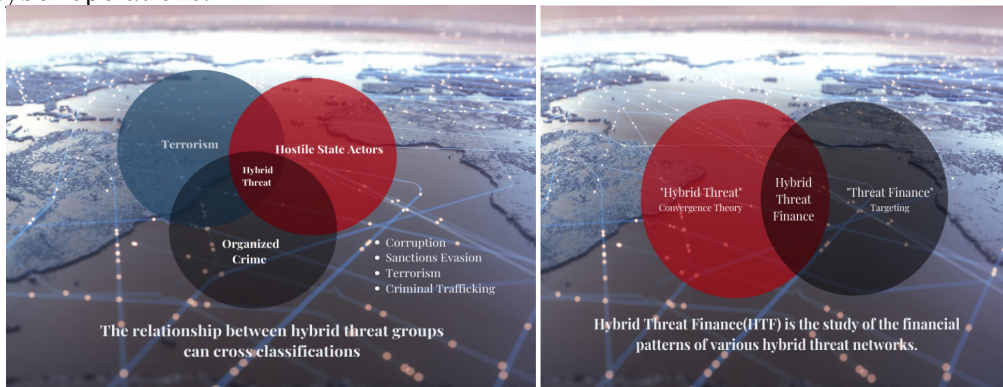


Figure 2. Left: “Hybrid Threat” convergence theory. Right: Hybrid Threat Finance (HTF) targeting doctrine. Source: Section 2’s Threat Finance Academy (TFA) (s2fis.com)

Hybrid threat finance (HTF) is the theory that those network intersections are often materialized transactionally, meaning that hybrid threat networks are in fact *networks* as a direct result of their financial relationships. In the modern day, most terrorist organizations are predominantly funded through their own criminal enterprises. This includes various revenue-generation events, such as KFR, fraud, and the organized criminal trafficking of narcotics, weapons, humans, antiquities, minerals, gemstones, and endangered wildlife. Terrorist organizations have also found ways to enforce a *zakat* (religious tax) on civilians in areas where they have seized territorial control. This tax can range from utilities, such as the Taliban’s control of the Kajaki Dam, to paid highway checkpoints, and traditional income taxes that would normally be paid to one’s government. Terrorist organizations also engage in fundraising via witting and unwitting donors to nongovernment organization charities and, occasionally, raise direct funds in cryptocurrency through the Dark Web.

Revenue generation is not the only critical component to terrorism finance. The ability to obfuscate and access funds for operational sustainment through money laundering is one of the most important success or failure criteria of any terrorist group. Understanding the importance of revenue generation and money laundering to terrorism helps to inform the process used by the US government to engage in counter threat finance (CTF) preventative and forensic targeting practices.⁵³

Terrorist organizations often rely on unconventional and Islamic banking practices to launder their ill-gotten proceeds. This includes the use of cash-intensive dealer-brokers known as *hawwaladers*, who operate *hawala* currency exchange businesses. These *hawwaladers* accept debts from their counterparts on behalf of customers and log those debts on handwritten and digital ledgers. When debts are small, *hawwaladers* can settle them through remittance programs like Western Union or MoneyGram, programs like PayPal, or general-purpose reloadable (GPR) “open-loop” prepaid cards. When a large amount of debt has accumulated from one *hawwalader* to another in Afghanistan, that debt is often settled by an intermediary known as a *saraf*, who operates a sarafi exchange business. The sarafs have access to accounts in the formal banking system and can settle debts through wire transfers, online automated clearing house transfers, or cryptocurrency.

Counter Threat Finance Targeting Philosophies

Preventive Targeting: Targeting source illicit revenue-generating activities as they occur, to prevent the enemy’s ongoing operational sustainment (preventive measures).

Forensic Targeting: Forensic analysis of the enemy’s placement, layering, and integration of funds designed to provide anonymity to their illicit funding source(s). Used to identify, freeze, seize, and retrace assets to high-value individuals (forensic measures).⁵⁴

The United States and its allies have not recognized the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and have worked with the IMF to ensure that the Taliban’s new regime does not have access to the billions of dollars in coffers that had been intended for the previous US-backed government. Additionally, the United States has cut off US dollar clearing to the Afghan banking system—a banking death sentence that has led to a global de-risking of the Afghan banking system.

China and Pakistan intend to fill this void by funding and laundering the proceeds of terrorism in Afghanistan in exchange for the monetary and supply-chain controls they gain through REE extraction. Beijing and Islamabad have taken the approach of recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate power in Afghanistan and presenting themselves as business partners to help with revenue generation and governance. Afghanistan- and Pakistan-based VEOs intend to utilize the support of the Chinese and Pakistani banking systems as intermediaries to regain access to the global financial system. China’s banking sector is notorious for privacy laws used to facilitate global money laundering and terrorist financing. China’s incursion into Afghanistan to extract resources is also a tremendous funding opportunity for the VEOs. In the current environment, the Taliban and other VEOs operating within Afghanistan’s geographic borders have limited capability to transact

internationally, which is thought to be a critical component of terrorist financing necessary to execute Ex-Ops attacks on the West.

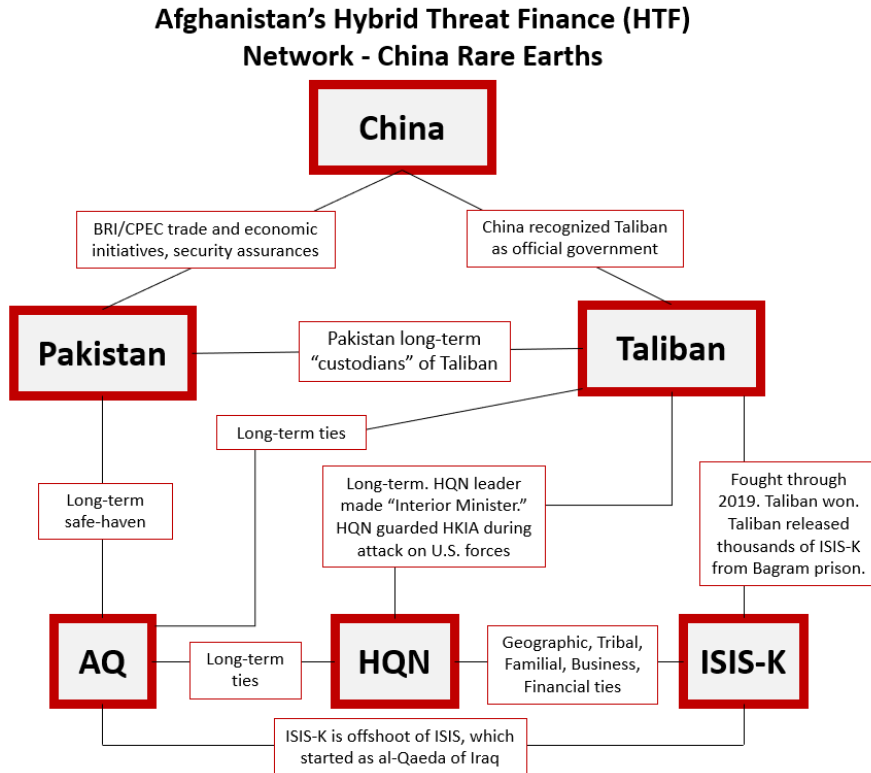


Figure 3. Relationship between Afghanistan's hybrid threat finance network and China's desire for REEs

We assess the current primary HTF network model in Afghanistan to include China, Pakistan, the Taliban, ISIS–K, AQ, and HQN. These VEOs likely see this relationship as mutually beneficial, as the environment for revenue generation through China/Pakistan financial incentivization and the trafficking of narcotics, minerals, gemstones, people, and weapons are nearly unobstructed. Additionally, the prospect for utilization of the Chinese and Pakistani financial systems will enable these groups to access, operationalize, and relocate funds globally to facilitate ongoing governance and Ex-Ops aspirations. We believe these groups view the relationship with China and Pakistan as a business partnership that is unlikely to interfere with their operations.

The Taliban has maintained longstanding good relationships with AQ and the HQN, which have been well-corroborated over decades of research and academic white papers. These relationships were further cemented through recent open-

source reporting. Osama bin Laden's former security chief, Amin ul-Haq, returned to his hometown in Nangarhar to a celebrity welcome captured on video one day before the US withdrawal, after taking refuge in Pakistan for the past two decades.⁵⁵ We believe that the Pakistani ISI intelligence service has long provided safe haven to AQ members. Additionally, AQ amir Ayman al Zawahiri released his first video in four years to congratulate the Taliban after the US withdrawal.⁵⁶ On the HQN side, the Taliban promoted Sirajuddin Haqqani as the interior minister of its Islamic Emirate. That role mirrors the position of Pakistan's interior minister, who recently admitted that Pakistan has served as the "custodian" to the Taliban for the past two decades. We also observed HQN's Badri 313 unit placed in charge of security at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) prior to an ISIS-K attack that killed 13 US service members. The HQN is believed to have strong ties with Pakistan's ISI, oftentimes functioning as a proxy for ISI operations. In fact, most of these VEOs have had long-term positive relationships with one another, with the exception of the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K. However, we believe that ISIS-K will "turn their turbans," an old Afghan reference meaning to shift one's loyalties in favor of the victor, to find mutual ground.

Understanding the Taliban/ISIS-K Relationship and the 26 August 2021 ISIS-K Suicide Attack on Abbey Gate at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), Kabul

Explaining the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K is complicated; however, it is a critical relationship to understand in a post-US drawdown environment. Although the news cycle of stories suggests ISIS-K is in a full-fledged conflict with the Taliban,⁵⁷ there is most likely a working agreement between the two organizations, up to and including the Taliban's use of ISIS-K as a proxy force. The Taliban's relationship with ISIS-K has long been contentious. ISIS-K and the Taliban were involved in significant fighting for years until mid- to late 2019, when the Taliban nearly obliterated ISIS-K, pushing the latter's remaining fighters through Nangarhar Province back into Pakistan.

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized Bagram Airfield uncontested from the ANDSF. According to Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, the number of ISIS-K prisoners in Bagram prison was "in the thousands." Upon seizing the prison, the Taliban executed ISIS-K leader Abu Omar Khorasani and eight of his deputies but released thousands of ISIS-K fighters. The Taliban could have executed these prisoners instead, but it did not. The simple act of executing ISIS-K's leadership and releasing the rank-and-file fighters appears to indicate that the Taliban may have placed conditions upon their safe release.⁵⁸

On 26 August 2021, just 11 days after the Taliban's release of these prisoners, known ISIS-K terrorist Abdul Rehman al-Loghri detonated a suicide vest at the Abbey Gate of HKIA, killing 11 US Marines, one Sailor, and one Soldier and 170 Afghan citizens. Eighteen additional US troops and many additional Afghan citizens were wounded. We have not observed any credible information indicating that members of the HQN or Taliban were killed. According to Congressional hearings on the suicide attack, al-Loghri was among those released on 15 August 2021 from Bagram Airfield after the Taliban seized the base.⁵⁹

At the time of the attack, the Taliban had entrusted airport security to the HQN's Badri 313 unit. There were no Taliban or HQN Badri 313 members reported killed or wounded during this suicide attack. Members of ISIS-K and the HQN are believed to maintain familial, tribal, business (smuggling), and financial (*hawala*) ties along the eastern Afghanistan border with Pakistan.

The complex history of Sunni terrorism has made it challenging for Westerners to understand the alliances and rivalries among various groups. In Afghanistan, Westerners are currently struggling to understand where ISIS-K fits in the Sunni VEO landscape. We take the position that ISIS-K may in fact be currently operating as a proxy force for the Taliban. This is in contrast with other analysts who believe that ISIS-K is still involved in a large-scale conflict with the Taliban. This distinction is important for policy makers, who, according to recent media reports, were or are deliberating the possibility of intelligence sharing with the Taliban against ISIS-K. Weeks after the attacks, during US/Taliban meetings in Doha, Qatar, the Taliban emerged from the talks indicating that the group refused to cooperate via intelligence sharing with the United States against ISIS-K. The Taliban's refusal to ensure that Afghanistan does not emerge as a global hub for terrorism Ex-Ops is a clear violation of the Doha Agreement.⁶⁰

These collective activities appear to demonstrate operational precoordination and an ongoing working relationship among the Pakistani leadership (and by virtue the ISI), the Taliban, AQ, the HQN, and ISIS-K and indicates that the Taliban may have leveraged ISIS-K as a proxy strawman layer of separation to oversee and/or facilitate the attack on US service members and Afghan civilians at HKIA on 26 August 2021. We are concerned that the public face of their relationship may remain contentious for the Taliban to continue to leverage ISIS-K members for operations that require "plausible deniability," including KFR operations. If there is a working relationship between the Taliban, AQ, HQN, and ISIS-K to operate in Afghanistan for mutually agreed upon and beneficial deliverables, we grow concerned about the prospect of the Taliban potentially declaring an Islamic caliphate to consolidate power and increase funding from the Islamic world.

Prospect for a Taliban-led Caliphate Declaration and a Risk Comparison to ISIS's Former De Facto Caliphate

As Afghanistan emerges into the global hub of terrorism, the prospect for an Afghan-sourced, facilitated, and/or financed Ex-Ops terrorist attack by a Sunni VEO against the United States, its interests globally, and its allies will now be higher than at any point in history. The partnerships of AQ, ISIS-K, and HQN, presumably facilitated through Pakistan's ISI, with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, is laying the framework for a potential caliphate declaration that would be indescribably more dangerous and capable than ISIS ever was in the height of its self-proclaimed de facto caliphate.

ISIS was born through a confluence of events that included AQI's reconstitution after former president Barack Obama's campaign promised an Iraq withdrawal order, the Muslim Brotherhood's hijacking of the Arab Spring movement in North Africa (and that that organization's subsequent takeover, loss, and expulsion from Egypt during the Mohamed Morsi era), and the proliferation of young Sunni jihadists to Syria to fight the Shiite forces of Bashar al-Assad. ISIS never had legitimate state recognition, true governance, major nation-state partnerships, or major nonstate Sunni VEO partnerships. While they stumbled into the Captagon business, they never possessed a truly global drug empire like the Taliban does; nor did ISIS accumulate the level of conventional arms the Taliban just seized from the ANDSF.

