

مفاوضات سلام أفغانستان
د افغانستان د سولې مذاکرات
مذاکرات صلح افغانستان
Afghanistan Peace Negotiations

Afghanistan Papers
and the Future of
Peace with Taliban



Afghanistan Papers and the Future of Peace with Taliban

This Analysis paper was written in February 2020 coinciding with signing peace treaty between Washington and Taliban

Following a three-year strenuous legal battle, The Washington Post succeeded in obtaining a judicial ruling under the Freedom of Information Act that permits its publishing of what has become known as Afghanistan Papers. These papers signify the outcome of the work of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and its interviews with powerful officials who possess direct communication lines with military operations taking place in Afghanistan, as well as those representing political-strategic levels.

The 2000-page documents reveal deliberate disinformation campaigns to manipulate public opinion in the United States, prepared by high-ranking officials; official statements contradicted the results of fact assessments of the different stages of U.S. military engagement on Afghan soil. This engagement is close to concluding its second decade in what some U.S. media call an "Unwinnable" war in which victory cannot be attained.

Labeling "Afghanistan Papers" as such may be inspired by the "Pentagon Papers" which "The New York Times" and "The Washington Post" raced to publish in 1971; the Pentagon Papers is a confidential military report that was copied by a civilian contractor serving as a military analyst and leaked to U.S. press which in turn "resisted" a court order that banned publishing the report as it contained classified information that could threaten U.S. national security.

Hence, "Afghanistan Papers" revives early debates on state's right to maintain the confidentiality of its sensitive information and the rights of its tax-paying citizens to learn real information without forgery; in its depth, this debate represents two currents:

The First

A conservative movement that calls for the state's right to act in political affairs without the influence of public opinion.

The Second

A liberal democratic movement that endeavors to expand participation base in the decision-making process, expressing the broader public opinion and serving its interests, apart from factional interests and internal affairs.

"Afghanistan Papers" emerges amid a critical state of fluctuating U.S. negotiations with the Taliban; appearing at times and disappearing at others. Yet, the constant in this context, the presence of a strong U.S. interest to pull out of Afghanistan without altering the domestic balance of power which favors the Taliban in the first place.

Given the complexity of Afghanistan's file, and the sensitive U.S. internal and electoral situation, this paper highlights the implications of the lack of clarity in U.S. general strategy towards complex files and examines the necessary mechanisms and means to increase the efficiency of the strategic payoff with the least possible losses, attempting to answer the following two questions:

What are the key features of the deficiencies in U.S. strategy in Afghanistan?

Why did the U.S. efforts fail to build an Afghan state?

Domestic Environment

The population of Afghanistan is about 38.5 million over a wide geographical area estimated at 652 thousand km², with a low population density of about 53.5 people/km², ranking 153rd on the state density scale.

Moreover, the majority of the population is concentrated in north and south-west cities, with less rough terrains and semi-polar climate mountains which make up around 75% of the country's area.

Such extreme nature brings more challenges to the Afghan scene, evidently at the beginning of the spring of every year; the activity of armed groups increases and as the snow melts, it reveals areas over which parties fight to control. Despite ambiguities in conflicting parties' control over the Afghan geography, facts on the ground collectively reveal that the Taliban can increase the momentum of their control and spread their influence over new areas; many lands in Afghanistan with an unresolved sovereignty where the control of a legitimate government or that of the Taliban is absent as the powers intermingle and interfere in many of Afghanistan's 407 provinces.

According to the most recent U.S. military assessment issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction in January 2019, the Afghan government controls a geographical area comprising about 63.5% of the total population, while the rebel movements control 10.8%, with the remaining quarter living in areas of dispute among conflicting parties.

In the latest official update of control over Afghan lands, it became clear that the U.S. leadership in Afghanistan had suspended their announcements of these estimates since late April 2019 for they believe that the evaluation has limited importance in the decision-making process, and models used to determine the scope of control are subjective and further the state of ambiguity. There were no further clarifications made on this matter.

This suspension coincided with the Taliban expanding their control and access to new urban areas, beyond the countryside and parts of low political importance.

The quarterly assessment, of which 46 editions were published, is the only metric allowed for publishing in the media, and that is unclassified, yet, the timing of its withholding raises many questions regarding the true purpose behind this move since this metric is "the most telling in a counterinsurgency" as stated in a briefing in November 2017 by General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan.

Besides terrain, control over land is affected by domestic and regional demographic calculations as evident in the growing support that the Taliban has in areas inhabited by the Pashtun tribes, the largest segment of Afghanistan's population.

Given the intertwined terrain, Afghan Pashtun tribes connect with their relatives from the Pakistani Pashtun tribes, the second-largest segment of Pakistan's population.

The Shiites constitute the second-largest Afghani segment, around 20%, belonging to the Persian-speaking Hazara nationalism with whom Tehran has strengthened its relations at the cultural and ideological levels after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Minorities are influencing the demographic balance, such as the Tajiks, Turkmen, and Bashay, and despite being Sunnis, they still fear the control of Pashtun Taliban over their areas, as they prefer to distance themselves from the ongoing conflict and avoid direct engagement.

Despite the ideological differences among demographic groups in Afghanistan, they share a deteriorating living reality due to the food insecurity, from which around 33% of the population suffers, as mentioned in a study issued by Integrated Food Security Phase Classification in November 2019, and it is a measure of the development of food security analysis and decision-making methods. Similarly, the World Bank blog published a study in October 2017 addressing the increase in poverty rates with the expansion of the geographical scope of the ongoing conflict, as 17% of Afghan families were subject to shocks as the security situation collapsed in the wake of the NATO ending of ISAF operation in December 2014.

Afghanistan's GDP reached nearly \$19.363 billion in 2018 as according to the World Bank, marking a decrease of \$605 billion compared to the year before; this has led to a negative growth rate, along with successive increases in unemployment rates at nearly 40% in 2016, according to estimates by the Statistics Center in Afghanistan.

Since NATO forces concluded their operations in Afghanistan in 2015, high unemployment rates have started to emerge, as many non-governmental companies and institutions are associated with the alliance presence.

Highlighting key features of the Afghan internal situation must be studied in conjunction future international policies towards Afghanistan. The current situation reveals the political stability and thus security in the country; if extremism and delinquency towards violence are Kabul's dilemma, whose resolution is manifested in gradually convincing the Afghan collective mind to normalize its relations with the state as an entity and dismantle the environment embracing extremism, which in turn is completely different from dismantling an explosive belt, as this process is complex and involves interrelated tracks.

Which Comes First: Negotiations or State-Building?

In its pages, Afghanistan Papers carries clear recognition of an existing structural flaw in U.S. ascription of the internationally recognized government of Kabul, which was reflected in development in its comprehensive dimensions. Moreover, The Washington Post has divided the leaked documents into 6 main sections, with 4 pertaining to Afghan interior and its relations.

The third section of the documents, entitled "Built to Fail," showed how the U.S. strategy in rebuilding Afghanistan has failed despite the allocation of \$133 billion to support the development and the security services in Afghanistan.

Instead of bringing stability and prosperity, the U.S. has - unintentionally - built a government that is unable to carry out its tasks and even depends on its survival on U.S. forces, according to the newspaper.

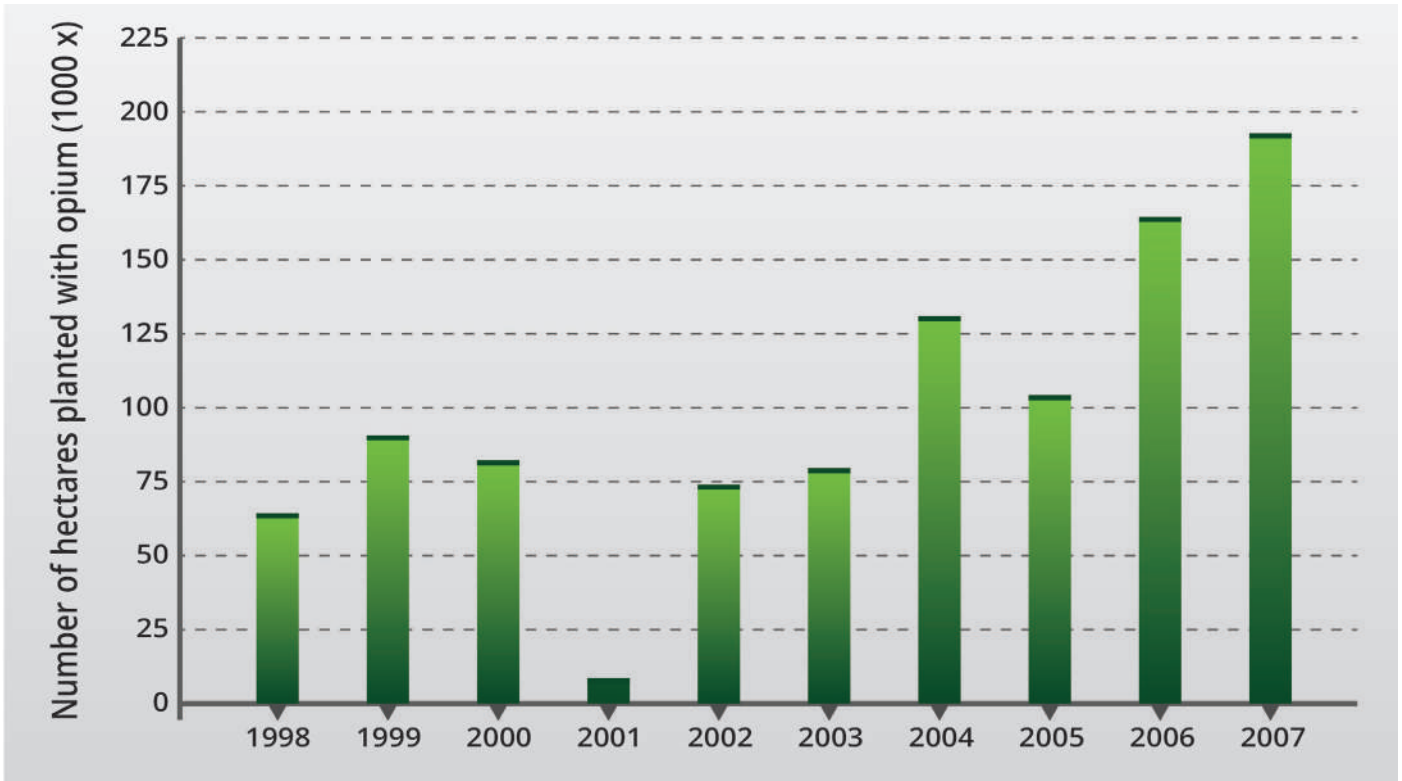
Given the sequence of the direct American military engagement phases in Afghanistan, the stage that followed the deprivation of the Taliban government from power and territory is the most important and ideal stage for planting the seeds of development and establishing effective and capable administrative units. However, the confusion that followed allowed the Taliban to breathe and operationally penetrate throughout the Afghan geography. Therefore, it can be said that the U.S. and its allies did not fail militarily, rather failed to align their military progress with an appropriate political course. According to common military strategy principles, the use of military force is limited unless it is driven by a clear, practical and specific political objective that can be applied.

Postwar studies confirm this new-old truth. To achieve the stated goal efficiently, major military operations must be followed by a comprehensive rehabilitation of the state, in which the economy recovers, and violent activities or those that threaten internal peace and stability are curbed.

