

## History shows us that outsiders can never bring peace to Afghanistan

*The US and British withdrawal has set off panic, but the truth is they were exacerbating the problem they were trying to solve*



*'What Afghans really need help with is getting everyone else to leave them alone.' A British army flag-lowering ceremony.*

*Tamim Ansary*  
Mon 12 Jul 2021

Friends keep asking me to sign petitions urging President Biden to change his mind about withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. They all agree that the US can't stay in the country for ever but this, they say, is not the time to leave: the Taliban are surging, and the social gains of the past 20 years are in jeopardy.

I've not signed any of those petitions. Yes, the Taliban have committed horrific offences, and they won't stop. And they must be stopped. Just the other day I saw a video of villagers in northern Afghanistan burying a dozen civilians killed by a bomb: an old woman wept because her whole family had been wiped out. Oh, but wait – that bomb was dropped by the government, delivered by drone.

Both sides in this war kill civilians. I'd sign any petition that would stop the fighting and bring peace. What's more, when this war ends, I hope the government now in Kabul emerges victorious. I hope Afghans resume their social and material progress on every front. But I can't forget a pattern of Afghan history so blatant that I'm amazed it's not central to this conversation.

The government in Kabul has never been able to secure authority in Afghanistan as a whole when it is held in place by an outside power's military.

In 1839, the British replaced the Afghan monarch Dost Mohammed with his rival Shah Shuja, who had just as legitimate a claim to the throne as he. But the British had put him in power, so the country went up in flames and two years later the whole British community in Kabul had to flee on foot, most of them dying on the way out.

In 1878 the British tried again: this time, they ousted Afghan ruler Sher Ali and tried to rule the country through his son, Yaqub. Sure enough, the British cantonment was sacked, their representative was killed, the country went up in flames. The British had to give up and leave the country to a strongman, Abdul Rahman, who knew what he needed to do to secure his position with Afghans: he made a deal with the British and Russia to keep them both out of Afghanistan.

Jump ahead to 1978: the Soviets helped Afghan communists topple the last of the Afghan ruling family and elevated their own man, Nur Muhammad Taraki, to power. What happened? The country went up in flames. The Soviets sent in 100,000 troops to keep the communists in power, but that only turned the fire into a bonfire. The war raged for 10 years until at last the Soviets simply left – with the country eviscerated.

Then came the Americans. They dropped a fully formed government on to Kabul, picked Hamid Karzai to run the country, and clothed him in all the markers of legitimacy recognised in western democracies: constitution, parliament, elections. Under Karzai, girls went back to school, women's rights improved, infrastructure was restored, progress was made.

Sure enough, however, as with all the previous great power attempts to manage Afghans through Afghan proxies, Kabul proved unable to secure countrywide legitimacy. Resistance brewed in the villages and spread to the cities.

In its war with forces based in the countryside, the Kabul government was hobbled by one huge disadvantage – the outside military forces that were helping it hold power. Because of that, it had no narrative to counter the one the Taliban wielded, which said: the government in Kabul isn't Afghan, it's a bunch of puppets and proxies for Americans and Europeans whose main agenda is to undermine Islam. Drones and bombs could not defeat that narrative but only feed it.

The US and Nato can't stay in Afghanistan for ever, but is this the time to leave? The answer has to be yes if, as I am arguing, the US and Nato military presence in Afghanistan is causing the very problem it is supposed to be solving.

Many people assume the Taliban are the face of what Afghanistan would be without US help. But the American military presence might be obscuring the single most crucial fact: the Taliban don't represent Afghan culture. They too are, in a sense, an alien force.

Before the Soviet invasion 40 years ago, it's fair to say most Afghans were deeply devoted Muslims. The underlying issue among Afghans was not Islam or not-Islam

but which version of Islam: Kabul's urban, progressive version or the conservative version of the villages. Afghans involved in that debate were the ones who rose up against the Soviet invaders.

But the Taliban are not those Afghans. The Taliban originated in the refugee camps of Pakistan. Their worldview was moulded in religious schools funded by elements of Pakistan's military intelligence agency. They were armed by Islamists from the Arab world, some of whom are in the country now, calling themselves Taliban. If the western military presence were removed, the Afghan energy that refuses to accept outsiders telling them who to be might recognise the Taliban as the alien force.

The great irony of the western project to bring democracy and social progress to Afghanistan is this: Afghans have a powerful progressive current of their own. It's Islamic, not secular, but it is progressive. In the six decades after the country gained independence from the British and before it was invaded by the Soviets, Afghanistan was governed by Afghans. During that time, what did that Afghan government achieve? It liberated Afghan women from the previously obligatory burqa. It promulgated a constitution. It created a parliament with real legislative power. It set up elections. It built schools for girls nationwide. It pushed for coeducation. It opened women's access to a college education at Kabul University and it opened public employment opportunities for them in professions such as medicine and law. It is staggering to look back at that era.

As the US and British withdrawal proceeds, the country is surrounded by outside forces hungry to get in: Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, China. Before any of them succeed, there ought to be a global conference at which international actors can work out a way to keep one another out of Afghanistan. For what Afghans really need help with is getting everyone else to leave them alone.

- Tamim Ansary is the author of *Games Without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan*