AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL, HOW TO PREVENT MORE BLOODY GAMES IN AGHANISTAN?

by HAIDER RIAZ KHAN

IN

the opening chapter of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael laments that the "Fates" have sent him on a "shabby" whaling voyage, while other men of his epoch are sent on "magnificent" ventures instead. One such "high tragedy" was the "Bloody Battle in Afghanistan," which Ishmael describes as among the "more extensive performances" in "the grand programme of Providence." In the hundred and seventy years since the publication of *Moby Dick*, imperial providence has programmed a chain of bloody battles that have only become lengthier and bloodier: since 1978, Afghanistan has been in the grips of near continuous war, with two separate invasions by two different superpowers, a brutal civil war, and unremitting slaughter and destruction.

Despite being entangled in Afghanistan for many years, outsiders retain a deeply simplistic conception of the country: in the media and in Washington, it is primarily viewed through a pernicious Orientalist lens, as a place of backwards customs and intractable intertribal warfare. This rigid and impoverished perception clashes with the lived experiences of Afghans, and the resulting schism is part of the reason why the United States has repeatedly failed to pacify the insurgency. >

The ongoing occupation of Afghanistan is the longest foreign military operation in US history. The direct economic cost has reached over $975 billion. Upwards of 2,400 US soldiers have died in the war. But the Americans have very little to show after nearly eighteen years in the country. The Taliban continues to hold sway over large swathes of the countryside, while the US-backed government — in which abominable warlords occupy powerful positions — is embroiled in corruption, torture, and human rights abuses. The much-vaunted emancipation of Afghan women has never materialized; on the contrary, violence against women continues to be endemic throughout the country. Trapped in a perpetual nightmare, Afghan women continue to suffer the same hardships of war that began decades ago with the Soviet occupation, while all along being subjected to the penalties imposed by a conservative patriarchal society.

Neta C. Crawford, a professor of political science at Boston University, published a report in November 2018 for the Costs of War Project that calculated the human casualties of the war: since 2001, over 38,480 Afghan civilians have died, and 41, 000have been gravely injured. Almost two million Afghans are internally displaced — refugees in their own country. The war has also spilled into neighboring Pakistan, with over sixty-four thousand Pakistanis killed. US drone strikes account for an estimated 3,800 of those deaths — mostly civilians. Pakistan is also host to the largest number of Afghan refugees — 1.3 million (the number has declined from a reported 4 million at the end of 2001) out of a total of 2.6 million worldwide in 2017. Additionally, there are a hundred and seventy thousand internally displaced people in Pakistan (the vast majority of them from the tribal belt along the Afghan border).

The tragedy of the "War in Afghanistan and Pakistan" goes far beyond the number of casualties and displaced people. Alex Edney-Browne, a researcher on drone warfare, has documented some of the psychological trauma that Afghans have suffered as a result of American drone strikes. She interviewed a man named Abdul Qodus from Wardak province who saw "pieces" of his "brother's body" scattered about after a drone strike. Qodus is perpetually forced to relive this terrifying event as drones regularly fly over his village, making a characteristic buzzing sound as they hover above. "All day and all night it is there," he said, later adding that

UPON HEARING THE NEWS OF KABUL'S CAPITULATION, A BRITISH OFFICIAL BOASTED TO THE KHAN OF KALAT: "THE BRITISH ARMY HAS ENTERED KABUL WITHOUT FIRING A BULLET." UPON REFLECTION, THE KHAN OF KALAT IS SAID TO HAVE REPLIED, "YOU PEOPLE HAVE ENTERED THE COUNTRY, BUT HOW WILL YOU GET OUT?"

going outside means "we go with fear, we go quickly." In interviews conducted by *The Intercept* in 2017, Afghans lamented that the US was treating their villages "as a playground for their weapons."