Although the total cost of U.S. spending on the war in Afghanistan has approached \$2 trillion, according to estimates by the Brown University's "cost of war" project, some aspects of lawlessness have deepened after the end of the Taliban rule, such as the drug industry and

its planting, for example. The Taliban government had succeeded in ending opium cultivation as opium production fell from 3,300 tons in 2000 to 185 tons in 2001, as stated in a speech in October 2001 by the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Pino Arlacchi.

During his speech, Arlacchi warned from the return of the flow of opium from Afghanistan to the countries of the world, calling for practical plans to block this flow if the opium cultivation returns to its previous levels. Indeed, what the United Nations office warned against did happen, but at dramatic rates, as shown in the attached chart.



Therefore, the peace-making process in Afghanistan faltered, due to the structural distortions that accompanied the state building on several levels, namely the social one. Still, successive Afghan governments are not convincing for many groups of the people because of local cultural considerations. A government that wants to adopt an open approach cannot be accepted in a conservative tribal society that clings to imposing its vision, even by force of arms. Any government that can enjoy popular legitimacy must demonstrate behavior in line with the impressions of the Afghan people so that the actual political chain of representation does not remain

in void and to eliminate the powers and groups capable of attracting specific groups of people in the political arena.

It is noticed, should you focus on the Taliban-Washington current negotiations that the Taliban deals wisely with this file without draining its moral balance. It refuses, for example, to engage the Afghan government as a negotiating party, while its media insists in the same time on publishing the images of its negotiating delegation in the Afghan costume and appearance in a sign of holding to their stance and not abandoning their directed "propaganda".

Swinging negotiations

The U.S. administration seeks to make the format of the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban successful before the upcoming presidential elections in November 2020. A wide segment of the U.S. people has always complained of the heavy costs, human and material, regarding the deployment of their forces abroad, and perhaps what brought Trump to the presidency in the 2016 elections is his awareness of this fact, as he has pledged to withdraw as many U.S. soldiers as possible, especially those stationed in Afghanistan.

Despite the cessation and faltering that accompanied Washington's negotiations with the Taliban, there is a mutual desire for a political solution to the Afghan file, in addition to a serious endeavor to make the negotiations succeed and reach an agreement after the two parties realized the extreme difficulty of achieving their respective goals unilaterally. Taliban did not abandon its ideology and presence and the U.S., in turn, is not capable of withdrawing abruptly without ensuring that Afghanistan does not turn into a training and preparation ground for terrorist operations, as in 9/11.

Therefore, the negotiations were a "perfect" way out of a chronic dilemma that approached the end of its second decade without a party capable - or willing - to impose the logic of force along the Afghan geography. However, the manifestations of "showcasing strength" were not absent during the negotiations period, as the two parties are convinced that any agreement to be signed, is nothing but acknowledgment of the facts on the ground,

so negotiations were broken off by violent incidents, most notably the killing of a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan in September 2019. Also, the U.S. tried in 2019 to stress its military superiority, this was reflected in dropping 7423 bombs compared to 7362 bombs in 2018, according to a report published in January 2020 by the U.S. Air Forces Central Command "AFCENT".

With an optimistic view, it may be possible to reach a real peace agreement with clear clauses. The difficulty lies in the ability to maintain it and work for its continuity during the next stage, as the concerned parties are alarmed by the violent past not so long ago, which may reflect negatively on the confidence-building stage necessary to activate agreement terms.

Also, imposing peace in Afghanistan will face many challenges, most notably:

1 - The weak combat efficiency of the Afghan army and police

In late December 2014, NATO announced the end of its combat missions in Afghanistan and the start of a new mission called "resolute support" in January 2015. It aimed to rehabilitate Afghan forces to gradually transfer security tasks to local forces, as the NATO withdrawal created a vacuum the forces could not fill. Armed groups like the Taliban and ISIS used it, in some stages, to control and dominate certain geographical areas. This means that any sharp reduction in the number of U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan must be accompanied by a tight Afghan security plan that prevents a security collapse exploited by armed groups such as the Taliban.

