



IMAN
RESEARCH

SOCIETY • BELIEFS • PERCEPTION

brief December 2021

Absurdistan in Afghanistan Part I

Absurdistan in Afghanistan - Part I

Part One of this article is to look at the origin of militancy that gave birth to religious extremism and how they have become formidable by the design of the global geopolitical cookbook.

by Tadzarul Adha. IMAN *brief* | **November 2021**

In August, the Taliban moved in to Kabul as victor, as the world watches the unfolding confusions in shock. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was heavily criticised as ill-timed and secretive, but by the end of the week, it all became clear, the new lord of the country is the one that was ousted twenty years earlier - to replace militancy with democracy, and to bring back Afghanistan in the world's map. Where are we now?

Introduction

Afghanistan, the nation that was nurtured for twenty years by Western powers, in particular the United States, to stand on its own and chart its own 21st Century legacy, has recently collapsed, following the confident takeover of the capital city Kabul by the Taliban insurgents in August 2021.

The country of 38 million people with Islam as the religion of the majority, is now facing an urgent humanitarian situation, with winter approaching fast, and displaced people and refugees exposed to the harsh environment.

In the context of contemporary Afghanistan, the image of the last American soldier leaving the ensuing airport chaos received mixed reactions. It felt like the US and the Western allies were abandoning the Afghans, yet another time. Especially for Afghans who feared for their life, having been employed by the US army, who were now desperately trying to leave the country before things could get even worse.

At the moment, there are many Afghans making their way to cross the border into Pakistan and Iran, a familiar sight not too long ago when Afghanistan was the theatre of war between the Russian invading forces and the Mujahideen.

The abrupt shift of political and military command, from the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani - who fled the country - to one Mullah Hasan Akhund, is a tragedy. The President's departure led to a sense of panic, especially when Taliban on the ground regrouped and claimed that they had taken control of many provincial towns, and while the ongoing negotiation between the US-Taliban in Qatar remained inconclusive about the actual withdrawal time-frame.

While confusions and miscommunication can be seen in this progress, it was the lack of leadership and direction under President Ashraf Ghani's regime that led to the unprecedented power shift - a bloodless coup in some aspects.

The diplomatic community across the world was shocked to see the unfolding scenes – the airport chaos, suicide bombings, the US drone strikes and the build-up of the National Resistance Front in Panjshir valley, which all accounts to one surety – a forlorn civil conflict, with no democratic process yet in place, and in the case of a new security alert vis-à-vis the presence of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan, it is only going to be deadlier, with potential of another global repercussion.

It is still not clear how the Taliban perceives the IS-K's threat on its leadership, and how persistent is the IS-K in turning the country into the hub of the new Islamic Caliphate.

It was twenty years ago when the start of the Operation Enduring Freedom was launched under Bush's administration to remove the Taliban from power, and to hunt down the al-Qaeda numero uno – Osama Bin Laden for what the US claimed to have been the brains in many terrorist attacks against the US interests including the 9/11 attacks.

In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda received protection from the Taliban in the Tora Bora mountains in Jalalabad province, a stone's throw away from Pakistan's northern lawless borders. At the time, Al-Qaeda was a household name, and the Taliban wanted to be a good host in any way possible. After all, their strict observance of Islamic laws (that shuns democracy) was a mutual concept.

Deep in the border region are the tribal community, largely a Pashtun ethnic area that observes a strict Muslim code of conduct, that is patriarchal, feudalistic and virulently anti-West. Though Pakistan has not experienced any direct civil conflict in its territory since independence in 1947, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province is one of a few areas in northern Pakistan that is sealed off due to known active terrorist activities and subjected to heavy military presence until quite recently.

Militant groups, which later called themselves Pakistan's Taliban, are thought to have established themselves in this region, emulating the spirit of fighting in Afghanistan. Unknown to many, the establishment of such groups, were more or less under the purview of the Pakistan military intelligence, and it was essentially this unholy coexistence that gave Pakistan the notoriety as the culprit in proliferating conflicts in the region, either with neighbouring countries, or attacks on minority religious and ethnic groups in its own soil.

Under the army-controlled administration, Pakistan was the major supply route of weapons during the war against the Soviet in the 1980s, and a strategic logistic partner to the US and NATO-dominated Afghanistan for the last twenty years.