WHERE BRITAIN WAS, THE US FOLLOWS

This is far from the first time a foreign power has made Afghanistan its playing field. In an article for the Pakistan-based magazine *Tanqeed*, James Caron, researcher at SOAS University of London, notes that from a "metropolitan" perspective, "the Pashtun heartland, forever garrisoned on the borders of empires, has always been more interesting to power as a problem rather than as an asset." This was the viewpoint of imperial Britain (adopted later by the Soviet Union and the US) at the height of the so-called Great Game.

The Great Game was a powerful rivalry between the British and Russian empires over the dominion of Afghanistan and adjacent territories in Central and South Asia from 1837 to 1907, fought primarily on the mountain ranges of the northwest frontier of British India, beyond which lay Afghanistan. The region now constitutes the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of northwestern Pakistan.

To combat Russian intrusions in Central Asia and eliminate the almost entirely fictitious threat to India (the "jewel in the crown" of the empire), the British East India Company initiated the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1839 — the catastrophic colonial campaign that Melville alludes to in *Moby Dick*. The British formed "The Army of the Indus" (a reference to the ancient Indus River) to oust the Afghan ruler Dost Mohammad Khan and replace him with the subservient Shah Shuja, who had been living in exile. The invading force consisted of more than twenty thousand soldiers and a stupendous thirty-eight thousand camp followers. It entered the country with relative ease, capturing Kabul within seven months. Dost Mohammad Khan was exiled, and Shah Shuja acceded to the throne of Kabul. As part of the incursion, the British also subdued the Khanate of Kalat (now a district in the Balochistan province of Pakistan). Hearing the news of Kabul's capitulation, a British official boasted to the Khan of Kalat: "The British army has entered Kabul without firing a bullet." Upon reflection, the Khan of Kalat is said to have replied,

DOST MUHAMMAD KHAN WITH AIDES AND BODYGUARDS, 1927.

"You people have entered the country, but how will you get out?"

The words proved to be prescient. In the winter of 1841, the British garrison in Kabul was attacked during an uprising and incurred significant losses. The garrison was besieged, and the city descended into anarchy. A month later, in January 1842, the British officers in Kabul managed to negotiate a withdrawal to Jalalabad. The winter march towards Jalalabad proved to be a disaster as the great army perished under incessant Afghan fire from the mountaintops (tribesmen largely ignored the negotiated agreement), disease, starvation, and the bitter cold. The demise of the British force entered legend, particularly the image of the solitary Dr. Brydon on horseback, vividly described by Karl Marx in *Notes on Indian History*: "On the walls of Jalalabad . . . the sentries espied a man in a tattered English uniform on a miserable pony horse, and the man was desperately wounded; it was Dr. Brydon, the sole survivor of the 15,000 who had left Kabul three weeks before. He was dying of starvation."

After the devastating defeat, the British sent additional forces to secure the release of prisoners and to carry out retributions against the Afghan populace. But the political situation in the country was essentially unchanged by the war: Dost Mohammad Khan was back as the ruler of the country and Shah Shuja was dead. The British had fought a costly war for naught. This was not, however, the end of British attempts to exert control over Afghanistan. There were two further Anglo-Afghan Wars and recurrent military operations against tribal Pashtuns along the

Durand Line. Imposed in 1893, the line forms the modern border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Indeed, it was the British that first carried out indiscriminate aerial bombardments in the region, a policy they described as "air policing." As Madiha Tahir has pointed out in her essay "Bombing Pakistan: How Colonial Legacy Sustains American Drones," these colonial bombing campaigns, beginning with Winston Churchhill's bombing of Jalalabad in 1919, were the logical predecessor of the drone warfare that currently dominates life in Afghanistan and the northwestern borderlands of Pakistan.

But Afghanistan is more than just a theatre of war. It is a geographically and culturally diverse country, with expansive deserts, soaring mountains, and ceaseless ranges, including the Hindu Kush and Pamir Mountains, the latter known as the "Roof of the World." Water is scarce, and a meagre 12 percent of the soil is arable. This harsh terrain is home to several different ethnic groups. The south and east are populated by Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (they are also indigenous to Pakistan's northwestern regions). In the north and west are Tajiks and Uzbeks. The Hazaras are mostly situated in the central part of the country. Pashto and Dari (a dialect of Persian) are the two most widely spoken languages. Most of the population is rural.