The Taliban is not just stronger than ISIS was at its inception; it is almost incomparably stronger. Despite this, it took three distinct, unfriendly, and powerful groups to destroy and reseize ISIS's de facto territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria. That included the United States and some NATO allies augmenting the Kurds; Russia augmenting the military forces of Syria's Assad regime; and Iran's IRGC, its Quds Force, and the support Tehran's forces received from numerous SMG. These efforts were not resisted or countered by any other major nation-state, except for Turkey's incursion into bordering Kurdish held territories, which were efforts that occurred late in the conflict and were focused on limiting the capabilities of the Kurds rather than prohibiting the degradation of ISIS. The political impetus to repeat such a Defeat ISIS-like coalition effort in the international community currently does not exist and is highly unlikely to exist any time soon. Rather, the opposite is most likely, with China, Pakistan, Iran, and potentially, to a lesser extent, Russia collectively focusing operations on preventing the United States, NATO, and other partners from militarily re-entering Afghanistan.

Although many national security policy experts believe we will be back in Afghanistan soon, our capacity to reverse course in the near to mid future is limited

due to the full collapse of the Afghan government, leaving the Taliban with billions of dollars' worth of military equipment, involvement of near-peer state adversaries filling the vacuum post the US withdrawal, and the extent that those adversaries value the potential economic opportunities of REE mining, energy pipelines, and other trade deals—as well as the resolve of those nations to prevent the United States from securing an air base in Afghanistan that could be used to kinetically strike their interests.

Policy Recommendations

1. Department of State:

a. DOS/Foreign Service:

- i. Recognize the NRF as an ally of the United States, up to and including the initiation of diplomatic engagement—and, if the conditions are right, recognition of the NRF as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.
- ii. Formally refuse to recognize the Taliban's Islamic Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.
- iii. Engage with allies and neutral jurisdictions on the prospect of accepting additional Afghan refugees.

b. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs:

- i. Budget appropriations for training to assist Afghan refugees with assimilating into Western cultures. Of particular concern is a 27 August 2021 study from the Center for Immigration Studies that reviewed the crime rates for Afghan refugee men living in Austria. That study revealed that Afghan men living in Austria were 22.1 times more likely to engage in rape, 35.7 times more likely to engage in robbery, and 10.1 times more likely to engage in violence against police officers.⁶¹ Cultural sensitivity, criminal law, and assimilation training are necessary assurances to help facilitate additional refugee patriation pacts and mitigate the risks associated with culture shock, lack of understanding of our Western laws, and assimilation issues.

c. US Agency for International Development (USAID):

- i. Humanitarian assistance (HA) assurances to the Taliban regime and NRF in exchange for safe facilitation of US- and ally-supported

evacuation of AmCits, SIV, Priority 2 (P2), and prioritized high-risk individuals and their families.

- ii. HA operations should prioritize medical needs. Additional appropriations are needed for lodging, medical screening, and legal documentation support. Time constraint hurdles in Afghan refugee medical screening have primarily involved:

1. Medical:

- a. COVID-19: Waiting for testing results (nonrapid test), contact tracing, and isolation periods.
- b. Tuberculosis: Many individuals from the region demonstrate false positive Tuberculosis results and require follow-on chest X-rays to mitigate Tuberculosis diagnosis.

2. Legal/Documentation Support:

- a. Many Afghans do not possess passports, or their passports have expired.
- b. Some Afghans do not have Tazkeras (Afghan identification cards), or they have expired.
- c. Some Afghans have presented fraudulent or fictitious documentation, which makes positive identification challenging. Counterintelligence (CI) screenings via interviews and screenings through various databases (Office of Foreign Assets Control [OFAC], terrorist, and other watchlists) are challenging without positive identification.

2. Department of Treasury:

- a. Conduct a thorough review on the conditions set forth in Pakistan's IMF loans, their periodic reviews, and loan disbursement cycles. There may be sufficient derogatory information available to impact Pakistan's ability to access additional loan disbursements going forward. We recommend engagement with the IMF, World Bank, Egmont Group, and FATF on this and other programs. We recommend significant US engagement on the next Pakistani FATF mutual evaluation through the presentation of derogatory information that corroborates Pakistan's direct impact in violating the terms of its loans, foreign aid support, military aid support, and other international agreements through terrorism financing and actions hostile to the United States, NATO, and

other allies. We should share derogatory information with partner and international authorities on Pakistan's performance incident to their FATF and IMF periodic reviews, which considers recently demonstrated and corroborated material and financial support to terrorism, corruption, and hostile actions against the United States and NATO interests.⁶² There is a historical precedence to IMF loan disbursements being blocked in Kenya for similar reasons. The United States should explore these options.

b. *Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN)*:

- i. Issuance of public release instructing US regulated financial institutions to issue suspicious activity reports (SAR) around key industries and relationships that associate Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).

c. *Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC)*:

- i. Targeted designations intended to degrade key industries and relationships that associate Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and UAS.
- ii. Refugee screening support.

3. New York Department of Financial Services:

- a. Regulate financial institutions in line with NYDFS Part 504 guidance to monitor and report suspicious activity associated with the nexus of Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and UAS.

4. US Department of Commerce:

- a. Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS):
 - i. Targeted-entity listing packages associated with the Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban nexus around REE mining, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services and UAS.
 - ii. US Export License restrictions.

5. Department of Defense:

- a. Counterintelligence (CI):
 - i. CI support to refugee screening.

b. Information Operations (IO):

- i. Pakistan is actively engaged in an online IO campaign generating propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation that strongly refutes, counters, and attacks Westerners promoting the well-corroborated stories listed above. These IOs are friendly toward China and the Taliban; attempt to mitigate public connections to AQ, HQN, and ISIS-K; and appear to be precoordinated and aligned with the messaging campaign coming out of China. This behavior is not restricted to media outlets. Rather, it predominantly takes place in social media campaigns by individual account posters, in a coordinated and concerted manner.
- ii. A cross-GCC dedicated IO apparatus incorporating elements of INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, SOCOM, the interagency, and allied jurisdictions to counter Chinese malign influence, REE mining, intellectual property theft, ongoing planning to seize Taiwan, efforts to lay telecommunications infrastructure globally, hostile military maneuvers, and trade/economic intimidation tactics. These efforts should also target Pakistan as a gatekeeper to China's operations in Afghanistan.
- iii. IOs should inform the world clearly and concisely of China's intent to do the following:
 1. Control global supply chains via dominance in technology, REE mining, intellectual property theft, and complex corporate beneficial ownership of US and other jurisdictions' high technology companies.
 2. Control, propagate, and suppress the information environment via ownership of the telecommunications infrastructure (satellites, ocean lines, and cell towers), hardware (ZTE, Huawei), software, and data/internet, leading to loss of personal freedoms and national independence for compliant jurisdictions.
 3. Utilize all elements of Chinese national power to intimidate, threaten, and potentially invade noncompliant jurisdictions.
- iv. These aggregate efforts should accurately depict China as a less-desirable partner than the United States, whose foreign policy does not seek to strip partners of their independence, individual rights, or an information environment free from suppression.

- v. This effort should be scoped to refute, delegitimize, and counter an apparent Chinese, Pakistani, and Taliban Islamic Emirate coordinated information campaign using propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation to control the information environment surround their relationships with one another and with other Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan.

6. Department of Homeland Security:

- a. Refugee screening support.

Summary

A post-US drawdown Afghanistan plays a significant role in the GPC with China and is likely to serve as the global epicenter of Ex-Ops terrorist threats to the homeland for the near-term future. Beijing believes China can win the GPC if it can dominate in emerging tech and IOs. Both of those LOEs require it to extract significant REEs to choke the United States out of critical supply chains. The threat of Afghan-sourced terrorists engaging in Ex-Ops attacks against US and allied interests are anticipated to be viable within 6–12 months.

An allied, interagency, soft-power-centric solution may have the dual benefits of degrading Chinese REEs extraction operations and threat finance denial of terrorist financing/money laundering by various Afghan-based Sunni VEOs to plan, sustain, and operationalize proceeds into high-profile attacks. For US and allied force denial and degradation operations to be successful, we assert that HA operations are necessary to evacuate remaining US persons, Westerners, valuable SIV applicants, and additional high-value vulnerable persons from Afghanistan. We are concerned that failing to do so could enable a ripe environment for KFR, which could give our enemies negotiating leverage that counters our soft-power capabilities. While the US military no longer occupies Afghanistan, the fight for this nation is far from over. We encourage our leaders to formulate a strategy to assist in the process of devising post-drawdown solutions that counter our state and nonstate adversaries' Afghanistan-based operations. 🌟

Maj Gen Buck Elton, USAF, Retired

Major General Elton retired in October 2020 after 31 years of service. He flew MC-130H, MC-130E, and MQ-1s in Air Force Special Operations Command; commanded at the squadron, group, wing, and task force levels; and was the commanding general of the Special Operations Joint Task Force in Afghanistan. He also served as the deputy commanding general of Joint Special Operations Command, the deputy director for special operations and counterterrorism on the Joint Staff, and director of operations of the US Special Operations Command.

CPT Joshua Fruth, US Army Reserves

Captain Fruth is the cofounder and chief strategy officer of risk consultancy Section 2 Financial Intelligence Solutions (s2fis.com) and was previously the director of anti-money laundering advisory services at New Jersey-based Matrix International Financial Services (Matrix-IFS). Josh served in the public sector as a US Army Intelligence Officer, civilian Police officer, and federal contractor. He completed assignments within CENTCOM, INDOPACOM, US Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (USACAPOC), US Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Special Operations Joint Task Force–Afghanistan (SOJTF-A), and US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry & Security (BIS). Mr. Fruth spent a decade as an inner-city law enforcement officer, combating the criminal trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and persons and interdicting gang, domestic, and sexual violence. Fruth is a published contributor, trainer, and keynote speaker featured by various major national and international media outlets and technology, financial crime, and banking associations. He is an honor graduate of the Special Operations Forces Captains Career Course (SOFCCC) at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWC), distinguished honor graduate of the Basic Intelligence Officer's Course (MIBOLC) at the US Army Intelligence Center of Excellence (USAICoE), and a graduate of the Fort Benning School of Infantry and Ohio OPOTA Police Academy. Josh previously reported to Maj Gen Buck Elton as his lead advisor on counter threat finance and counternarcotics.

Dr. Vanessa Neumann

Dr. Neumann is a Venezuelan–American entrepreneur, author, diplomat, and global political thought leader. Since 2010, Dr. Neumann has led the Latin American consultancy she founded, Asymmetrica, specializing in resolving complex investor issues (including litigation) by finding diplomatic, political, and commercial solutions that are often outside the scope of more traditional approaches. Her first commercial book, *Blood Profits*, was published in 2017; a Brazilian edition, *Lucros de Sangue*, followed in 2018. In 2019–2020, Dr. Neumann took a sabbatical to serve as ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland for the interim president of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó, whom she accompanied to a bilateral meeting at Number 10 Downing Street with UK prime minister Boris Johnson. During her tenure, she set a global precedent by freezing \$2.2 billion in sovereign gold bullion at the Bank of England, away from the kleptocratic and illegitimate Maduro regime. Dr. Neumann has done fieldwork in the reintegration of Colombian paramilitaries and was consequently the academic reviewer for the US military's Special Operations Command (SOCOM) teaching text on counterinsurgency in Colombia, ARIS Series. In 2018 she launched the *Golden Hydra* report on illicit finance in South America's Tri-Border Area at the US Congress and testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2019. Previously, she served four years in the Task Force Against Illicit Trafficking at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). She holds a PhD in political philosophy from Columbia University and a current fellowship at Yale University's Global Justice Program.

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What Happened to the Afghan Air Force?

JAMES CUNNINGHAM

JOSEPH WINDREM

As the Taliban rolled into Kabul on 15 August 2021 on motorcycles and in stolen Humvees, they clearly did not fear the one thing that had kept them at bay for years: air strikes. US forces had withdrawn; even “over-the-horizon” US air support had ceased—and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), a crucial part of a security force that the United States had spent two decades and \$90 billion building and supporting, was nowhere in evidence.¹ In fact, nearly 25 percent of all Afghan military aircraft were hundreds of miles away in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, where their AAF pilots fled to escape the Taliban.²

How did such a massive investment by the United States fail in such a key respect? And what lessons can be drawn from that failure?

Introduction

Since 2014, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has had a program dedicated to identifying and preserving lessons from the US reconstruction experience in Afghanistan. The head of SIGAR, John F. Sopko, created the program in response to requests from the many generals, ambassadors, and Afghans he met with on his visits to Afghanistan who were looking for big-picture assessments of what had and had not worked. To date, SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program has issued 13 reports covering a range of topics, from security-sector assistance to economic development to support for gender equality. These reports have identified more than 195 specific findings and lessons and made more than 146 recommendations to Congress, executive branch agencies, and the Afghan government. The following is based on SIGAR’s body of work on US security-sector reconstruction efforts, but primarily the work found in two lessons learned reports: *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces* (2017) and *Divided Responsibility* (2019).

The absence of the AAF in the final days before the Taliban takeover was not some 11th-hour disaster. It was the last event in a long chain of causality that SIGAR has been sounding alarms about for years. In Afghanistan, the United States tried to create a military force that was a mirror image of America’s own—that is, ground forces that rely on overwhelming air superiority—without providing the Afghans with an air force that could maintain, train, and equip itself without US support.

The last straw came when US aircraft maintenance contractors left the country in May and June. Once that happened, “every aircraft that had battle damage or needed maintenance was grounded,” a former Afghan National Army (ANA) senior officer told SIGAR in a recent interview. “In a matter of months, 60 percent of [the US-provided UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters] were grounded, with no alternative plan by the Afghan government or U.S. government to bring them back to life.”³ Given that reality, the decision by many AAF pilots to fly their planes to neighboring countries appears to have been a salvage effort: they took some fellow fighters and their families with them and kept their aircraft out of Taliban hands.

Although no one foresaw the speed with which the Afghan government collapsed, SIGAR has issued numerous reports—audits, inspections, special projects, quarterly reports to Congress, and lessons learned reports—pointing out problems that strongly suggested the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) was a foreseeable tragedy. The story of the United States’ unsuccessful attempt to create a self-sustaining air force in Afghanistan reflects the larger story of the US intervention in Afghanistan. Both were a complex mixture of calculated decisions, political pressure, bureaucratic inertia, and ad hoc decisions made by constantly changing military personnel who were never in the country long enough to build a lasting institutional memory. SIGAR was not the only agency noting problems: military observers and experts on Afghanistan did as well. In its regular reports to Congress, the Department of Defense (DOD) duly noted most of these problems, in detail. However, in keeping with the military’s “can-do” institutional culture, its top leaders kept their emphasis on progress and forward momentum. There was little incentive to weigh positive and negative information realistically—military careers are made by following orders, not demonstrating failure. To understand how the story unfolds, we begin with a brief history.