Before all this, Afghanistan was already a geopolitical playground as far back as 200 years ago, when the British expansionists were venturing into uncharted land in the Asian subcontinent searching for resources to exploit, power to yield and a population to subjugate.

The desire to expand its power led the British explorers and proprietors to a series of expeditions across the vast geographical area northwards beyond the Hindu Kush Mountain range, until they encountered an intact society of a self-governing population. It was not an easy courtship with the locals, and oftentimes it resulted in bloody confrontations. When dialogues failed to progress into co-optation, an all-out battle raged on until the population was subdued.

It was in 1919 that the British in the East India Company decided it no longer had a strategic interest for geopolitical contestation of the region up north. It said so following a global movement for independence or self-determination

by the local population resisting foreign occupation on the premise of nationalism and nation state – an idea very much espoused by liberation movements against Western colonials in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe or the Middle East.

Similarly, in the Indian subcontinent and across Southeast Asia, the British were losing steam; they no longer had the leverage to keep the occupation much further, and it began transitioning its way out of the region.

By the time the British left the region, Afghanistan like many others, had gained its nationhood status, in spite of being prone to internal conflicts. The forces that led to the British exit in India were composed of people from different ideologies.

Another movement with equal tenacity towards freedom was the Deobandi movement, founded in 1919 on the pretext of what is known as “composite nationalism” - India’s pluralism nexus – drawing parity with Mahatma Gandhi’s satyagraha doctrine. Satyagraha is Sanskrit for “holding firmly to truth”, a concept that promotes civil resistance sans aggression. Deobandi is an Islamist group supported by most of the Muslim population of India and subscribed to both the laws from the Al-Quran and man-made laws. It was also anti-British.

After the Partition of India in 1947, Pakistan became a Muslim-majority country, and an arch nemesis of India with whom it later fought for Kashmir, and have used the religious card in its protracted conflict every now and then. The impact of this partition can still be felt in how Afghanistan is engaged in condescending proximity by both the nuclear powers with vested interest in regional geopolitical games.

Islam has in a way been used to justify many acts of violence in the region by terrorist groups, and the Taliban was the first of such groups to have emerged as a winner during the brief period of relative calm post-Soviet invasion against all the other Mujahideen factions.

At the time when borders were not defined based on religious lines, Deobandi da’wah drew support amongst the Pashtun people residing in the area that are now Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (along both sides of the Durand Line).

The followers of non-linear Deobandi spread across the subcontinent Sunni-sect dominated region with varying degrees of intensity; some were moderate (conservative), others were radicals ready for armed struggle. In Pakistan, it has regarded the Shia and other Muslim minorities as heretic and have no qualm about prosecuting them.

The concept of Quran-based jurisprudence and a clout for ethno-political identity that Deobandi has cultivated spawned into the modern era of nation state, a paradox for Pakistan that is constitutionally secular and scientific, with a very dominant ultra-conservative Islam in its core, which by much of the 80’s

had taken interest in Wahabism.

Enter Wahhabism

Saudi Arabia which was founded on the basis of Saud-Wahhab alliance began funding generously across the Muslim world, promoting Wahhabism tacitly by building madrassahs, mosques, publications and many other charitable initiatives – including spreading theological subject matters, both for its own survival and political purposes.

Wahabism is a strand of Sunni Islam which styled itself as the revivalist of the monotheistic Islam, often in contrast with modern world of today. It also refers to Salafi, an Arabic word for “predecessor” in reference to the first practice of Islam that seek oneness of God or tawhid, giving it the notoriety for puritanism, orthodox and anti-democracy.

In practice, it calls other mazhab apostates, rejects modernity and calls it bid'ah, a man-made invention that contradicts and endangers Islamic core tenets – the Shahada. It also uses capital punishment to eliminate its opponents by any means necessary.

Over the years, the confluence of Deobandi and Wahhabism reached its pinnacle of terrorism, giving birth to groups such as the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehrik-e-Taliban, Jaish-e-Muhammad and many other hybrid groups of religious extremism. Most of these groups have employed indiscriminate attacks in the name of jihad, and have been acknowledged as terrorist organizations by the US State Department and most countries.

Though details are sketchy, these Pakistan-based groups would not have flourished without the support of funding from charitable organizations in Saudi Arabia, and at the behest of Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), which control key ministries and often act as a state within a state.