The mountainous geography of the region has forged a society that has historically been both fractured and isolated. More significantly, the Afghan tribes have typically not responded positively to reform or an assertive centralized authority. As scholars Eqbal Ahmad and Richard J. Barnet noted in an extensive 1988 essay in *The New Yorker*, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 brought all these factors into play. The war was an important precursor to the current conflict. In fact, the invasion really cemented the beginning of a broader conflict in Afghanistan that rages on into the present.

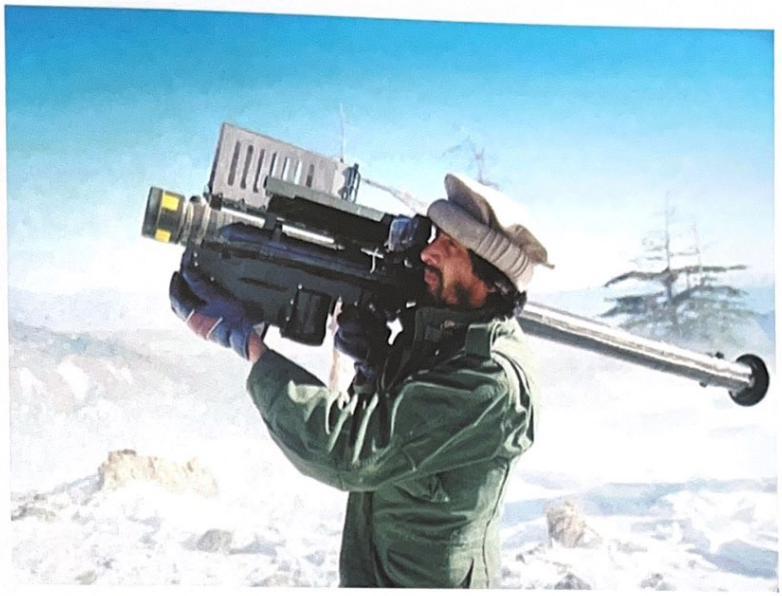
THE SOVIETS

The Soviet–Afghan War, lasting from 1979 to 1989, was one of the longest and costliest foreign military operations undertaken by the USSR. The war also marked the beginning of substantial American involvement in the region. Prior to the Soviet invasion, the US had showed limited interest in Afghanistan. However, in response to the Soviet intervention the CIA carried out an expansive covert operation in the country — arming, training, and funding the resistance. The mujahideen received an estimated $10 billion in weapons and aid from the US, Saudi Arabia, and their allies. Representative Charlie Wilson, from Texas, one of the strongest supporters of the Afghan resistance, echoed the prevailing sentiment in Washington at the time: "There were fifty-eight thousand dead in Vietnam and we owe the Russians one."

The Soviet invasion started off as a limited operation to bolster the increasingly beleaguered Afghan government and swiftly suppress the spreading insurgency. At the time of the invasion in 1979, Afghanistan was governed by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), formed in 1965 by a small group of men belonging to Kabul's leftist intelligentsia (predominantly Marxist-Leninist) during the presidency of Muhammad Daud Khan. The relationship between the domestic left and Daud Khan had deteriorated despite the fact that several members of the PDPA had helped Daud oust his brother in law, the king of Afghanistan, Muhammad Zahir Shah, in a bloodless coup that transformed Afghanistan from monarchy to republic.