Background

In the first years of the US involvement in Afghanistan, the United States took it for granted that American forces would provide the airpower the Afghan military needed; with the Taliban routed, the thinking was, US air support was only a temporary need. When it became clear the Taliban were regrouping, the development of an Afghan air capability became a key component of the US exit strategy. If the ANA could keep a motivated insurgency at bay with the help of US airpower and medevac capabilities, then—in theory—training Afghan pilots to do the same would get American troops home.

In 2005, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed the US Army to formally rebuild an Afghan presidential airlift capability as part of the Afghan National Army Air Corps. By 2007, that had morphed into plans for an Afghan Air Corps of 7,000 members, to be carved out of the ANA, and responsibility for training had shifted from the US Army to the US Air Force.⁴ The goal: to “set the conditions for a fully independent and operationally capable” air corps to meet Afghanistan’s security needs.⁵

But what were those needs? From the beginning, US and Afghan views differed. “We are grateful for what America and the West are doing,” Afghan Colonel Khei Mohammad said in 2007, “but we need to rebuild our air corps faster. . . . We should have jets, helicopters, and cargo planes, so that we can defend our borders ourselves.” However, while Afghan military leaders seemed focused on air attack capabilities, Brig Gen Jay Lindell, USAF, was more interested in the mundane problem of logistics, citing “the immediate critical need . . . [for] air mobility capability.”⁶

Training Efforts and Acquisitions

With those fundamental differences unresolved, the United States began work on training the fledgling air corps with around two dozen aircraft. By 2011, more than 30 coalition partners were participating in the AAF train-and-advise mission, and Afghan pilots hit several training milestones. Even so, the DOD noted the still-fledgling nature of the AAF, whose entire force was rated as “established but not operational.” Only 59 of 145 planned aircraft had been delivered, and the training mission lacked 65 promised trainers. Afghans renewed their requests for fighter jets and attack helicopters, which the Bush administration denied.⁷

That was to become a pattern: the United States provided equipment the US military *wanted* to give, not necessarily what the Afghans asked for. However justifiable any given equipping decision may have been, this policy had a long-term ramification: it kept the Afghan government from mastering the essential managerial role of learning how to equip its own military.

Several SIGAR reports focused on questionable equipping decisions, and a 2019 SIGAR report said, “After 18 years . . . the Afghans do not have a formal, consistent role in the equipping process.”⁸ As a result, the report found, “the Afghans currently have limited ownership and understanding of the equipping process.” To develop that understanding, the report added, “the Afghans will need be able to play a larger role in the direction, execution, and tracking of their own equipment procurement, training contracts, and sustainment.”⁹

In retrospect, it seems clear that acquisition decisions by the US military might have benefited from more Afghan input. The grounded UH-60 Black Hawk he-

licopters mentioned previously by the former senior ANA officer are one example. At the start of the United States' involvement with the AAF, the force was using Mi-17 helicopters, the Russian-made workhorse used by the Afghan military since the Soviet occupation. Afghans were familiar with its repair and maintenance. In 2014, Russian forces invaded the Crimean Peninsula, to widespread international condemnations—and those tensions, combined with the increasing difficulty of getting spare parts for the Mi-17s, prompted the DOD's decision in 2016 to stop using Mi-17s and give the AAF something else.

That “something else” proved to be the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, made by Connecticut-based Sikorsky Aircraft. The control panel of the Mi-17 has dials and buttons; the UH-60 control panel is a wall-to-wall array of electronic readouts. The decision to supply state-of-the-art UH-60s instead of a simpler model meant a steep new learning curve for Afghan pilots, at a time when the number of US trainers was minimal. By the DOD's own estimates, the AAF would have been able to completely maintain a fleet of Mi-17 helicopters by 2019. With the introduction of the UH-60s, that best-case-scenario target date became 2030.¹⁰

Yet two years before Congress approved the purchase of the UH-60s helicopters, SIGAR had warned in an audit that the AAF was not capable of even maintaining the aging aircraft it had. “The Afghans lacked the capacity—in both personnel numbers and expertise—to operate and maintain both the SMW's [Special Mission Wing] existing fleet of 30 aging aircraft and a planned fleet of 48 new aircraft costing a total of \$771.8 million,” the audit said.¹¹ It was the first of many times over the ensuing years that SIGAR pointed out the Afghans' inability to maintain their own aircraft.¹²

As a result, the AAF relied largely on contractors for its aircraft maintenance. This in itself was unremarkable; the US Air Force uses contractors for a significant amount of maintenance work, too. The problems with the AAF's near-total reliance included the fact that the overwhelming majority of contractors were from the United States, the increased need for maintenance caused by a small air force taxed with meeting the needs of large, scattered ground forces, and the scanty pool of Afghans who could even be trained in a country where two-thirds of the population are illiterate in their own language, much less English.

Another problem emerged when young, literate pilots with English language skills proved to be more competent than older pilots, causing significant generational friction—especially when AAF leadership, respecting Afghan cultural norms, bypassed younger pilots to give older pilots flying assignments.¹³ Corruption also played a role. In theory, Afghan trainees were selected based on merit and test scores, but—as SIGAR noted in a 2019 lessons-learned report—US

military officials acknowledged that Afghan officials often awarded coveted training slots based on patronage and family connections.¹⁴

Other training issues originated within the US military bureaucracy. In 2013, the US Air Force authorized the purchase of four C-130s to supplement two the AAF already had. SIGAR raised questions the following year about the purchase, pointing out that the AAF was unable to maintain the C-130s it already had.¹⁵ The DOD's solution was to hire more contractors—who would, in theory, help train more Afghan maintenance crews. However, the contract did not spell out any training goals. Additional problems arose because of a separate DOD policy that said US air advisors could fly only in aircraft that had been assessed as airworthy by a US Federal Aviation Administration–credentialed mechanic—which had the effect of barring Afghans from working on the planes.¹⁶ There were, in short, any number of reasons why the process of building a truly self-sustaining air force from the ground up in Afghanistan was turning out to be agonizingly slow.

On its end, the United States had its own personnel problems. Decisions about equipping all branches of the Afghan military were often the result of inexperienced, untrained personnel who often lacked the expertise to identify more appropriate or cost-effective options.¹⁷ What is more, they were never in their jobs for long, due to the DOD policy of deploying its personnel on one-year rotations—creating a constant personnel turnover that became known as “the annual lobotomy.” Not surprisingly, it was a system that produced bad decisions.

One notable example was the 2006 purchase of 20 refurbished G.222 fixed-wing aircraft for nearly half a billion dollars, which ended up being sold for scrap metal—an incident SIGAR first made inquiries about in 2014.¹⁸ The planes were bought under time pressure, via a sole-source contract, to use up procurement funds before the end of the 2008 fiscal year. This was despite warnings from within the US Air Force that a virtually identical model had proved unreliable and expensive to maintain when the United States had used it in the 1990s. One year of use in Afghanistan's high altitudes and punishing desert conditions proved nothing had changed: the G222s were still unreliable and expensive to maintain. The US Air Force tried to sell the planes, found no takers, and eventually sold them to an Afghan scrap metal dealer for \$40,257.¹⁹

However, such missteps did not in themselves doom the US effort in Afghanistan. The more fundamental problem was the US military's proclivity for creating an Afghan military in its own image—and then failing to plan for the many challenges inherent in creating the air force that model required. A 2017 SIGAR lessons-learned report pointed out that, over time, Afghan officers became “ad-

dicted” to close air support—a dangerous dependency, considering the ticking clock and the still-developing AAF. As the report went on to say:

The tendency to train and assist the ANDSF with capabilities largely provided by the U.S. led-coalition extended beyond the provision of close air support. The ANA became accustomed to other combat enablers, such as medical evacuations, intelligence gathering, and reconnaissance capabilities, that were largely underdeveloped or nonexistent within the ANA at the time. In April 2010, for example, Defense Minister Wardak told NATO assembly members that the ANA faced shortcomings in air transport, mobility, reconnaissance, and firepower. This view was largely shared by other ANA officers, who viewed the ANA as dependent on foreign support because of its own lack of heavy equipment, close air support, and intelligence.²⁰

The United States did produce one highly effective program for training Afghan pilots and maintenance crews: the A-29 training program, which began in January 2015 at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia. US Air Force personnel selected as trainers for the program were required to attend the US Air Force’s Air Advisor Academy to get teaching certifications and were then assigned to three-year tours as part of the 81st Fighter Squadron, based at Moody. After conducting introductory training for their Afghan students in Georgia, trainers and trainees were deployed to Afghanistan, where the trainers provided additional mentoring and training. Following the advisor’s tour, the advisor would return to Georgia to train the next class of Afghan students. Long tours and sustained mentoring, both in the United States and in Afghanistan, allowed trainers to enforce consistent standards and establish rapport with their students and their Afghan counterparts.

By 2018, Afghan A-29 pilots were hitting targets with 88-percent accuracy, according to the DOD’s December report to Congress that year—proof that an incremental training approach and long-term relationships could produce superior results. And then the DOD ended the program. That was not a reflection on the A-29 training program but the collateral casualty of a different problem: an increasing number of Afghans going AWOL from an English language course offered at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, which prompted the DOD to end all US-based training for Afghan pilots. (Meanwhile, the short-lived A-29 program became a template for similar programs subsequently being operated in Nigeria and Lebanon.)²¹

All these issues were problems that could have been corrected, given enough time—but the AAF was running out of time. In February 2020, the Trump administration announced that it had arrived at a peace agreement with the Taliban for a complete US pullout within 14 months, conditioned on the Taliban’s promises not to let Afghanistan become a haven for terrorists and to enter talks with the Afghan government. The so-called Doha agreement had a devastating effect

on morale among the Afghan military forces, former Afghan National Army General Sami Sadat wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, by putting “an expiration date on American interests in the region.”²²

Across Afghanistan, Taliban forces slowly but inexorably began consolidating their small pockets of fighters, demolishing roads and bridges, and expanding their areas of control. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, one effect of which was to restrict the use of US air assets. The AAF, already struggling to run air support, resupply, and medevac missions for Afghan ground troops, was “very effective but very small,” a former ANA official told SIGAR in a recent interview, and “the commandos were very effective, but now they were not getting the material support or the advisory or joint operation briefings that they used to get from the [United States]. Nonetheless, we have continued doing what we can.”²³ However, when scattered Afghan bases around the country began running out of ammunition and wounded soldiers began dying because of the lack of medical transport, the installations began falling to the Taliban. The result was an accelerating domino effect, ending with the 15 August flight of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Conclusion

An air force can be a game changer. If by 2021, the Afghan military had possessed a highly effective and self-sustaining air force, the outcome could have been different. Building a military that is reliant on airpower and then failing to provide that airpower considerably narrows the field of possible outcomes.

Building an air force is not the same as training an army. A soldier can be given a weapon, trained to use it, and then supplied with ammo. The soldier may even be able to find more ammo or weapons on the battlefield. Aircraft have no such agency. They are expensive and technically complex, their pilots and mechanics must be literate and highly trained, and their logistical supply chains must be robust to ensure fuel and parts are always available. Unlike an army, which can be more adaptable and resilient, an air force will fall apart in weeks without constant support.

The fate of the AAF was hardly the sole factor in the collapse of Afghanistan. As SIGAR’s work has shown, there were myriad reasons things went wrong, from corruption to mismanagement to lack of strategy and foresight. Moreover, there are more complex reasons—like morale and politics—that fall outside the purview of an oversight agency such as SIGAR.

However, one thing is clear: without political will and a long-term commitment—as we saw in Afghanistan—an air force cannot last long. It will be up to policy makers facing future contingencies to decide whether such an effort makes

sense. Part of that decision would require a more realistic understanding of the limits of political will—both our own and that of other nations. ♣

James Cunningham

Mr. Cunningham is the team lead for security-sector assistance for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). He led the teams for SIGAR's lessons-learned reports on the ANDSF and Divided Responsibility and is currently leading a team looking at the Afghan National Police. Mr. Cunningham has been working on Afghan security issues for 16 years, including a decade as an intelligence analyst with the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Joseph Windrem

Mr. Windrem is the director of SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program, which identifies and preserves lessons from the US reconstruction experience in Afghanistan. He joined SIGAR in 2010 and has also written about the US-funded effort to build, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces—specifically troop strength and capability assessments. Before joining SIGAR, he worked on reconstruction and policy issues related to US efforts in Iraq.

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The Ghost of Khost

What History Might Tell Us about the Future of Afghanistan

DR. MEHMED ALI

As the August 2021 dissolution of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) illustrated, the United States and its allies' effort to transform the nation faltered along a similar path tread by others during previous eras. The GIROA's immediate collapse, preceding the full drawdown of US military forces, and the retakeover of the nation by the Taliban, have not led to a peaceful security environment, however. The growth of the Islamic State of Khorasan and its challenge to Taliban legitimacy have already been manifested in several attacks since the foreign forces' withdrawal, and concern for Afghanistan's future security will continue to weigh on the Afghan people, the military, and diplomatic minds in the international community—despite Taliban assurances of peace.

But even though Pakistan, Iran, China, and other regional players will undoubtedly still have influence at multiple levels, the basis for stability is in the hands of the Afghans themselves, especially at the provincial level, where the ground truth has always, and will continue to be, categorically played out. One of the most important stages of this drama will be in the Pashtun (or Pakhtun) regions of the country—areas that showed great resilience in opposing the GIROA and coalition forces during the entire two decades of war. The southeast in particular represents a serious challenge to any government of Afghanistan, with the area of Loya Paktya, which includes the provinces of Khost, Paktya, and Paktyka, traditionally holding a unique, semiautonomous status vis-à-vis the central government due to its locational remoteness, its heavily embedded tribal structure, and its close relationships to British India and later Pakistan.

