The Great Game Continues: Afghanistan's Past, Present, and Future

by Dominic J. Markham

Abstract

After the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the insurgent group known as the Taliban seized power. The entire world watched as the country fell into chaos, and uncertainty became the common theme of the newly established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This review, drawing from a wide range of sources, seeks to present the issues surrounding the governance of Afghanistan and the people residing within its borders. Additionally, this paper will present conditions that have led to previous failures through historical analysis. This literature review will also present evaluations of the current situation of governance and factors that impacted the current situation while concluding with potential policy proposals regarding the Taliban, the international community, and what a legitimate, effective, and stable government may look like in Afghanistan. Though there is no consensus on a viable solution, there is just as much uncertainty over the acceptance of a solution by the Taliban and whether it will last for an extended period of time.

Introduction

On the grand scale of history, the sovereign borders of the nation known as Afghanistan have existed for a minuscule portion of human history, but events within these borders have shaped the world dramatically since its inception. From the beginning, Afghanistan was a nation that was formed without the consent of the people living within the borders, by people who had never stepped foot in its valleys or fields, and with no regard for what had existed previously for centuries. With the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August of 2021, the graveyard of empires claimed another victim, this time, the United States. Since the resurgence of the Taliban as the primary form of central governance in Afghanistan, there are immense uncertainties as to whether they will succeed in governing where predecessors have failed. Furthermore, how that will look and how the rest of the world will interact with it have yet to be seen. Within this literature review, the most prevalent challenge facing the future of Afghanistan, effectively governing the nation, will be explored. Special attention will be paid to the previous attempts at central state governance in the nation, the difficulties those governments faced, and proposals of what an effective system of government may look like.

Facts

Afghanistan is a nation that is unlike any other, hence the challenges facing the previous republican and current Taliban governments are unlike any other. The academic community is generally in agreement concerning the facts surrounding Afghanistan's creation and failures of previous governments. Specifically, Khan and Wagner (2013), as well as Bagai (2015), identify the lack of Afghan input on the establishment of their sovereign borders. The US State Department

(1983) published a border survey with background history on the establishment of every border of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of the country. The State Department (1983) found that every border shared with a neighboring country was established by a foreign power or leader without ever being approved or vetted by the people of Afghanistan. This is further complicated by the ethnic composition and arduous physical geography of the country, as Mazhar et al. (2012) reinforce. Mazhar et al. (2012) identify, as does Felbab-Brown (2009), that Afghanistan is comprised of Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras, all of which have been at war with each other long before the existence of the nations who drew the country's borders. The current facts stemming from these challenges surrounding the Taliban government are grim. According to the editors of the American Journal of International Law (2021), the West has completely cut off all diplomacy with the nation, all foreign aid and investment have been stopped, and there is no clear answer to how the Taliban will govern and what this means for the Afghan people.

Definitions

When discussing the challenges facing Afghanistan, it is imperative to define the factors contributing to the entire situation. Most important are the Taliban and their leaders within the newfound government and their complicated past with the international community. The Taliban are a militant group who grew out of the city of Kandahar in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and subsequent civil war. The group was able to seize power in the wake of the power void and ruled through brutality and violence across large swathes of the country until their removal by American forces in 2002 (Chasdi, 2017). The academic community as a whole is split as to the impact the Taliban previously had before the fall of the republican government, but moving forward it will be entirely up to them to answer any challenges. While Weigand (2017) describes the new Taliban as a different entity from their 1996 rule, Chasdi (2021) has defined them as the same group but with better public relations. Chasdi's (2021) claim of the Taliban being new and improved is further supported by Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) detailing the continued Saudi influence, the Taliban possessing a Twitter page, and persons identified by the United States Government as terrorists being ministers of government. Additionally, in identifying these challenges, it is crucial to explain and identify key elements of effective governance through a Western and Eastern philosophical perspective and what it means to be a legitimate government. As Wardak and Hamidzada (2012) highlight, governance in Afghanistan has consistently been organized at local levels through Jirgas and Shuras, or local councils of elders. Barfield and Nojumi (2010) go further in stating, "Government is the action of ruling, the continuous exercise of state authority over the population it governs," but elaborate that Afghanistan has shown effectiveness in this when the "state" is more localized around ethnic and cultural lines. Concerning the Western approach to governance, Alexander (2005) states that the Western model revolves around stagnant and solid borders, a capital with a strong central government with bodies of governance, and a strict adherence to democracy in some form. He goes on to state that the Eastern model is much more fluid in border identity, preferring to set them based on cultural lines or geography, and being heavily localized with democracy being optional.