2 - Enemy Identity Vagueness

On one of the pages of Afghanistan's documents, U.S. Defense Secretary and a war on terrorism engineer in the Bush administration, Donald Rumsfeld, says: "I don't have a clear vision to identify bad people". Since the first day of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan after 2001, Washington has not explicitly identified enemy, friend, or terrorist in Afghanistan. Perhaps this confusion is due to the lack of differentiation between Al Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, and the legitimate Taliban government at the time. U.S. policy was careful not to show acceptance of the Taliban in political life at the time because there is a "common ideological issue" between the Taliban and Al Qaeda; what limited the desire of the U.S. plans to avoid direct clash with the Taliban, because the U.S. public opinion at that time was rejecting any lenience or compromise in dealing with "terrorists".

However, the Afghanistan Taliban has never been on the foreign terrorist organization list "FTO" of the U.S. State Department, yet, it is on the Specially Designated Global Terrorist "SDGT" one issued by the US Treasury. This difference in classification allows Washington to practice "carrot and stick" policy with the Taliban.

The blurry vision is not only limited to Washington's view of the Taliban but extends to the internationally recognized government of Kabul; high-ranking officials in Washington have often accused Kabul government of corruption and mismanagement. Therefore, there is an urgent need to set clear priorities and define accurately white, black and gray in Afghanistan,

as many U.S. decisions towards this country are general and do not differentiate between civilians, terrorists, extremists, or religious people.

3 - Adaptation with the "Non-State" Situation

The overall recovery path will collide with local obstacles that hinder the dynamics of the effort to improve living conditions and stabilize the fragile stability basis. Almost 19 years after the start of the war on terrorism, the Afghan people have adapted to the abnormal situation created by the state of violence, and have built alternative ways to make up for the absence of the state. The state did not meet the needs of large areas in Afghanistan, yet, parallel entities emerged and did what was supposed to be the responsibility of the legitimate and exclusive state.

A parallel and illegal economic pattern is spreading in Afghanistan in which criminal networks take over smuggling, internal trade and imposing monopoly based on the commodity or geographical scope; and because these "black markets" adapted with the non-state situation, it is expected that the beneficiaries of the lawlessness will defend their interests and seek to maintain a situation that benefits them.

4 - Warlords

For decades, violence and the absence of the state dominated public life in Afghanistan, which allowed the emergence of "warlords" running local armed gangs that control the affairs of civilians under their rule.

These "lords" are a product of the competition for governing the country since Afghans resisted the existence of Soviets in the country.

The Kabul authorities seek to contain the root-phenomenon of "warlords" so that they can focus their efforts on dealing with the Taliban, and preventing any cooperation between such "lords" and the Taliban, or between the "lords" and terrorist organizations such as ISIS.

Perhaps the most prominent warlord still alive in Afghanistan is the leader of the Islamist party known as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was accused of war crimes by the Security Council after trying to control Kabul amid his rivalry with other armed groups in the 1980s. Also, he was among the top "wanted" figures on the U.S. list, as it provided a reward of \$25 million for information that would help arrest him, dead or alive. However, all these charges were dropped and Hekmatyar returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan after signing a peace treaty with the Afghan President, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, in February 2017.

5 - Geopolitical Situation Sensitivity in Afghanistan

Afghanistan affect and is affected by the tensions in the surrounding countries. Its geographical location as a landlocked country without a water outlet in the heart of Central Asia increases the complexities of its internal environment. Also, the rugged mountains shared in the border areas impede the ability of the Afghan government to control internal affairs, which puts peace efforts at the forefront of regional and international interventions that aspire to use the Afghan theater to serve special goals and interests.

Kabul has long exchanged public accusations with some neighboring countries, as Afghan official estimates see that Islamabad

turns a blind eye to the activity of the Pakistani Taliban fighters in the border areas, who have tribal and ideological links with the Afghanistan Taliban fighters. In January 2018, the U.S. administration withheld all security aid to Pakistan at nearly \$255 million because of the "double role" that Pakistan plays in countering terrorism, as described by Washington's former ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley. U.S. intelligence services believe that Pakistan provides a safe border sanctuary, and allows fighters freedom of movement. It is worth noting that unlike Afghanistan Taliban, Pakistan Taliban is on the U.S. State Department terrorist lists.