Despite its apparent isolation, Loya Paktya actually represents the Pashtun region closest to the Afghan capital. Over decades, the province of Khost, a comparatively small area with an equally small population, has played an oversized role in the nation's politics. While some analysts have viewed this corner of the country to be of little strategic relevance, “tiny and inconsequential” in one author's words, Khost historically has been at the center of things. Seemingly inconspicuous and relatively detached, it is considered by some natives to be the “gate of Afghanistan.” Khost's position as a key province illustrates the complexities of how a sparse area or a small group of political actors with strong ideological or

tribal ties can affect an entire nation's stability, meriting attention as the political structures of postoccupation Afghanistan develop.¹

Khost Province is a 1,600-square-mile (more than 4,100 square kilometers) bowl-shaped valley ringed by mountains jabbing into the heart of Pakistan's semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Territories—a counterpoint southern salient to its neighbor's "Parrot's Beak." Geologically linked more to Pakistan, with mountain ranges that are tallest on its boundaries with the rest of Afghanistan, Khost has a front seat on the Durand Line. Fertile, temperate, and once boasting significant rice cultivation, Khost is unlike most of the nation. Demographically unified in its overwhelmingly Pashtun ethnicity and Sunni faith, it hosts a vibrant economic center for the region due to its location on a trade route with Pakistan. Literacy rates in Khost are higher than in the rest of the southeast, and the province is home to one of the only university-level journalism schools outside Kabul.²

Despite the potential for great stability in Khost, security issues have always been at the forefront of the province's history. Serious rebellions against the Kabul-based government occurred in 1856–57 and in 1912. It was from here that the Khost Rebellion of 1924 nearly overtook the Soviet-leaning King Amanullah, who had initiated reforms such as ending child marriage and promoting education for women. And here again five years later the area was the staging ground for a successful regime change reportedly instigated by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), who spread his influence (and the inevitable British bribes) from his base in Miram Shah just a few miles south of Khost's boundary. While some have doubted that Lawrence was actually involved in the plot to overthrow King Amanullah, one author pointedly states: "Surely he didn't go all the way to the Afghan frontier just to translate the *Odyssey*." And what is certainly more than coincidental is that fact that, once Lawrence left Miramshah on 8 January 1929, the rebellion quickly grew across the border and led to Amanullah's resignation six days later.³

Friction with subsequent monarchs led to the Khost disturbances of 1932–33 and 1944–47. Later, in 1978, the communist-inspired Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) government took control of Afghanistan and under the aegis of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) attempted several unpopular reforms that caused the growth of a highly armed opposition. Beginning in 1980, the siege of Khost Province became the defining, decadelong battle within the larger war between the US-backed mujahedeen on one side and the Soviet Union supporting its Afghan National Army (ANA) allies on the other. Khost's strategic importance led to several key battles between the Soviet army

and the mujahedeen during the 1980s, including Hill 3234, the Battle of Jaji, Operation Magistral, and the Battles of Zhawar.⁴

Unlike under previous Afghan governments, Khost had substantial representation in the DRA, and because so many of the PDPA leadership came from there, Khost City was nicknamed “Little Moscow” or the “Second Moscow.” Symbolically and strategically, it was one of the most important areas to the DRA government, and both sides made it a top priority to put in their win column. The mujahedeen takeover of the province in 1991 broadcast in obvious terms the weakness of Kabul and bolstered the rebels’ momentum to defeat the government the following year.⁵

Khost was where Osama Bin Laden tested his battle skills against the Soviets in Jaji. It was the site of Zawhar Kili—the mountainside camp where Bin Laden later trained his followers and at which the United States fired 75 Tomahawk cruise missiles after the al-Qaeda bombings of their African embassies in 1998. Some authors believe that the name al-Qaeda—which translates to “The Base”—is actually derived from the center at Zawhar Kili.⁶

During the American intervention from 2001 to 2021, Khost’s troubled past and tradition of violence persisted. Insurgent forces opposing GIROA, chief among them the Haqqani Network, actively used the area as a base of attack and travel. Khost was the location of the deaths of Specialist Pat Tillman in a troubled episode of friendly fire and of the seven CIA operatives who were caught in a double-cross, triple-agent suicide attack at Camp Chapman. Khost was also the province where US Army soldier Bowe Bergdahl was released by insurgents after nearly five years of captivity. An analysis of what makes the province tick from a historical perspective is essential for comprehending the current sociopolitical and security situations. And perhaps more pointedly, it is also imperative to understand Khostis’ history as shaped by tribal and ideological identities that might underpin the dynamics of the times ahead.⁷

Tribal Overlay

Khost reflects a unique tribal makeup in comparison to other areas of the nation. The province has a far higher number of individual tribes—17—compared to its neighbors (reportedly, Paktya has four and Paktyka five) and most of the country as well (except for Ghazni). Khost reportedly has the second-highest population of the nomadic pastoralist Kuchi tribes throughout Afghanistan, illustrating how prevalent the traditional clan systems are in the province. And perhaps more important, none of Khost’s tribes, except for a relatively small group (the Ahmadzai Kuchis), are affiliated with the country’s two large Pashtun confederations—the Durrani and Ghilzai. The relative isolation resulting from the existence

of these smaller tribal groupings has created a sense of independence for Khostis, which symbiotically has reinforced their ideas on governance.⁸

For example, in return for supporting the installation of King Mohammed Nadir Khan in 1929, the local tribes around Khost didn't ask for cabinet positions or infrastructure projects. Instead, they extracted from the central government exemptions from taxes, military service, and compulsory education. For these tribes "less equaled more," and their goal was to be left alone from state apparatus—an idea that undoubtedly resonates with many Khostis today. As part of this agreement, they also maintained a special administrative tribal status that continued until the communists came to power in 1978. Despite the radical societal transformations the DRA rolled out, strong tribal identities remained. And during the Taliban rule of 1995–2001, Khost, Paktyka, and Paktya were ruled by their own local governors instead of the Kandahari Taliban who held power over the rest of the country. Due to these special historical conditions, Khost and its two neighboring provinces are today part of the "only area in Afghanistan where the tribes . . . remain to varying degrees the main recipients of power alongside the state."⁹

In retaining a significant level of autonomy, Khost tribal psyche holds what might be termed a "kingmaker" complex, a residual consequence of having helped to overthrow King Amanullah. In many ways, the relationship with the central government is a function of the Pashtun tribal code that continues to be predominant in Khost. One component of the Pashtunwali code is the concept of *seyal* (equality), which ensures that no single person becomes too powerful in the tribe, especially when power occurs at the expense of others. This ideal has worked its way on a larger political scale in the fact that tribes from Khost have periodically rebelled against governments when they think they are overstepping their authority or not demonstrating enough respect toward them.¹⁰

The Mangal tribe, located in Khost's Musa Kheyl, Sebari, and Qalandar Districts, provides an example of the concept of *seyal* on a broader scale. Historically, the Mangal have maintained a pattern of rebellion against local governors, appointees of the central government, and outsiders in general, which continues to this day. When the first reported Westerners came to Khost in 1879—a British army unit that was part of the invasion force during the Second Anglo-Afghan War—they found their most troublesome opponent was the Mangal tribe, who assembled an 8,000-man force to attack the British. After defeating the fleeing Mangals, British troops carried out the "Massacre in Khost," the retributive plundering and burning of 11 villages that was later investigated by Parliament. But the Mangals eventually returned, ousting the British-installed governor. The for-

eign forces then had to destroy ammunition stockpiles and evacuate the area, squashing dreams of incorporating Khost into the Raj.¹¹

The Mangals themselves revolted against the Kabul government (itself seen as a foreign power in a way) several times during the modern formation of the Afghan state. The Mangals failed during a major uprising in 1912 but were nearly victorious in the Khost Rebellion of 1924. The tribe participated heavily in the 1929 overthrow of King Amanullah and then staged the Mangal Revolt in 1959, which occurred when the government went to build a road from Chamkani to Musa Kheyl and a tribal leader named Charka Baja (meaning “Dirty Water”) declared war. Outnumbered by mechanized government troops and by progovernment tribes such as the Jaji and Tani, who were brought in to work on the road, Charka Baja and many Mangals fled in exile to Pakistan. Almost like clockwork, 20 years later the Mangals were at it again—this time revolting against the new communist government.¹²

Similarly, the Zadrans tribe, part of a larger “Zadrans Arc” in the two neighboring provinces, is present in Khost’s Shamal, Nadir Sha Khot, and Spera Districts and has held an essentially antigovernment role over the course of history. Like its Mangal compatriots, the Zadrans tribe played a significant part in supporting the 1924 Khost Rebellion and the overthrow of Amanullah five years later. Later, the Zadrans revolted against the DRA in 1979 and blocked the Sitta Kandow Pass, which was the primary route connecting Khost to the rest of Afghanistan. Despite President Hafizullah Amin’s attempts to defeat the Zadrans that year, the government experienced “a crushing defeat” with “hundreds of burnt-out cars and armored vehicles” littering the road from Paktya to Khost.¹³

While there were representatives from many Khosti tribes involved in opposing the Soviets and the DRA, the mujahedeen derived most of its support from the two tribes discussed above, the Zadrans and the Mangals. From the two kinship groups, Jalaluddin Haqqani of the Zadrans was the most prominent mujahedeen leader to come out of the area. Haqqani grew up in Paktya but lived in Khost’s Mandozai District after the overthrow of the DRA and solidified his support base throughout the province, which persists today even after his death.¹⁴

Conversely, while the Zadrans and Mangals have a history of opposition to Kabul and its representatives, certain tribes such as the Tanis and Jajis have historically been progovernment (or perhaps better defined as less opposed than others). For example, when the government of King Zahir Shah (1933–1973) formed *qawm-e kandak* (tribal battalions) to provide security to the border regions of the province, the Tani tribe provided hundreds of men for these units. This policy continued under the DRA government, when the Tani agreed to the overtures of tribal affairs minister Faiz Mohammed to supply the gov-

ernment with militiamen. The Tanis' relatively educated neighbors, the Jaji tribe, also supported the DRA, and many joined the government's security forces during the late 1970s and 1980s. This pattern continued during the last two decades, with the Jaji tribe being "unambiguously supportive of GIROA" and touted as having "always flown the government flag." In context, it might be reasoned that Tani and Jaji tribal support in the end might not derive from a full allegiance to the central state but rather as an offset to the larger and stronger tribes in Khost Province.¹⁵

As illustrated above, tribal allegiances to the government in Kabul are essentially standard over time, and those relationships often determined the success of either side during the 1970s–80s war between the communist government and the mujahedeen. A noteworthy example of this relationship between tribes and the central state is the case of DRA president Mohammad Najibullah. Ruling Afghanistan from 1987 to 1992, Najibullah originally hailed from Seyyed Karam District in Paktya. During his early days, he spent time in Khost discussing politics with friends, and he knew the area intimately, facilitating his subsequent "skillful manipulation of tribal divisions among the Mujahidin [that] helped keep the isolated Khost outpost on the Pakistani border in the regime column."¹⁶

Likewise, the defense minister for most of the 1980s and one of the most influential members of the DRA cabinet also hailed from Khost. Shahnawaz Tanai, from the Tani tribe, used his "tribal connections in the province to throw back Haqqani offensives," including rallying his own clan to defeat a mujahedeen takeover of their namesake district in December 1986. In the end, it was Haqqani's utilization of those same connections and the abandonment of the DRA by the tribal militias that led to the government's defeat. Ultimately, it might be viewed that, in the absence of support from the Soviets, the national government could no longer assist their local Khost supporters, and consequently the more powerful local tribes, the Zadrans and the Mangals, were able to defeat their weaker progovernment adversaries, the Tanis and the Jajis.¹⁷

Communist versus Mujahadeen Identities

The long-rooted status of division between Khost and the central government eventually went through a metamorphosis of sorts during the rule of King Zahir Shah. As the country stabilized after the tumultuous times of the 1920s, the royal government enacted policies attempting to bring the Loya Paktya region closer to the fold. As early as 1941, Kabul rewarded Khost with some agricultural initiatives to win over the populace. By the 1960s, numerous Afghan ministries had brought several development projects to the province, including a trade school, a vast sapling orchard, a 50-bed hospital, a meteorological station, a reconstructed

road over the mountains to Paktya, and a pilot health, education, and agricultural extension program in Tani District. Several of these initiatives were funded via international donors—especially Germany, which worked in Afghanistan because it was “one of the countries that didn’t go to war with them.” As a sign of further outreach, the king personally viewed some of the projects and met with tribal leaders in visits to Khost in 1962 and 1963.¹⁸

As part of its goals to centralize power and attempt to fashion a unified sense of Afghan nationality, the government embarked on another strategy toward societal unification through the schooling of Pashtun students in Kabul. The government, with the help of Soviet and US advisors, established an education system that brought young people from all around the country to study in the capital. For example, Rahman Baba High School (named for the historic poet Abdur Rahman Baba) was opened for young men from provincial Pashtun tribes, with instruction in their native Pashto language as opposed to the commonly used Dari. The boarding school recruited many people from Loya Paktya and became the most prestigious lycée for the Pashtun people. By the 1950s, the sons and grandsons of the warriors who had fought to ensure that Khost would not pay taxes, face conscription, or require compulsory education went off to school to learn about how they could be an integrated part of the nation.¹⁹

But as Soviet aid and influence rose under the time of Prime Minister Daoud Khan, so did radical leftist ideologies in Afghanistan. And ironically, some of the expanded schools in Kabul created to help unify the country instead became foundries for factious politics. At Rahman Baba High School, which many young people from Khost Province attended, lectures about communism were not part of the official curriculum; however, several of the instructors promoted the subject in informal discussion groups after regular classes. At collegiate-level schools, several educators from Khost were instrumental in bringing about a new political identity for their younger kinsmen as well. Mahmud Alumgal Suma, a teacher of political science at Kabul University, and Pohanmal “Professor” Guldad from the Kabul Polytechnic University were notable left-wing influencers of fellow Khostis and others who came to be educated in the capital.²⁰

Although Khost traditionally believed in maintaining a distant association to the central government, attitudes began to change during this period. As a consequence of their exposure to relatively new ideologies concerning the relationship between the state and its role in the lives of its citizens, some prominent Khostis began advocating for radical change in the Afghan kingdom. Despite the investment in provincial development projects during the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the king in Khost actually increased. There were many public demonstrations in Khost City expressing opposition to the monarchy and calling for more government-

provided services and educational opportunities. A reason for discontent, according to one protester, was that no one from the region held any significant position in the government during the king's time. But because of the significant ideological undertones and Khost's traditional (yet now modified) opposition to Kabul, another activist related that perhaps these early protests were not reflective of popular ideological activism but rather the historical antagonism between Khost and Kabul and that in fact "people were finding any reason to protest."²¹