The rift stemmed from Daud Khan's ambitions to broaden Afghanistan's diplomatic profile by joining "a Western-tilted, Tehran-centered regional economic and security sphere." As part of the deal, the Shah of Iran promised $2 billion in aid to Afghanistan. In exchange, Tehran pressured Daud to curb the government's dependence on the Soviet Union and suppress internal leftist influence. This eventually culminated in a new constitution that banned all political parties except for Daud's own. The government also began purging PDPA members from the military and civil institutions. In 1978, after a large funeral demonstration took place in Kabul over the killing of a leading PDPA member, Daud placed the leadership of the party under arrest. This marked the beginning of the end for Daud. The very next day, the military staged a coup and freed the PDPA leadership — many of the Afghan officers (about one third) were trained in the Soviet Union and were sympathetic to the leftist PDPA. Daud died fighting in the presidential palace. The 1978 military coup came to be known as the Saur Revolution, or Saur Revolution.

The Soviets quickly recognized the new government and reestablished their influence over Afghan affairs. But turmoil was still brewing. An insurgency



A MUJAHIDEEN FIGHTER WITH A STINGER SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILE.

along the border with Pakistan, which had begun under the tenure of Daud, seemed to be spreading rather than abating — Islamic militant groups (mostly made up of Pashtuns from the border tribes) had been organized by the Pakistani government to harass the "secular" Afghan government, in retaliation for Daud's incitement of Pashtuns in Pakistan's northwest to secede and join their ethnic brethren in Afghanistan. The Durand Line, splitting the Pashtun heartland between the two countries, is a demarcation the Afghans have long disputed. Though Daud was gone, the Islamic militancy continued gaining strength; it was apparent that the mujahideen did not view the "communist" PDPA any more favorably.

Meanwhile, the PDPA began pursuing aggressive land reforms, instituting coeducation, and imposing legal constraints on dowries. These dramatic changes, foisted from above, were not well received by a still largely conservative and patriarchal society. To make matters worse, instead of attempting to accrue popular support for their policies, the PDPA began purging dissenters. Almost overnight, the countryside became rife with rebellious fervor. To add to the pandemonium, the PDPA was split into two factions, and much of their energies were spent trying to wrest control from one another. The Soviets, alarmed by the turmoil in a country that shared a border with several of its constituent republics and that had been firmly under their sphere of influence since the British left the Indian subcontinent, ultimately decided to pacify the resistance by invading in December 1979.

They immediately assassinated the president, Hafizullah Amin, who represented one faction of the warring PDPA, and replaced him with the leader of the rival faction, Babrak Karmal. The Soviets believed they would not have to fight much after the invasion; the mere presence of their forces, they thought, would dissuade the enemy and increase the effectiveness of the Afghan army. They could not have been more wrong. There were widespread defections in the Afghan army — many of the conscripts were alarmed at the prospect of having to kill their kinsmen on behalf of an unpopular government — and as the war dragged on, the Soviet troops became increasingly entangled in fierce fighting across the country. Almost fifteen thousand Russian soldiers were killed during the course of the conflict, along with eighteen thousand Soviet-backed Afghan military personnel. Despite the heavy losses, the government was never able to extend its control beyond the cities and a limited area of the countryside.

Initially, the Soviets carried out devastating carpet bombings and vicious large-scale assaults against entire villages that they suspected of sheltering militants. These terrible attacks created the first wave of Afghan refugees, who sought safety in neighboring Pakistan. Ironically, this helped the mujahideen in the long run: by being forced to leave their families behind in Pakistan, they became more mobile and less constrained in their movement. The Soviets eventually realized this and evolved their tactics to avoid aggravating the civilian population. They started carrying out targeted counterinsurgency strikes and began pressuring the Afghan government

TAJIK COMMANDER AHMAD SHAH MASSOUD WITH AIDES, 1987.

to carry out political reforms that would mollify both conservative Afghan society and the influential trading class.