Cause and Effect

The nation of Afghanistan is the pure result of causes and effects, but these influential factors are not entirely encapsulated within the borders of Afghanistan. Though the essential "effect" of the causes is agreed upon by academics as instability in the nation in different forms, the

causes have yet to be quantified as to which contributes to instability the most. The first of these causes, as identified by both Bagai (2015) and the US State Department (1983) is tribal and ethnic loyalties being observed dramatically more than loyalties to the nation of Afghanistan. As Alexander (2005) stated, an Eastern model of governance has the importance of governance at the local level, rather than the national level. So, the issue then argued by Parkes (2018), from interviews with Afghan citizens, is that there is no incentive to embrace a Western-style of governance, leading to instability and ineffectiveness of the central government.

The second cause of instability, as identified by Bagai (2015), Felbab-Brown (2021), as well as Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021), has been and continues to be the interference of foreign powers in Afghanistan. While this is still an issue, there has yet to be a consensus among academics as to whether foreign assistance or influence could help the entirety of Afghanistan or just the Taliban government.

The third cause, and more recently coming to the forefront, is the illicit economy through the form of poppy cultivation. Felbab-Brown (2009) identifies and predicts that the majority of Afghanistan's economy is and will continue to be illicit in nature, stemming from the lack of legal economic opportunities or investments from the government. As Felbab-Brown (2021) and Bagai (2015) both identify, this will continue to be a challenge that is both a contributing cause and subsequent effect in the instability of governance within Afghanistan. Additionally, Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) point out that the elimination of poppy production could have lasting effects on the international community, in that it could bring back foreign aid and investment on moral grounds alone.

Evaluations

When evaluating the challenges facing the Afghan people, it is tremendously difficult to quantify the human toll of instability beyond lives lost and crises endured, as there is no numerical measure for human suffering. *The Economist* (2021) pointed out that as of October 2021, ninety percent of Afghanistan is unable to secure a consistent food supply and is at risk of starvation. Subsequently, Verma (2021) states that although the Taliban are now the dominant power holder in the country, pockets of continued resistance still remain. These internal borders have been drawn almost exclusively along ethnic and tribal lines, according to Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021). This is further exacerbating the aforementioned challenges and has no real end in sight, especially the ethnic situation, according to Mazhar et. al. (2012). When answering the question of how hard it will be to overcome these challenges, the only way to truly quantify it is if a new measurement of human suffering can be standardized and understood. Shahrani (2002) identified at the onset of the US invasion of Afghanistan that the past must not be allowed to repeat itself with the fledgling Afghan government or the people will eventually suffer. As Felbab-Brown (2021) and Verma (2021) point out, this did not come to fruition, and now the Afghan people are left with a brutal government that rules through violence with little regard for the people it governs.

The blame for this system existing is not an all-encompassing list, but academics have narrowed it to certain key players. According to Khan and Wagner (2013), the blame originates with the British and Russian empires playing the "Great Game" in carving up the borders of the region between 1830 and 1903. Mazhar et. al. (2012) and Bagai (2015) identify the government of the United States as a key instigator for funneling weapons and funds to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in order to bog down the USSR in its own Vietnam War scenario. Out of these funds and the Saudi

Madrassa system, says Weigand (2017), arose a radical Sunni Islamist sect that sought to create an Afghanistan under hardline Sharia rule. Felbab-Brown (2009) identifies the roles of the US military-industrial complex as the main element in the propagation of conflict in the region, while Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) identify a shift toward major corporations in the pharmaceutical and tech industries as taking the new mantle of responsibility for influence in the region. All of these powers and groups being blamed, however, detracts from the fact that their meddling has a human factor beyond lives lost. It is a factor that cannot be quantified, nor is it tangible in nature. At every attempt to lessen the physical suffering of the Afghan people, only failure or inability to make widespread change has been the outcome. The greatest value lost in this period is the humanity and the potential of these people to live their lives as free and safe human beings.