The growing opposition to Kabul helped foster "various forms of political opposition and radicalism" in Khost. At this time many Khostis joined the Khalq (Masses) faction of the PDPA when it was formed in 1965. Khalq, which predominantly derived its support from a rural Pashtun population base (as opposed to the Parcham faction, which attracted greater numbers of urban and educated members), was known for its more radical stances and for propaganda "so strong that people would follow them to their death." Most Khostis were part of the "Red Khalqis" faction connected to Nur Muhammad Taraki (who later became president) with a smaller group, the Paktia Khalqis, connected to Khost leader Dr. Abdul Karim Zarghun, a Marxist from Mandozai. Their dedication to the communist cause led Taraki to have said that "the friends we have from Khost Province, we have nowhere else."²²

As Afghanistan's political stability unraveled in the 1970s, Khostis played key roles in Afghanistan's coups, countercoups, and coup attempts over the years. Afghan Air Force officer Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi was active in the events leading to the overthrow of King Shah in 1974 and the installation of former prime minister Daoud Khan as president of Afghanistan. While the Khalq faction was sidelined during the rule of Khan, communists from Khost were instrumental in the Saur Revolution of 1978, which in turn ousted Daoud Khan. Just one year later, when the Soviets entered Afghanistan in 1979, one of the three Afghan leaders that guided the invading forces in overthrowing President Hafizullah Amin was again Gulabzoi. And ironically, the head of the elite guard who attempted to defend the ill-fated president from the Soviets was an officer named Jahandad who also came from Khost.²³

With the Saur Revolution, Khost Province had a seat at the table of power for the first time, and during the subsequent reign of the DRA, several Khostis held central positions in the PDPA-led government. Among the leaders were the aforementioned Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoi, minister of the interior and minister of communications from Nadir Sha Khot District; Shawnawaz Tanai, minister of defense from Tani; and Faqir Mohammed Faqir, minister of the interior, also from Tani. Other important Khostis included Habib Mangal, a member of the PDPA politburo and ambassador to the USSR; Ghafar Lakan, minister of

agriculture; Mahmud Alumgal Suma and Pohanmal “Professor” Guldad, both ministers of higher education; and Mir Ahmed Gorbuz, ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Except for Mangal, all these individuals hailed from the districts of Matun, Tani, or Gorbuz.²⁴

Aside from Kabul and Jalalabad, Khost was one of the few places in the country that was considered a “bastion of the regime.” And the loyalty to the DRA cause led to Khost receiving status as a de facto province in the Afghan year 1365 (1986/87). This included the establishment of a *tashkil*—a force of paid provincial staff—and an annual budget separate from its neighbors.²⁵

But the new designation didn’t win over any friends from the mujahedeen, who were steadily gaining the support of the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, those countries helping to funnel funds and weapons to the rebels. And of the religious fighters, it was Jalaluddin Haqqani of the Zadran tribe that was considered by the United States to be “the most impressive Pashtun battlefield commander of the war” and who received a substantial share of the foreign-supplied war materiel. Stinger missiles, first tested by men under Haqqani subordinate commander Mawlawi Hanif Shah of Khost, proved potent in keeping airlifts away from Khost City, causing shortages of food and armaments as the mujahedeen maintained a siege of the city during a period of more than 10 years throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s.²⁶

As things grew tough in the province, a new kingmaker moment arose at the national level with another son of Khost at its heart. In 1990, General Shawnawaz Tanai attempted a coup against President Mohammad Najibullah in collusion with mujahedeen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and with the support of politburo member Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi. The aptly named Tanai Coup was a failure, however, and the general escaped on a commandeered helicopter, arriving in Pakistan to a warm welcome from Hekmatyar. The peculiar alliance of a hard-line communist with a major religious fighter bluntly illustrated Tanai’s interest in pursuing power over his commitment to ideology. And his proclamation, a week after fleeing, that the DRA forces at Khost would immediately surrender to the rebels “when he gave the order” spoke to the idea that personal and tribal loyalty to individual leaders was maybe more important than allegiance to the state.²⁷

As the mujahedeen continued to lay siege to the city, secret negotiations were undertaken between DRA supporters Azzizullah Zaland and Amir Shah Karger and insurgent leader Mawlawi Hanif Shah to allow for the capitulation of government forces. But talks stalled, and an extensive ground attack, which even utilized Iraqi tanks captured in the Persian Gulf War and smuggled into the country by the US Central Intelligence Agency, spelled the dénouement. In March 1991, the communist garrison flew the white flag and yielded up some

2,000 soldiers and seven generals who were all miraculously accorded decent treatment as prisoners of war.²⁸

Aside from the great fighting the mujahedeen carried out, the fall of Khost was also linked to the thousands of tribal militiamen on the government payroll who apparently refused to support the communists at the critical moment. According to DRA general Mohammad Zahir Solamal, the militias fled to watch over “their houses instead of [their assigned] security posts inside the town,” while others reported that they merely “swapped sides when the going got tough.” Since the Tani tribe made up a significant component of this force and it was from their area that one of the main bodies of mujahedeen invaded the city, it is also quite possible that DRA defector and fellow kinsman Shawnawaz Tanai convinced them to take a walk at an opportune moment. Whatever the reasons on the provincial stage, it was a distinct foreshadowing of national events during the summer of 2021.²⁹

When the mujahedeen took over Khost in 1991, some broke down doors and looted shops, even disassembling buildings and blowing up tanks for the scrap metal. About two weeks after the takeover, journalists reported that trucks laden with office equipment from the downtown were carrying their cargo over the hills to Pakistan. In many ways, Khost was old-fashioned tribal spoils at its best (or worst).³⁰

Although some analysts have claimed that the fall of Khost was not a significant factor in ending the Najibullah government, the US Department of State declared at the time that “[t]his is definitely a major victory for the mujahedeen” and that the importance of Khost was that it “guards the vital supply routes connecting the capital, Kabul, to the north, with the southwestern provinces.” It was also perhaps more importantly a symbolic triumph, which rallied religious fighters all across the nation. Within a year, the DRA was dead, and in the next several years, as warring factions sought control of the nation, Khost was back in its historically default position—out of Kabul’s reach.³¹

During this time, Haqqani became the “quasi-warlord” of Khost and Paktya. Critics complained that provincial organizations were “dismantled rather than governed” and that the city fell into a scene of frequent crime, including thefts and kidnappings. One contemporary generously noted that the mujahedeen “were military guys, not politicians.”³²

When the Taliban first came into the region in January/February 1995, they found it easy to enter Paktya and Paktyka, “but Khost was more challenging.” Many of the mujahedeen commanders were opposed to the Taliban, and Haqqani was hesitant to join the new movement. But once the group came across the mountain pass, they surrounded his house in Mattajina, Mandozai.

With no escape, associates reported that Haqqani was handcuffed and tortured by the Taliban before finally accepting an agreement to join forces with them. Governance continued along a similar path during the Taliban times. Observers related that “Khost was like a graveyard. There were no educational opportunities, no economic growth, no freedom for discussions.” Another lamented how “it wasn’t really a government. . . it was just gangs who killed a lot of people and tortured people.”³³

Khost’s independent spirit (or hard-to-govern nature perhaps) continued under Taliban rule, which one journalist described as being a “big headache” for the new leaders in Kabul. Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I Islami group even attacked the Taliban forces in eastern Khost in August 1996 before retreating. In January 1999, the people of Gorbuz in Khost openly fought the government after six people, including a woman, were killed by the Taliban, who declared their traditional New Year egg-cracking game to be “un-Islamic.” The following year, tribal elders threatened to declare a jihad unless governor Sayed Abdullah was removed from office. After his sacking, it was reported that this was the first time since “the emergence of the [Taliban] movement in 1994 that the entire administration of a province has been changed due to pressure from the local population.”³⁴

Khost during America’s Longest War

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the old mujahedeen/communist and tribal enmities arose again as former DRA supporters (some who returned from exile) maneuvered into or reclaimed positions of power. In many ways this was a natural progression. The new government and the international community pushed for a return to emphasizing educated bureaucrats and a “professionalization” of the armed forces. On the other side, the mujahedeen for the most part were uneducated and didn’t value formal schooling outside of the madrasa, leaving them out of potential sources of power.³⁵

The presence of US forces in the province after 2001 also altered the nature of power, allowing old groups to reform. Often following the path of least resistance, military units found those who were most like-minded for the immediate goal. One author has noted, “In an odd twist of history, the fall of the Taliban brought to power many of the old communists the United States had struggled against in the 1980s, and because they were often the most ‘anti-Taliban’ officials in the area, they were useful allies to the U.S. and Coalition partners.”³⁶

In 2002, General Khailbaz, an exiled Khalq officer from Jaji Maidan, returned to Khost and established his own militia from former communist soldier forces. Eventually, the group was integrated into what became known as the Khost Protection Force (KPF)—a 3,500-member special forces unit. For keeping “rela-

tively close relations with provincial authorities and security organs,” these former communists were criticized by other tribes. Complaints ran the gamut from their “lack of accountability and perceived arrogance when returning to Khost City” to their harassment of former mujahedeen members and “ruthlessness and human rights abuses.” One observer related that the KPF, while “nominally subordinate to the National Directorate of Security [NDS, Afghanistan’s domestic intelligence agency], in reality operated autonomously from the Kabul government.” And in 2019, the United Nations reported that the organization was outside of the legal government structure and that “the continued widespread impunity for abuses its members enjoy remains of grave concern.” Reportedly, the KPF, until its surrender to the Taliban in August 2021, was funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency.³⁷

Opinion on the Khost office of the NDS was similar. Some Khostis alleged the agency was staffed with “many former communists” and targeted families who previously supported the mujahedeen. NDS brigadier general Abdul Wasi Ahmadzai was a former DRA officer, and when the US Department of State reported that there was “systematic torture” at the NDS facility in Khost, it didn’t surprise many locals.³⁸

The divergence that Khostis maintain from the central government can also be attributed to the makeup of the other security forces in the province. For several years, the head of the ANA in Khost was General Nasir Hedayat, a Tajik, while the forces stationed there continue to be exclusively from outside of Khost—mainly non-Pashtun soldiers who speak only Dari. Their ability to connect to the local populace is substantially limited, and many Khostis consider them to be an “occupying army.” Within the ranks of the ANA in Khost there are also divisions between ethnic backgrounds as well as between those who fought with the mujahedeen and those with the DRA. As an example, for several years there was continual friction between General Nasir (former mujahedeen) and Lieutenant Colonel Nasarat (a former communist), commander of the subordinate 3rd Kandak. In the words of one former US Army commander, General Nasir continually attempted “to find any reason necessary to get rid of him.” The same commander also noted that “when things go sideways these guys go right back to ethnic politics.”³⁹

During the American intervention, US complicity, intentional or not, real or not, contributed to the perception that their forces favored former DRA supporters. Some religious leaders in Khost believed that coalition forces were preferentially hiring linguists and other workers who came from communist families. In turn, these employees were using their positions to encourage the military to target mujahedeen families, claiming they were insurgents, and causing innocent people to be arrested and detained. Some religious leaders have even incongru-

ously proclaimed that the mujahedeen were in “a better position during the Communist regime.”⁴⁰

When in 2005 several of the former PDPA leaders returned to Khost to run for parliament, including Shahnawaz Tanai and Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi, it further refreshed the communist/mujahedeen division. Tribal elders declared, “In the last three years, the communists have tried to blackmail the mujahideen; they call us Al Qaeda. . . . We are a Muslim nation, and we will destroy them step by step.” Another former mujahedeen member was even more blunt: “The communists should be killed and the philosophy of communists should be killed. . . . I will not let Gulab Zoi walk into parliament. He killed 1.5 million Afghans.” Despite the tough talk, Gulabzoi (though not Tanai) won a seat and even topped the ticket of all candidates, illustrating that his tribal base and other connections to voters were still solid. Undeterred, Tanai and Dr. Habib Mangal both ran as presidential candidates in 2009 but were unsuccessful against Hamid Karzai.⁴¹

During the GIRoA era, the return of communists to “high positions” within the provincial government caused a myriad of issues. Perhaps most significant were their attempts to reclaim properties and other assets that were taken after the fall of Khost by the mujahedeen, which obviously created dissension between the two sides on a very personal level. After the US military pulled out of the province in October 2013, the political situation became murkier, and according to the US Embassy, one of “the most salient social and political division[s] in Khost remains the opposition between ex-communists and ex-mujahideen.”⁴²

Issues of trust between the different constituencies as well as the nature of governmental structures also caused persistent problems. While most of the GIRoA-appointed provincial governors and most of the district governors had affiliations with the mujahedeen, most of the important provincial-level ministry directors were former communists. And as the governor and district governors had very little influence over the ministry officials, who reported directly to Kabul, the situation led to frequent tensions. The elected provincial council was also split along similar lines, and the former communists, including leader Daoud Shah Makenzoi, were at the forefront of criticizing the governor over the years.⁴³

At other levels, GIRoA suffered from the age-old Khost malady of unrequited amity. The feeling of disenfranchisement by the Khosti people was perhaps more enhanced in light of their political status in previous regimes. The days of the communist rule were a boon for Khost primarily because it had solid connections within the government. The few individuals from Khost with significant positions during the GIRoA interregnum were ANA chief of staff Sher Mohammed Karimi and the deputy minister of higher education, Wali Zai, both from Mandozai District. But other influential players were missing, and the sense around the province

was that “no one speaks for Khost on the national level” and that the parliamentarians were “not perceived to have influential contacts within the regime.”⁴⁴

Many Khostis held a common belief that the province was not represented in positions of power, especially during President Hamid Karzai’s tenure. One critic related: “There are no ministers, no ambassadors from Khost while in other places there are many. There are 16 ambassadors from Panjshir and there are four ministers from Wardak which is a tiny place. Karzai does not like Khost!” Another observer believed that there was “no foreign intelligence agency supporting the Khalq people [and] that’s why there is no minister or deputy minister in government representing them.” And this criticism comes not just from people who supported the DRA—a former rebel commander, Mawlawi Hanif Shah, noted that while in office Karzai did not give any major government position to any mujahedeen.⁴⁵

For several years Khost was considered the “crown jewel in the American counterinsurgency” efforts, but the withdrawal of troops in 2013 led to increased attacks around the province. An attack against a presidential convoy delivering election ballots caused the death of Associated Press photographer Anja Niedringhaus in April 2014. Other high-profile strikes against the government were the November 2018 suicide bombing in Ismail Khel District, which killed more than 25 security force members, and a brazen roadside assault targeting Khost governor Mohammad Halim Fidal in April 2019.⁴⁶