But the greatest problem the Soviets faced in Afghanistan was that they were not engaged in a conflict with a single enemy. They were up against dozens of individual armies and militias under the command of various warlords. The mujahideen were divided along ethnic and ideological lines. Rivalry among groups for territory and resources was common, and each major faction had at least one foreign benefactor. The US (and Pakistan) mostly supported fundamentalist Islamic groups over moderate factions in the fight against the Soviets — notable among them was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. A shrewd commander and politician, Hekmatyar continues to be a power broker in Afghanistan today. He is far from the only notoriously brutal warlord who remains active in Afghan politics. Abdul Rashid Dostum, the leading Uzbek warlord and former PDPA general, is serving as vice president in the current administration of President Ashraf Ghani, despite being credibly accused of war crimes.

While there was widespread resistance to the Soviet invasion from large segments of Afghan society, the role of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan in the Soviet defeat cannot be overlooked. Support for the mujahideen was a centerpiece of the Reagan Doctrine — a program to fund armed resistance against Soviet-backed governments across the globe. Perhaps the US's most significant contribution to the Islamic resistance was supplying mujahideen groups under its patronage with Stinger ground-to-air missiles. This almost certainly prevented the resistance from crumbling; the Soviets had steadily been making headway beginning in 1984 (after the shift in tactics) by clearing insurgent hideouts using commando teams backed by gunships. The introduction of these missiles in 1986 virtually neutralized the aerial threat. The Soviet–Afghan war also spawned the modern pan-Islamic jihad — fighters from across the Muslim world joined the indigenous resistance to overthrow the "godless communists." This transformation of the conflict from a religiously tinged national liberation movement to a full-fledged global holy war came about largely as a result of the recruitment efforts of the CIA. In fact, it was during these years that Osama bin Laden first traveled to Afghanistan; he was tasked by Prince Turki, the director of Saudi intelligence, to marshal the foreign fighters who had flocked to fight the the Soviet Army.

The Soviets began their withdrawal in 1988. After nearly a decade in Afghanistan, they could no longer sustain the costs of a war that seemed unending. Prior to their withdrawal, the Soviets desperately tried to get the Americans to negotiate a settlement by agreeing upon a coalition government. The Soviets rightfully feared the beginning of a new bloody civil war upon their departure. But war hawks in Washington put an end to any hopes of a negotiated settlement. These senators and congressional representatives suggested that signing an agreement was not necessary because the Soviets were already defeated, and that it would constitute a betrayal of

the mujahideen. Though the US had agreed in 1985 to be the guarantor of a settlement in Afghanistan, Ronald Reagan suddenly became amnesiac about this commitment after witnessing the opposition towards it in the Senate. The US instead made the rather unreasonable demand that in order for Washington to stop funding the mujahideen, the Soviets must stop giving aid to the PDPA government. The Soviets unsurprisingly rejected this stipulation and left without reaching a political settlement. Brutality and chaos ensued.

The violence was caused not only by the mujahideen fighting government forces, but equally by their internal warring. Because of the disunity and factional rivalries of the rebels, the PDPA government did not fall until 1992. During this post-Soviet phase of the war, Afghans witnessed the sieges of Jalalabad and Kabul, both notorious for their senseless destruction. These events scarred the collective Afghan psyche.

In his 1989 essay, "Stalemate at Jalalabad," Eqbal Ahmad used Mao Zedong's theory of revolutionary warfare to analyze the failure of the mujahideen to establish a political base in Afghanistan. Ahmad points out that the mujahideen largely foreswore the foundational stages of liberation movements, namely, the building of grassroot political structures to gain popular support: "Revolutionary guerillas organize politically; they delegitimize and outadminister the enemy before starting to outfight it. To gain support ... they set up participatory and governing structures among people and provide needed services in health, education and arbitration." With few exceptions, the mujahideen commanders were more akin to mercenaries than national liberators, possessing little to no organic links with the populace, and subject to the dictates of their foreign funders.