As for Iran, which faces stifling sanctions, and monitors the entire U.S. deployment around it for defensive and offensive considerations, it believes that the lifting of U.S. sanctions will not take place without increasing the cost of the U.S. presence in the region (financial and human). After the killing of Soleimani, Afghanistan is expected to witness more indirect Iranian moves, as the revenge flag is still raised in Qom, and the response across the Afghan scene may be of less cost compared to the exhausted Iraqi arena. Experts have indicated that there is a possible Iranian role in the fall of a U.S. spy plane in a Taliban-controlled area in January 2020, as there is a link between some parties in Tehran and some currents inside the Taliban.

Also, Afghanistan has borders with China, the most prominent threat to the U.S. interests and the primary target of the U.S. counterintelligence operations, according to official U.S. government rankings.

Possible Scenarios

The success of the agreement and the Taliban quietly expanding toward the state's bureaucratic joints

The arrival of the Taliban to power is not a nightmare, but rather something that can be coexisted with. Fundamentalist groups have demonstrated their pragmatic and rational political behavior when they act as a political party rather than a member of a general revolt.

What may reinforce this scenario is the social legitimacy the Taliban enjoy, the acceptance it has among many Afghan groups, and the weakening of the prevailing governance model across successive Afghan governments.

Overthrowing the legitimate government

The American-Taliban negotiations should be strengthened by an Afghan-Afghan path in which the local parties agree on a form of government that satisfies as much as possible or reach a formula that does not offend any prominent party. No serious talks have been held yet between the Afghan parties, and it is not known whether Kabul has developed a development strategy for Taliban-held areas, especially in rural areas.

The sudden and rapid withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan could encourage Taliban militants to take over the authority and return to a form of fundamentalist rule that prevailed before 2001.

Fighting between armed groups

There are many armed groups in Afghanistan, most of which share adopting the Islamic jihadist ideology, but these armed sects differ from each other in terms of Islamic jurisprudence and worldly interests, such as the difference between ISIS and Al-Nusra Front in Syria, which led to several clashes.

If the Afghan forces' engagement efficiency does not improve, it will still be unable to control the expected fighting, and there will be rounds of violence between the Afghan parties.

Limited effectiveness agreement

The agreement was not preceded by any actual rehabilitation process for the political and economic structures in Afghanistan, so the agreement does not have a fostering environment that it sponsors and supports, and the Afghan state is not expected to be able to crystallize a stage that would transfer development in Afghanistan to safe levels, thereby reducing acute political tension and increasing the legitimacy of its political representation. This means that the agreement will be in an external security framework with the U.S. at best, without being translated into a consensual political level on the Afghan internal, regional, or international levels.

The agreement may be driven by the mere desire of the U.S. administration to do something new in Afghanistan, given the state of confusion that accompanied the years of military operations in Afghanistan. Black comedy bloggers in the U.S. circulate a political joke that sums a lot from what happened in Afghanistan. It says that

Washington did not fight for 19 years in Afghanistan, but it fought 19 times in one single year.

Washington's return after Afghanistan becomes fertile soil for terrorism

Regardless of what is said about the absence of an effective U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, it has succeeded in neutralizing the threat of the most important areas of preparation and training of international terrorist operations. Terrorist operations indeed spread in Afghanistan, but they remained in a local scope, which means that they did not use the Afghan lands to plan, train or finance major international terrorist operations, as was the case on 9/11.

But if the U.S. military deployment in Afghanistan reduced greatly, and if international terrorism rearranges its ranks on its soil, the imminent threat of terrorism may bring back the U.S. forces to address the stalemate that it left before making sure to address it properly.

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