In the leadup to GIRoA’s fall, rebel leaders capitalized on the divisions that existed in Khost and strengthened their movements through the recruitment of a disenfranchised rural base as well as from their own tribal connections (in the case of the Haqqani Network, it is from the Zadran group that provides much of the material support). In many ways the notable tribal, geographic, and class distinctions that existed between the former mujahedeen and the communists were replicated between insurgents and GIRoA. And from that juncture, one can understand that much of the original mujahedeen structure transformed itself into the anti-Kabul insurgency between 2001 and 2021.⁴⁷

One policy brief stated that, “in a somewhat ironic twist of history, it seems as though those tribes that sided with the PDPA government in the past are now less affected by insurgency infiltrations. Areas where tribes were stronger among the *mujahideen* factions, and in particular where factions struggled for power in the past, are some of the most insecure areas today.” But the situation as described is not paradoxical at all if one considers that the same pro- or antigovernment lineup existed during this century as it did in the 1980s. It is no surprise that the Haqqani Network viewed the coalition-backed GIRoA as essentially the same entity that the Soviet-backed DRA embodied—a government supported by foreign forces that was illegitimate in their eyes.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Despite the touting of Khost as an example of American-backed resilience, the province fell to the Taliban on 15 August 2021—the same day that Kabul fell. The expected return to a harsher interpretation of religion's role in society and the age-old politics of Khosti “payback” came quickly, with the naming of Jalaluddin Haqqani's son, Sirajuddin, as the Taliban's minister of the interior, the arrest in Khost of several female leaders, further limitations on education for girls, and the imposition of a curfew in the city after hundreds of people came out to demonstrate against the new government. Sirajuddin's younger brother, Anas, returned to the province in August, declaring there was “no need to leave the country and now it was time to bring back refugees from other countries and these people should know that they [are] safe here.”⁴⁹

But by early October, events indicated something else, as an explosive device at the Mazharul Alum Madrasa in Khost killed seven and wounded 15 others. This was followed a few days later by the arrest of eight members of the Islamic State in Khost who “confessed that they were planning to conduct attacks in the province.” The continued flying of the old GIRoA flag by some is a “fearless” display of Khostis' continued strive for autonomy and a public challenge that many “will not allow the new government's foot soldiers to remove the hallmark of the past until they have proven that rights for all will forge ahead.”⁵⁰

In analyzing the reasons for Khostis becoming supporters or detractors of a certain political cause, the importance of personal connections cannot be underemphasized. Whether it is Western notions of democracy, the system of Soviet communism, or visions of an Islamic caliphate, the introduced ideologies form, for most players, only a thin layer of political identity over the long-prevailing competitive tribal structures and bonds of kinship.

It is believed that for some provincial elders' support for “the Taliban revolves around tribal interests, not through belief in the insurgency's inherent virtue vis-à-vis the Afghan government or foreign forces.” Another analyst even reported that “some people who have met [Jalaluddin] Haqqani over the past decades doubt that he is mainly motivated by religious feelings.” And on the other side one author believes that, for former PDPA supporters, “extreme nationalism is a stronger force among them than is Marxism. As for tribal affiliation, that comes first.”⁵¹

The departure of American soldiers from Afghanistan has opened both positive possibilities and potential dangers for the security of Khost. Either way, the Afghans themselves are now in command of figuring out the next step along the road toward stability for the province. And while the political structures of Taliban 2.0 are so new as to forestall an exact analysis on intertribal relations in the

province, the fluidity of beliefs will probably continue as a trademark of the ever-changing notion of Khost citizenry.

The superimposition of ideologies that are often morphed into an indigenous form of their own will doubtless be forever changing. A common denominator for much of the province, however, is that it has and will probably always be an outlier. For a multitude of reasons, Khost continues to engender a sizable minority that opposes the state structures in Kabul—for the vast majority of time that has been its legacy. However, when Khost has maintained strong connectivity to the central government, such as during the DRA days, it enhanced the split between the differing tribal alliances and illustrated a set of societal structures that pose challenges for peace in the province. And in reviewing all the historical narratives, it appears that these very similar patterns look poised to continue.

There is no claim, though, that tribal fidelity or loyalty to a certain military or religious leader is seamless. There are many instances where families or individuals have made a personal decision not to support one side or another. Likewise, after 40-plus years of almost continual warfare and refugee displacement, tribal power is not as potent as it was previously. And yet, there are still filial linkages that provide a sense of bonding and trust in a society that has vast experience with violent outsiders, whether those outsiders are from the neighboring valley or from thousands of miles away. It is those types of connections that must be at the forefront of everyone's understanding if Khost Province is to have a sense of peace for the future.⁵² ✪

Dr. Mehmed Ali

Dr. Ali is director of Academic Services, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Connecticut. He previously served as a diplomat in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a team at the forefront of strategic bilateral public diplomacy, higher education, and development initiatives, including time in Khost.

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Legitimacy and International Development in a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan

MARK S. COGAN
DON MCLAIN GILL

Legitimacy is an old concept in international relations—the origin of which has been explored by numerous scholars, from Jean-Jacque Rousseau to Robert Dahl.¹ Nation states navigate their existence by probing popular and external legitimacy, both of which are required to take part in the affairs of state. The denial of legitimacy, evidenced in Taiwan by mainland China, has been an active part of Beijing’s strategy at the United Nations,² which has had adverse effects on the island, measured in part by diminished international stature and a nagging security dilemma that has narrowed windows for diplomacy. Legitimacy in Afghanistan has been a concern for decades and is not necessarily grounded in the Weberian sense of the term. The West has had to come to terms with the traditions that legitimize rule in the country, especially when it is based on patriarchy, political kinship, family, and age.³

The inner workings of Western-backed governments had been sources of anxiety for many Afghans, particularly the ability of such mechanisms to generate legitimacy out of essential state functions, such as social service delivery or the conduction of elections. No more corrupt and bereft of both legitimacy and public faith were the August 2009 presidential elections, which resulted in a victory for the incumbent, Hamid Karzai, over his rival, Abdullah Abdullah. Security lapses, low enthusiasm, and poor voter education—as well as alleged ballot stuffing—marred the end result.⁴ The 2014 election did not augur well for a freer and fairer process, although a negotiated compromise after a lengthy recount created the National Unity Government of Pres. Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah.⁵

The work of United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), and civil society groups assumed that both security and government legitimacy would be guaranteed or that the arduous process of development would continue unabated. Aside from the tens of thousands of international troops that were deployed to Afghanistan to maintain peace and security and reconstruct the country, billions were invested in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. While war costs exceeded \$2 trillion,⁶ approximately \$65 billion in aid was also provided

to Afghanistan, focusing on a range of objectives, from education, good governance, infrastructure, to agriculture. And while development assistance to Afghanistan had slowly declined after 2011,⁷ as donors fatigued or became weary with the prospect of continued Afghan dependence on external resources, there were some signs of progress, particularly in terms of the education of girls, greater participation for women in government, media development, and broader economic diversification and development.

All this changed when the Taliban quickly seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021. International development now operates in a fog, with line ministries under the control of what many deem to be an illegitimate government. While more than \$1.2 billion has been allocated for immediate humanitarian needs, the longer-term problem of engagement with the Taliban back in power in Afghanistan remains a lingering concern of the international community.⁸ This commentary explores the related issues of development in Afghanistan and the dangers of external partners granting varying degrees of legitimacy to the Taliban. In this article, we survey the current Afghan context and highlight the pitfalls of granting external legitimacy to the Taliban—a group still labeled as a terrorist organization by many governments—underline the importance of legitimacy in the context of development, and navigate options for the UN and other aid organizations still operating in Afghanistan.

Will the International Community Legitimize the Taliban?

In the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan from the collapsed Ashraf Ghani government, Western countries and institutions have made some attempts to delegitimize and marginalize the new Taliban regime. The United States, upon leaving Afghanistan, immediately froze \$9.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets—funds that will now be unavailable to the Taliban, which remains on the US Treasury Department's designated sanctions list.⁹ The deprivation of funds also means that the Taliban will not have access to international financial institutions, an essential component of governance. In mid-August, the International Monetary Fund blocked access to more than \$460 million in reserve funds.¹⁰ Finally, the World Bank halted funding for several Afghanistan projects, directly citing the illegitimacy of Taliban rule, a departure from its history of funding more than \$5 billion in the country since 2002.¹¹ These developments are significant as they complicate efforts by the Taliban to gain popular and external forms of legitimacy.

Legitimacy and recognition serve as important factors for any government to operate independently within the confines of the state and participate in the international system. The recognition of a government allows for several important

benefits such as providing a basis for the acceptance of representatives as diplomats, the ability to enter into treaties, the reception of aid and development packages, and the access to state assets abroad. The Taliban is aware that without proper external legitimacy and recognition, it will not be able to maneuver effectively to win over the support of the Afghans or to craft or join cooperative arrangements with other states to address a wide array of issues in the defense, economic, and sociocultural realms. In keeping with these aims, the Taliban recently asked UN Secretary-General António Guterres to speak at the General Assembly, as well as expel Afghanistan's UN Ambassador Ghulam Isaczai in favor of the Taliban's choice, Mohammad Suhail Shaheen.¹² A seat at the UN would have significantly improved the Taliban's recognition deficit, also coupled with a series of recent promises that the Taliban would potentially moderate its behavior, from claims of establishing an inclusive government, respecting human rights—particularly for women—and preventing the country from becoming a haven for terrorism. In its pursuit of the UN seat, the Taliban demonstrated a modicum of restraint by maintaining security during their initial weeks in power.¹³

Yet the regime shown signs that it has begun to revert to its much more restrictive ideological approach, preventing women and girls from attending school or participating in the labor force.¹⁴ While the Taliban claims to have full control of Afghanistan and the support of Afghans, the reality is much more complex. Many Afghans have gone into hiding, as the Taliban continues to search and monitor individuals who supported American and international forces. In urban areas, Afghans fear losing development gains achieved over the past two decades. These factors also demonstrate the obstacles the Taliban will face in gaining a significant degree of international support and recognition. For example, it was assumed that Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan would be overt in their recognition of the Taliban, but Moscow has expressed concern about the Taliban's promise to deliver a tolerant and sustainable government.

In September 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov highlighted that the interim government of the Taliban failed to reflect the “whole gamut of Afghan society.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Lavrov added that international recognition of the Taliban was not yet on the table. Iran, despite its willingness to enhance its economic engagements with Afghanistan, also expressed its displeasure due to the marginalization of the Shia Hazara community in the Taliban's power structure.¹⁶ This has also resulted in Tehran's wariness about how Taliban-led Afghanistan will turn out vis-à-vis the Shia community.

China initially extended support and accommodation for the Taliban. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted the Taliban in July 2021, while they were still gaining ground in the country. Yi called the Taliban a “pivotal force,”¹⁷ and later

Beijing offered \$31 million in humanitarian aid.¹⁸ However, China is also keenly aware of the strategic limitations in Afghanistan. While Beijing has expressed a long-term desire to incorporate Afghanistan into China's Belt and Road Initiative and monetize Afghanistan's untapped mineral wealth,¹⁹ Chinese leaders understand the security risk an unpredictable partner can pose on the Wakhan Border, in broader Central Asia, and in Xinjiang.

While Pakistan was among the first to recognize Taliban rule in 1996, the current situation is quite different as Islamabad copes with a faltering economy and record inflation. Moreover, Pakistan is highly dependent on the aid provided by states and international financial institutions.²⁰ It will be counterproductive for Islamabad to recognize the Taliban knowing the negative implication in which it can result. Within the domestic political realm, Pakistan's parties are also divided. While Islamic hardliners have shown their great support for the Taliban, secular parties have expressed discontent toward the Taliban's treatment of women and minorities.²¹ Worries brought by the possible proliferation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's terror activities are also a cause of critical concern. These factors serve as immediate obstacles for Pakistan openly recognizing the Taliban.

How Does a Lack of Legitimacy Impact the Work of the United Nations in Afghanistan?

Prior to Taliban control, Afghanistan faced a myriad of development crises, from the onset of drought to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.²² Under the Ghani government, approximately 40 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) came from foreign aid.²³ In addition, 90 percent of Afghans were living on less than \$2 per day,²⁴ and, going into 2021, more than 18 million people were dependent on humanitarian assistance—nearly half the country's population.²⁵ As billions in national assets were frozen by the West, the question of legitimacy has a direct impact on humanitarian and development plans by international organizations like the UN working on the ground in Afghanistan. While the Taliban made attempts to reassure the international community of its intentions to create a more inclusive government, inaction has forced Guterres into appealing to partner countries to act on a "make or break moment"²⁶ for Afghanistan.

After the events of August 2021, the work of UN agencies in Afghanistan was upended,²⁷ as diplomats and practitioners worked against the pressures of security and a loss of operational control. In the weeks after the Taliban takeover, national staff exchanged correspondence with senior UN officials worried about the prospect of Taliban rule and their immediate security. Some national staff reported

being beaten and abused,²⁸ in stark contrast to written assurances by the Taliban that development and humanitarian workers would have safe passage and freedom of movement.²⁹

The lack of legitimacy in Afghanistan comes with international and regional pressure to avert a looming humanitarian crisis that would further destabilize the region. Regional powers China, Russia, and Pakistan have pressured the UN to send staff back to Afghanistan to mitigate the crisis.³⁰ However, senior UN officials such as Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed skepticism due to human rights concerns, recommending that an investigatory mechanism be incorporated to monitor developments in the country to ensure the safety of UN staff and civilians.³¹ These normative reservations further highlight the dilemma of granting legitimacy to the Taliban with few guarantees that its behavior will be moderated and the prospect of a country without the means to administer basic social services to its people. Regional states are more concerned about the possible spillover effects of a humanitarian crisis, which would worsen regional security and compromise their individual strategic interests.

In the Current Environment, How Can United Nations Agencies Operate and Remain Effective?

In evaluating the Afghan development landscape in the short to mid-term, UN agencies are already adapting their approach to current humanitarian and development crises. Responding to multiple challenges arising from the collapse of what the UN calls the “legitimate government” on 15 August, the UN created the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan, which will be led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).³² The new fund serves as an interagency mechanism that allows donors to channel resources to coordinate their support for an Area-Based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives (ABADEI), a strategy to operationalize a humanitarian and development response in the ever-evolving Afghan context.

The difference between this approach and those of the past is that the Taliban is essentially left out of the decision-making process. Furthermore, the fund uses UNDP’s direct implementation modality, where the UN agency assumes the role of the implementing partner, and through direct contracting, works with third-party implementers such as NGOs, community groups, and private vendors. With the Special Trust Fund, the UN works at the local level in Afghanistan to provide essential services, boost community-based livelihoods, develop disaster and climate-resilient infrastructure, and foster social cohesion at the local level. Created in October 2021, Japan, along with Germany, was among the first interna-

tional partners to contribute to the Special Trust Fund, announcing a \$3 million grant for emergency agricultural initiatives.³³

As security forces evaporated during the Taliban's quick takeover of the country,³⁴ the future of capacity building and professionalization funds like the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOFTA) seem in doubt. Often plagued by scandal,³⁵ LOFTA was established by UNDP in 2002 to provide support to the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MOIA) and the Ministry of Finance to establish, pay, and equip members of the Afghan National Police. With Sirajuddin Haqqani—a senior Taliban figure listed in the United States as a terrorist with a \$10-million bounty in exchange for his arrest³⁶—now firmly in control of the MOIA,³⁷ donors will be extremely reluctant to place monies in the hands of funds like LOFTA, which was nationally managed by the MOIA, even while still governed by UN financial rules.

The United Nations and other aid agencies might have some leverage over the Taliban in the short term, as social service delivery, even in a violent context, is critical to earning popular legitimacy. Still, the ability to deliver basic social services hinges on demonstrated capacity, expertise, and an adequate distribution of human and financial resources. With many female government and municipal employees being told to stay at home,³⁸ local ability to deliver essential services will be hamstrung. Many government workers with the capacity to assist the government in social service delivery have fled the country, while many government workers and teachers have not received pay.³⁹ With the flight of human capital and the neglect of existing workers, it will be difficult for the Taliban to demonstrate proficiency in governance.

In the short term, the international community—in concert with UN agencies—will need to engage with the Taliban to implement an immediate humanitarian response plan. A recent survey by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs showed that nearly 11 million people—or 35 percent of the population—face high levels of food insecurity as of May 2021. In one of four scenarios developed by the UNDP Afghanistan Country Office, if a high-intensity crisis persists, assuming trade with major partners is interrupted for two months, there would be a 12-percent decrease in real GDP or a 23-percentage point increase in poverty from 2020.⁴⁰

As the Taliban continues to consolidate power in Afghanistan, it is inevitable that states and institutions will have to engage with it to provide Afghans access to humanitarian assistance. However, it must be noted that engagement merely reflects an understanding of power, but not legitimacy. Accordingly, engaging with the Taliban should be limited to area-specific objectives, while incorporating a series of well-defined conditions—including the close monitoring of development workers,

religious minority groups, marginalized communities, and human rights defenders. The advantage of this temporary leverage could push the Taliban toward moderation, which could include greater political participation, from regular citizen input to a distant goal of holding free and fair national elections. ☪

Mark S. Cogan

Mr. Cogan is an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kansai Gaidai University, based in Osaka Prefecture, Japan. He specializes in peacebuilding, human rights, democratization, and social movements, particularly in Thailand and Cambodia. His research focuses on Southeast Asia, particularly on authoritarian regimes in Thailand and Cambodia, with an emphasis on foreign policy, bilateral and multilateral relations, and joint security cooperation. Mark's previous journal articles have examined Thailand's nuanced relationships with the United States and China, the history of Thai social movements, and the dehumanization of political activists and opponents in contemporary Thai politics. His first book, co-edited with Dr. Hidekazu Sakai, entitled *Alternative Approaches to Peacebuilding: Theories and Case Studies*, will be published in early 2022 by Palgrave MacMillan.

Don McLain Gill

Mr. Gill is a resident fellow at the Manila-based International Development and Security Cooperation (IDSC) and the director for South and Southeast Asia at the Philippine–Middle East Studies Association (PMESA). He is also a geopolitical analyst and author who has written extensively on South Asian geopolitics and Indian foreign policy.

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Islamists' Fear of Females

The Roots of Gynophobic Misogyny among the Taliban and Islamic State

DR. HAYAT ALVI

The Afghan Taliban, along with a lengthy list of global Islamist extremists, seemingly possess an overt, irrational fear of females. However, this fear is not just based on the secular phenomenon known in psychology as *gynophobia*, which is the general fear or dislike of women. Rather, it is more than that; it is a religiously interpreted fear of females as a source of temptations that might lead to sinful sexual behavior. This article offers an analysis of the misogyny of Islamist extremist groups, specifically in the case of the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic State (IS), in the context of psycho-religious fear of females as the source of temptations leading potentially to sinful acts. The actual fear of females plays a principal role in the Taliban's and Islamic State's misogyny, and coincidentally, these organizations' determination to control the lives of women and denial of agency revolve around the same fears.

In the extremists' logic, if the patriarchal social system can control practically every aspect of females' lives, especially in the public space, then the risk of temptations for committing sins in the eyes of God is mitigated. Therefore, if women must venture into the public space, then they are required to dress with the full veil, rendering them "invisible." As the Islamists' logic goes, failure to do so would result in chaos in the streets, as men would have to face sexual temptations and distractions at every turn. Also, many ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islamic theology and principles place the burden of temptations on the shoulders of women. In other words, even if it is not a woman's intention to cause sexual temptation, she is still responsible and at fault. It is a similar concept to the burden of Eve/woman in her role causing the "original sin," as believed in some Christian denominations—but with a twist.

Renowned writer Francine Prose has illuminated the issue of fear and control of women in many religious traditions. According to Prose, referring to the Southern Baptist Convention,

. . . the convention's leaders, quoting a few carefully selected Bible verses and claiming that Eve was created second to Adam and responsible for original sin, ordained that women must be 'subservient' to their husbands and prohibited from serving as deacons, pastors, or chaplains in the military service.

. . . To automatically hate and fear anything or anyone different from ourselves and to want to feel smarter and worthier than an entire race or gender are two of the least admirable and most regrettable aspects of human nature. So it does seem peculiar that religion, with its emphasis on self-perfection through prayer and the help of God, should so rarely include intolerance among the roster of sins for which we wish to be forgiven, or to avoid altogether. Strange, but not so very strange, when we consider that religions are not merely belief systems but social institutions whose leaders have always understood how effectively fear, hate, and the assurance of racial, national, or sexual superiority—and sex—can be used to define and control a society.¹

In Islam, there is no concept of original sin. However, it can be argued that throughout Islamic history the Muslim clergy—whose institutions are male-dominated—have interpreted the *Quran* (Islamic scripture) and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) according to their respective cultural lenses. As the birth of Islam took place in Arab culture during the seventh century, wherein society consisted of predominantly patriarchal social structures and systems (with very few exceptions), the preeminent culture of Islam has been observed primarily through the male lens. While Islam brought revolutionary freedoms and rights to women *at that time of history*, the subsequent interpretations and applications of Islamic principles and laws have favored men, and, in fact, in many cases have denied women fundamental freedoms and rights. The early Islamic freedoms and rights afforded to women do not pass the test of modern standards and circumstances. Nonetheless, the ultra-orthodox clergy and followers feel compelled to impose the seventh century norms on modern societies. Global Islamist extremists are practically unmatched in their zealotry in this matter.

For instance, Saudi Arabia holds the record as an ultra-orthodox Sunni/Wahhabi theocracy that implements an extreme version of gynophobic Islamic misogyny. Furthermore, the facts that Saudi Arabia, along with Pakistan, helped create the misogynistic Afghan Taliban and that the IS ideology is based on its own version of Wahhabism are not mere coincidences. Francine Prose supports these contentions, saying, “The Taliban’s demonic and demonizing attitude toward women represents merely the most current extreme manifestation of the grotesque misogyny fostered throughout history by religion and patriarchal tribal culture. Both the Taliban and the Southern Baptists employ the ‘lessons’ of biology and scripture to ‘prove’ women’s inferiority, a view of our gender unlikely to be eliminated by another air strike or drone-missile deployment, or by the polite demurrals of a former president.”²

All these misogynistic ideologies and attitudes stem from a principal psychological factor in religiously orthodox male-dominated societies: the actual *fear* of

females. This is even more potent for the Afghan Taliban, who have been indoctrinated with this irrational fear of females in their schooling in *madrassas* (seminaries) and who have been physically isolated from female populations in their youth.

In addition, Afghan Pashtun tribal culture and codes have been known to be highly conservative and repressive toward women. Ahmed Rashid reminds us that the role that Amir Abdul Rehman (1880–1901) played—with British help—in setting the stage for Pashtun domination and empowering the mullahs (clergy) in Afghanistan is a pivotal moment in the country's history. According to Rashid, one of the most reliable authorities of the Taliban,

The Amir used British subsidies and arms supplies to create an effective administration and a standing army. He subdued rebellious Pashtun tribes and then moved north to ruthlessly end the autonomy of the Hazaras and Uzbeks. Using methods that were to be closely followed a century later by the Taliban, he carried out a nineteenth-century version of ethnic cleansing, massacring non-Pashtun opponents and transporting Pashtuns to settle farms in the north thereby creating a loyal Pashtun population amongst the other ethnic minorities.

... His other legacies, which were to indirectly influence the Taliban, included the isolation of Afghanistan from Western or modernizing influences including education, his emphasis on Islam by enhancing the powers of the Pashtun mullahs and introducing the concept of a divine right to rule rather than the traditional concept of election by the Loya Jirga.³

Rashid has long studied the madrassa culture and curricula since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and thereafter, and he describes them in his book, *Taliban*, in which he mentions that “Afghan mullahs or Pakistan’s Islamic fundamentalist parties” have run the madrassas.⁴ The students, or *Taliban*, were mostly orphaned refugee boys between 14 and 24 years old.⁵ The madrassas have proliferated along the Afghan-Pakistan border region, in which the boys “studied the Koran, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the basics of Islamic law as interpreted by their barely literate teachers. Neither teachers nor students had any formal grounding in maths [*sic*], science, history or geography.”⁶ Moreover, Rashid reports that these boys

... were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning. Untrained for anything, even the traditional occupations of their forefathers such as farming, herding or the making of handicrafts. . . .

Moreover, they had willingly gathered under the all-male brotherhood that the Taliban leaders were set on creating, because they knew of nothing else. Many in fact were orphans who had grown up without women – mothers, sisters or cousins. Others were madrasa students or had lived in the strict confines of segregated refugee camp life, where the normal comings and goings of female relatives were curtailed [...] They had simply *never known the company of women*.⁷ (emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, the roots of the Taliban's gynophobic misogyny stem from this severely gender segregated background of the madrasa students and young male refugees. Rashid adds the following observations that clarify the depths of the Islamist extremists' gynophobic misogyny:

The mullahs who had taught them stressed that women were a temptation, an unnecessary distraction from being of service to Allah. So when the Taliban entered Kandahar and confined women to their homes by barring them from working, going to school and even from shopping, the majority of these madrasa boys saw nothing unusual in such measures. They felt threatened by that half of the human race which they had never known and it was much easier to lock that half away, especially if it was ordained by the mullahs who invoked primitive Islamic injunctions, which had no basis in Islamic law. The subjugation of women became the mission of the true believer and a fundamental marker that differentiated the Taliban from the former Mujaheddin.⁸

These historical factors have contributed to and exacerbated the Taliban's fear of females. Based on this fear, the Taliban feel compelled to control and restrict the female population as much as possible to prevent the public sphere from descending into chaos due to female temptations. Author Prose substantiates these points, saying, "Measures are taken, as in Islam, to protect men from temptation."⁹

The Taliban and the IS harbor gynophobic misogyny in the context of the Islamic rule of "enjoining the good and forbidding evil." The specific verse in the Quran mentioning this is chapter (Surah) 9, *At-Tawbah* (The Repentance), verse 112, which countless violent Islamist extremists invoke: "Those that turn (to Allah) in repentance; that serve Him, and praise Him; that wander in devotion to the cause of Allah; that bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer; that *enjoin good and forbid evil*."¹⁰ Therefore, the likes of the Taliban and IS deploy religious police to enforce dress codes and other socio-religious policies, especially to control and manage women and girls. In fact, for religious extremists, women are the first targets of social control. In doing so, these Islamists believe that they are "enjoining the good and forbidding evil," and hence, the public sphere will be safe and secure, including from sources of female temptations and distractions.

When the Taliban first came to power in Afghanistan during the mid-1990s, “women were prohibited from working, girls’ schools shut down and beatings liberally handed out for ‘abuses’ of the strict dress code.”¹¹ The IS took this a step further once they turned Raqqa, Syria, into their headquarters in 2015, as they violently enforced a *double-veil* policy: “In Raqqa, the ISIS ‘capital’ in Syria, women were initially ordered to wear a black abaya covering the entire body. Soon after, a command to wear a veil was issued, then a third ordered a shield on top of the abaya. Women are also instructed to wear only black, including gloves and shoes. ISIS subsequently ordered women to hide their eyes, requiring a double-layered veil.”¹² The resolve to “purify” the streets from any perceived sources of female temptations cannot be overemphasized. Clearly, the burden of these policies always falls on the female populations. In addition, in these highly conservative cultures, the concept of honor is also borne by females for the entire family or even tribe. Seemingly, men are absolved of any behavior that may lead to “sin” or “evil,” especially in terms of sexual attraction and acts.

Consider the words of a Taliban cleric, Maulvi Kalamadin, who served as the head of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (i.e., another interpretation of “enjoining the good and forbidding evil”), in an interview with Rashid: “Stylish dresses and decoration of women in the hospitals are forbidden. Women are duty-bound to behave with dignity, to walk calmly and refrain from hitting their shoes on the ground which makes noises.”¹³ Also, Kalamadin’s organization has issued and enforced a number of decrees “including that men should not shave their beards and women should not appear on the streets without a blood-shared relative.”¹⁴

Rashid describes the Taliban’s fear of women early on in his book, describing his American journalist colleague, “a tall, lanky blonde”: “[She] posed a threat to every concept the Taliban held—that women should be neither seen nor heard because they drove men away from the proscribed Islamic path and into wild temptation . . . Whether it was a fear of women or their abhorrence of femininity, Taliban leaders had frequently refused to give interviews to female journalists.”¹⁵

Another aspect of the Taliban and IS misogynistic control of women has to do with power. Girls and women who are denied an education and employment cannot pose a threat to the men in society. Thus, while the Taliban and IS impose harsh social policies against girls and women while claiming that it is for the purpose of “enjoining the good and forbidding evil,” the bonus is to remove their potential socioeconomic and political competition of the opposite gender.