During the years of Soviet onslaught, the US needed to establish its sphere of influence, to cast doubt on the Russian geospatial trajectory. Pakistan was seen as a reliable partner to Washington which had good ties with Saudi Arabia, the country that the US regards as the only voice of the Islamic world, which put Iran at odds with the rest of the Muslim world because of the campaign to ridicule Shia, and seeing both the sect and the country as security threats to Saudi’s oil-based dominance.

The ISI’s proxies within the mujahideen, who received most of American weaponry and combat training, were part of the Haqqani network. It was not that hard to note how Stinger missiles and RPGs would be used against the Soviet, without the oversight from Pakistan’s civilian government. Pakistan was the entry point for those who wanted to join the mujahideen, branding it as a “holy war” including many Malaysians.

The weapon trades not only became a lucrative business for the military and its cronies, it also allowed Pakistan to avoid international obligations in addressing its own human rights violations and terrorism within its border. Islamabad was needed by Washington to financially exhaust the Soviet from continuing the Cold War.

Ahmad Shah Massoud, a Tajik, the Mujahideen de facto commander, leader of the Northern Alliance, originally from the Panjshir province, was not part of the network. The founder of the group, Jalaluddin Haqqani was a strategist and savvy businessman, with a penchant for both power and money.

The group controls the passage along the borders of Afghanistan-Pakistan, and have helped recruit thousands of students, mostly Afghan refugees, to fight guerrilla warfare without clear conscience on the type of homeland they fought for.

At the end of the Cold War, much of the Muslim world began to identify themselves more or less along the Sunni-Shia line, a grey area which was later tapped into protracted proxy wars in the Middle East. This feature was prominent in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and being a minority comes with great consequences.

Afghanistan is home to many ethnic groups such as the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Hazaras, and the Pashtun Taliban who were dominant in their undefined contested areas. It's hard to exactly know the population figure in Afghanistan as censuses have never been implemented. The Pashtun however, are known as the leader of the ruling class in Afghanistan, which over the years of cultivation has seemingly given them blanket authority over the others.

Afghanistan finally conducted its first election in 2004, giving the population a sense of representation. The country was very much rebuilt from the start and progress was growing rapidly with the employment of more Afghan citizens into the labour force, creating the demand for economic activities. Though there were deadly encounters with the ousted Taliban operatives, the training of Afghan security forces have helped promote overall security in the country, with a series of human rights violations to say the least.

New Model Taliban

Two months after the Taliban came to power the second time, most countries have yet to resume diplomatic relations with the new regime. Judging from this scenario, Pakistan would likely continue engaging with the Taliban, while India may take a step back for a moment, as it has a policy of not negotiating with terrorist organizations. In recent weeks, the US has said that it would continue to engage in talks with the Taliban, as has the UK.

So far, the Taliban today is what the Taliban was in the past. Its characteristic remains intact, but it craves for economic stability more so than ever. In many of its important speeches, the Taliban talks about building strategic ties with

China, its eastern neighbour, and assuring the doubters it will respect the Constitution by allowing women and girls to participate in daily activities, and for the religious minorities, it gave its word that they will be spared. The previous regime did so because there was monies and perks involved, and the Taliban are not known for its appreciation for diversity.

There's so much expectation, it's difficult to see where exactly the new phase of Afghanistan is heading. The Taliban have yet to show its good side in order to work out on its recovery plan. Since forming the interim government, the Taliban has faced internal factionalism, threats from the IS-K and the resistance forces in the north. None of which have full influence over the fragmented population without the use of coercion. With all of these, the Taliban affirmed to the world it had Afghanistan to work on, it didn't want outside influences. What to make up of this statement delivered by the group's spokesperson remains a guessing game.

The US withdrew from Afghanistan with over 240,000 casualties on its watch. One of the longest wars in the history of modern civilisation, a dark remembrance of the past with pain still on the shoulder of the people, Afghanistan is still far from salvation. Through history, an Afghan would claim that they have never been colonized, and through a tested time, Afghanistan would remain the graveyard of empires. 

In Part II, we will be looking at Afghanistan between 2001 until 2021, a period of Western sponsored nation-building, an elected regime and a segmented population who would later pay the price of trying to be democratic.