Proposals

Although the blame for Afghanistan's precarious situation is beyond one singular agitator, there may be a way forward. The nation is facing unprecedented challenges and uncertainty, the likes of which haven't been seen since the creation of the country, but there are a few solutions that academia is in relative agreement upon regarding governance in Afghanistan and the Taliban's place in the international community.

Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) propose that the Taliban utilize their position of power as a means to barter with the international community. They go so far as to suggest that the Taliban assume the mantle of responsibility for counter-terrorism operations in the region and hand over necessary intelligence or prisoners to earn credit with the West. Felbab-Brown (2021) goes as far as to say that the Taliban can basically hold the world hostage in the areas of terrorism, poppy cultivation, weapons trafficking, and hoarding of crucial lithium deposits. Though this is an attractive option to the Taliban, it is unlikely to be a clear piece of their political roadmap. Chasdi (2021) does not agree with the sentiments of Felbab-Brown (2021) or Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) and states that it is imperative that neighboring nations take on the role of policing the Taliban and encouraging them to act appropriately in the eyes of the international community, strictly due to the previous failures of non-neighboring powers attempting to do the same. The likelihood of this scenario occurring is extremely unlikely due to the political environments in the neighboring nations that make Afghanistan a footnote amongst their own respective political activities. Chasdi (2021) identifies specific areas of focus for the Taliban to be policed on by their neighbors, namely their genocide of the Hazara minority, their interaction with known terrorist groups (IS-K, HIG, The Haqqani Network), and their manipulation of humanitarian groups and their respective aid to the country.

When seeking a way forward, in terms of what the government may look like, Wardak and Hamidzada (2012) as well as Barfield and Nojumi (2010) agree that the current Western-style will not work, as history has shown. What they propose is a set of Jirgas, or councils, set up at local levels, almost like municipalities in the West. These Jirgas will be nominated and elected by the people of the region governed and will report to a regional governor, also nominated and elected by the people, to run their province accordingly. While Wardak and Hamidzada (2012) propose the central government still determine the goals of the provincial governors, Barfield and Nojumi (2010) propose the central government focus on the big picture and allow the provinces to act in a semi-autonomous nature, with oversight only coming in the form of neutral inspections. Furthermore, every aforementioned academic source agrees that it is paramount that any form of government is absurdly transparent to affirm legitimacy and integrity with the people of Afghanistan. All of these

proposals are just that—proposals. The reality of the situation is that the Taliban will act in whatever way they choose, because there is no large resistance as there existed before the American invasion. The Taliban, as of the writing of this literature review, according to Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2021) has set their style of government up very similar to the previous administration, but with extremely unqualified ministers and with little desire to actually govern. So far, the Taliban has not made any political moves to rejoin the international community, nor have they shown any sign of embracing international human rights laws concerning their Hazara minority. There is also no consensus within the academic, political, or military communities as to whether Afghanistan will ever recover from the fall of the republican government, nor is there a consensus on whether these proposals will work. One thing that the whole of these communities agrees on, is that the status quo is unsustainable and will only lead to more suffering.

Conclusion

When the people of the world think of Afghanistan, a picture of a war-torn and unstable land comes to mind. The ground on which the Afghan people walk upon has been soaked with the blood of empires for millennia and will continue to be stained so long as the world refuses to learn from the past. The situation in Afghanistan is not a simple one, nor is it going to be fixed in a short amount of time. The nation and its people are living under the whims of a tyrannical and vicious government that has an abhorrent record of genocide, murder, violence, and hatred of anyone not bending the knee. Though the graveyard of empires has claimed Uncle Sam as their most recent victim, he will certainly not be the last. The fact of the matter is that no one has an exact solution to Afghanistan's problems, and, quite possibly, there isn't one. Naturally speaking, the nation should have never existed as other nations do, and academia agrees that keeping it under the current system of governance and borders will only further propagate instability and suffering in the Khorasan. Although there is no concrete solution to these challenges, there is still hope that the Afghan people will take up the mantle of responsibility and fight the tyranny of the Taliban. Whether that will be through armed conflict, political resistance, or eventual democratic governance remains to be seen. As the world watches, waiting to see what unfolds, the history books are being written and will continue to be unkind to anyone who steps foot in the mountains who swallowed every invader whole.

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