Conclusion

What can be done about this deeply rooted gynophobic misogyny in Afghanistan, especially now that the Taliban have reemerged into power and continue to violently repress women and girls? The international community must continue pressuring the Taliban regime to embrace international norms and laws of human rights. The international community must also expose Taliban crimes and violent abuses of the female population and minorities. We cannot let them off the hook, nor can we stop shining the “light of shame” on the Taliban on the global stage.

What counterterrorism strategies can be deployed to fight against Taliban and IS ideologies? The latter are ideologies steeped in distorted religious interpretations and beliefs, and such gynophobic beliefs facilitate and exacerbate violent repression of female populations. To quote Prose,

To automatically hate and fear anything or anyone different from ourselves and to want to feel smarter and worthier than an entire race or gender are two of the least admirable and most regrettable aspects of human nature. So it does seem peculiar that religion, with its emphasis on self-perfection through prayer and the help of God, should so rarely include intolerance among the roster of sins for which we wish to be forgiven, or to avoid altogether. Strange, but not so very strange, when we consider that religions are not merely belief systems but social institutions whose leaders have always understood how effectively fear, hate, and the assurance of racial, national, or sexual superiority—and sex—can be used to define and control a society.¹⁶

Fighting against such entrenched gynophobic ideologies is immensely challenging, since they are cloaked in religion, and one thing is for sure: no amount of air strikes, bombs, targeted assassinations, denial of safe havens, or whole-of-government counterterrorism tactics can remove what is embedded in one’s heart—especially if it grants the perpetrator great advantages over the other sex. ❀

Dr. Hayat Alvi

Dr. Alvi joined the US Naval War College in 2007. Previously, she served as an assistant professor in the Political Science Department at American University in Cairo from 2001–05 and as the director of the International Studies Program at Arcadia University from 2005–07. She specializes in international relations, political economy, and comparative politics, with regional expertise in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. She also specializes in Islamic studies and genocide studies. She is proficient in Arabic and Urdu and is a Fulbright Fellow (Syria, 1993–94). Alvi has published numerous articles, books, and book chapters.

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Afghanization and the Prompt Collapse of the Nation

JOSEPH HAMMOND

AYNUR BASHIROVA

August 2021 witnessed a turning point in US operations abroad in a notable example of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. After decades and enormous amount of money spent on the Afghanistan mission, Kabul did not manage to sustain itself. Even before the US troops withdrawal date, the country fell into the hands of Taliban.

In this article, we are going to examine the causes that led to such an outcome. Failure is characterized by two factors. The first is the failure of the mission on the military front. US government was being present and active in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks, when Taliban refused to hand in the al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden. However, these 20 years of presence meant little when Taliban captured Kabul even before the US troops last withdrawal date approached. In this section, we will also give a considerable space to the role of contractors in the mission. After 2014, they were playing the biggest role in sustaining the country's security.

The second aspect is related to finances. Around USD 2 trillion of the US taxpayers' money was spent on the Afghanistan mission. However, the dire situation in which Afghanistan found itself during the US withdrawal raises eyebrow concerning the use of these finances. Not only were government and military echelons incapable of self-defense but also, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 97 percent of the Afghan population is teetering on descending below the poverty line by mid 2022.¹

Afghanistan Mission's Dire End

The United States, its allies, and partners spent 20 years in Afghanistan building democracy and governance. Yet, after two decades of costly training, the Afghan government and military were incapable of defending their country, falling to the Taliban in just 11 short days—due in part to an overreliance on contractors. While the official figures state that 2,442 US troops died in Afghanistan since 2001, the estimated 3,800 US private security contractors who died during the same period far exceeds that number. The Pentagon does not publicly track contractor deaths; so, the stated figure is perhaps only an estimate.

NATO's combat mission formerly ended in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but a 13,000-strong force remained in country to train the Afghan military and

assist in counterterrorism operations. There were casualties, but policy makers considered the numbers to be manageable. Much is made of the fact that there had been no US casualties for quite some time prior to the fall of Kabul. Yet, as illustrated by the bombing at the Kabul airport on 26 August that killed 13 American soldiers and a score of Afghan civilians, this period of tranquility was in fact a mirage.

Contractors were the backbone of the Afghanistan mission after 2014. The United States, its NATO allies and partners, as well as Afghan forces heavily relied on these contractors. Contractors were always a central feature of the war, but after 2014 their prevalence increased. This was a unique period in the war that was post-surge and indeed post-nation building, as the United States tried to find ways to meet its primary objective—defeating terrorists without spending US lives. This involved, to paraphrase the language of the Vietnam era, an “Afghanization” of the conflict.

In that reality, training of the Afghan military relied on a significant number of private contractors. According to the US Congressional Research Service, as of the second quarter of 2020 alone, 22,562 contractors (7,856 US nationals and 14,706 foreign and host-country nationals) were deployed in Afghanistan.² Indeed, the Afghan military relied on these contractors practically for all military operations, including training, gear maintenance, intelligence gathering, and air support.

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan David Sedney, in an interview with *Foreign Policy*, stated, “We built the Afghan army in our image to be an army that operates with air support and intelligence [and] whose backbone is contractors.”³ And, Sean Carberry, serving in the US Department of Defense’s Inspector General Office until March 2021, said in August, “Contractors were essential for keeping most of the air platforms flying . . . The Afghan army could still conduct operations without contractors—they could fight, maneuver, shoot, all the basics. But, without the safety net of ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and air support, many Afghan soldiers didn’t want to go head-to-head with the Taliban.”⁴ Air support was a paramount factor in keeping Afghanistan free from Taliban control. The loss of air support played a significant role in the defeat of the Afghan military as air superiority was an important morale booster for Afghan soldiers in the field and provided logistical support to remote regions. Yet, there were Afghan soldiers and units, such as the special forces, which fought exceptionally well.

In other words, contractors employed by the United States saw little need to involve the Afghan government even nominally—a situation which has, one must admit, odd echoes of the colonial administration of European empires in Asia. Instead of actually building accountable governance and institutions in Afghani-

stan, the United States preferred shortcuts and spending on contractors—efforts that had they been applied to contracts in NATO countries would have likely been illegal. US experts found that consulting Afghan government officials and project beneficiaries during project design and implementation slowed things down; so, US agencies and their contractors “often did not bother,” according to the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report.⁵

On reflection, it appears it was not the development of the Afghan military through the years of training that was keeping the Taliban away but the presence of foreign troops and contractors. The abrupt departure of this support concluded with the fall of the Afghan government. Though a few brave souls have apparently reconstituted something akin to the Northern Alliance in the Tajik-majority regions of the country, the war is perhaps over. The failure in Afghanistan will be taught in military institutions around the globe for decades. The overreliance on contractors and the failure to generate buy-in from the Afghans should be two key lessons.

Misuse of the Finances

The swift collapse of the Afghan government contrasts with the stated goal of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan to build a stable and sustainable democracy. While this was the lofty rhetoric, the United States, according to its proclamation, gradually de-emphasized nation building. Yet the dollars and cents told a different story entirely. Four American administrations—two Republican and two Democratic—spent more than USD 1 trillion in Afghanistan. A handful in the government tried to keep track of those expenditures. According to a new study by Brown University, the US costs for the war in Afghanistan amounted to USD 2.313 trillion.⁶

Few institutions, let alone individuals, have looked closely at those numbers. One entity that did was the SIGAR. Founded in 2008, this organization was designed to serve as an Afghan War spending watchdog. However, it appears few in government heeded SIGAR’s dire reports released in recent years. Reviewing “twenty years and \$145 billion of reconstruction funds,” the organization’s final report did not mince words: “If the goal was to . . . leave behind a country that can sustain itself . . . the overall picture is bleak.”⁷

Afghanistan’s then-president, Ashraf Ghani, came to similar conclusions, infamously abandoning Kabul by helicopter on 15 August. According to the Russian embassy in Kabul, Ghani left with a helicopter and four cars full of money. As the source for this story is the Russian embassy’s spokesperson in Kabul, Nikita Ishchenko, told Reuters, “As for the collapse of the (outgoing) regime, it is most eloquently characterized by the way Ghani fled Afghanistan. . . . Four cars were full

of y, they tried to stuff another part of the money into a helicopter, but not all of it fit. And some of the money was left lying on the tarmac.”⁸

In a true democracy, the system and the bureaucracy are accountable to the people. It is, after all, their tax monies on which the government operates. However, in Afghanistan during the war, the payroll for the military and its bureaucrats came from the US taxpayers, with a good portion unaccounted for. The US policy focused not on building a Jeffersonian democracy north of the Khyber Pass but rather on quick turnaround solutions related more to spending the funds in their contracts. This helped contribute to the Afghanistan state becoming a rentier economy, relying on the largesse of the American taxpayer. The final SIGAR report spoke plainly in exposing the lack of accountability: “The U.S. government was focused on short-term gains” and “rather than revisit their assumptions when progress proved elusive, U.S. officials concluded that it would be better to power through the shortcut by adding even more money.”⁹ ❖

Joseph Hammond

Mr. Hammond is a former Fulbright fellow, researcher, and journalist who had reported extensively from the Middle East, Africa, and Eurasia on defense topics and other issues. He is a researcher/writer with the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers.

Aynur Bashirova

Ms. Bashirova is a researcher and published author specializing in the European Union, Middle East, South Caucasus, security and defense, and energy. She is also a PhD student at Université Libre de Bruxelles’ institute for international relations (REPI, Recherche et Etudes en Politique Internationale).

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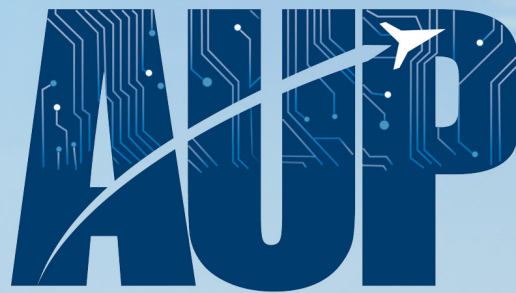
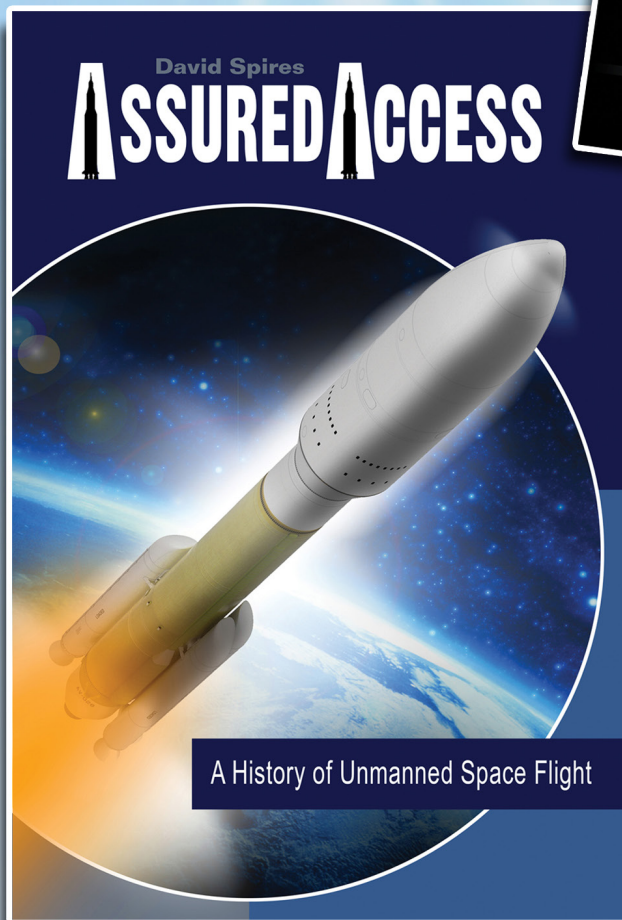
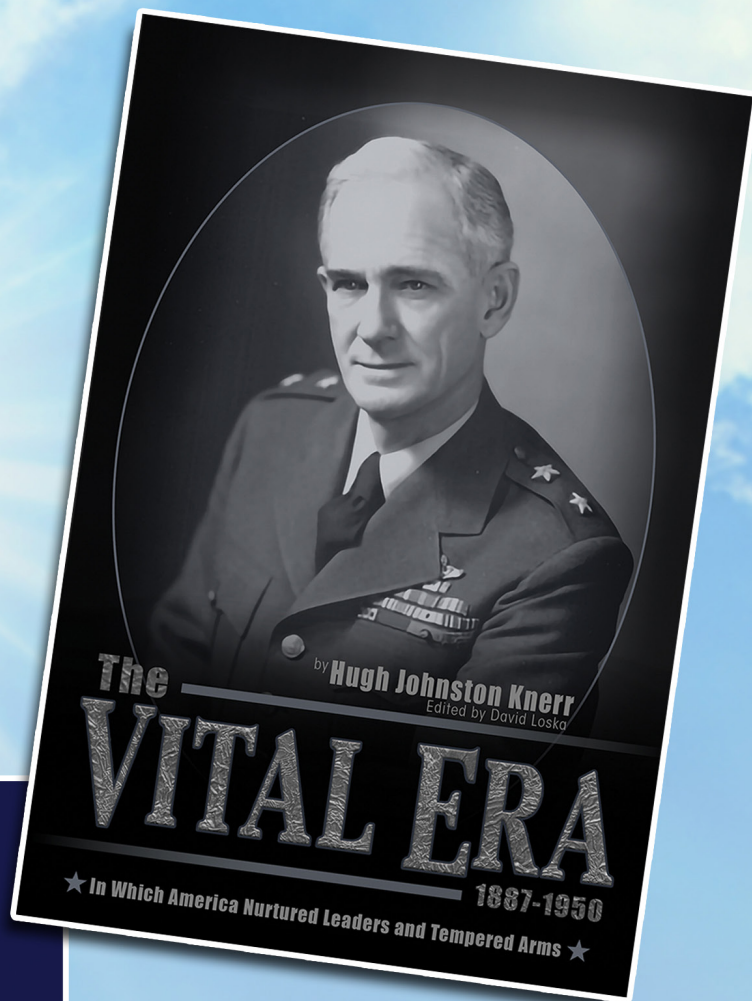
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