The stalemate between the warring mujahideen groups was finally broken by the arrival of the Taliban in 1994. This new entity was backed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), its vaunted intelligence agency, which had overseen much of America's covert war in Afghanistan. Mostly drawn from among ethnic Pashtuns, the emergence of the Taliban is somewhat murky and subject to contradictory accounts, with some locating their origin in Pakistani *madrassas* (religious schools), and others in ascetic religious traditions from southern Afghanistan. Pakistan supported the Taliban in order to gain control of the trade routes running through Afghanistan and into Central Asia, to which they had been denied access up until that point by warlords. In a span of two years, the Taliban blitzed across much of Afghanistan, combining firepower with lucrative bribes to subdue enemy warlords.

Despite their successes, the Taliban never gained control of the entirety of Afghanistan. Most significantly, they were halted from penetrating into northern Afghanistan by the forces of Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. He was joined at various stages by Uzbek commander, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Hazara chief, Abdul Karim Khalili, who together formed a coalition later known as the Northern Alliance. This was noteworthy since Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras constitute the three main ethnic minority groups of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Taliban also began facing opposition from their own kinsmen — the Pashtuns — simply as a consequence of their sheer barbarity.

Prior to the September 11 attacks, the American attitude towards the Taliban regime ranged from ambivalence to furtive approval. Shortly after they took over Kabul, an American official stated that the Taliban were "unlikely to become the sort of Islamic fundamentalists like Iran because they follow a different brand of Islam."

THE AMERICANS

After the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban's response to the impending military threat by the US was scattered and inconsistent, with much confusion in their ranks. On September 21, 2001, the *New York Times* reported that a council of approximately one thousand clerics met in Kabul to issue a decree that Osama bin Laden should be "persuaded" to leave the country in order to "avoid the current tumult, and also to allay future suspicions." The council also added a statement of condolence to the victims. The White House rejected the suggestion, stating that it didn't "meet American requirements." To further complicate matters, the obscure and reclusive leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, gave conflicting statements on handing over Bin Laden — initially proclaiming that the Taliban would not surrender him. Later on, during the early stages of the American bombardment of Afghanistan, the Taliban deputy prime minister tried to stop the war from escalating and stated that his government would turn over Osama bin Laden if evidence of his complicity in the attacks was provided: "If the Taliban

JALALUDDIN HAQQANI IN 1982

is given evidence that Osama bin Laden is involved, we would be ready to hand him over to a third country." President George Bush summarily rejected the offer, stating, "There's no need to discuss innocence or guilt. We know he's guilty."

By the end of 2001, the US had installed a new government headed by Hamid Karzai. The Taliban had disbanded, overwhelmed by American airpower, and the foreign fighters of Al-Qaeda had absconded from the country. The circumstances rendered a foreign occupation of Afghanistan unnecessary. From a purely realist perspective, American military efforts should have been restricted to hunting down Osama bin Laden and the other architects of 9/11. But the US was not content with this limited role. They wanted a full-throttled war — a way to signal their dominance to the rest of the world. As a consequence of America's hegemonic posture, Afghanistan was to experience zealous violence perpetrated by yet another imperial power.

In his sombre and penetrating book *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes*, Anand Gopal documents the absurdity and callousness of the US War in Afghanistan — mostly taking place in the all-but-inaccessible southern countryside. The narrative that emerges from these invisible places reveals the grotesque underbelly of the American occupation.

Despite the Taliban fighters laying down their arms, the US still sent tens of thousands of soldiers to fight the War on Terror. This quickly engendered perverse and morbid social dynamics in places where American forces were concentrated. In particular, the Americans allied themselves with anti-Taliban strongmen and warlords. Under the guise of fighting terrorism, this new breed of warlords exacted revenge on their personal enemies and neutralized contenders for power. Extortions became common; civilians were routinely detained as suspected terrorists and ransoms demanded from their hapless families. These strongmen, who enjoyed exclusive access to the American military apparatus, were abetted in their quest for regional dominance by US forces.

These misguided American machinations quickly led to the birth of the insurgency and the reconstitution of the Taliban. As a paradigmatic case, the notorious Haqqani network which "pioneered the use of multiple suicide bombers," according to Gopal, came about as a result of America's ethos of "you are either with us or against us." (The group is named after Jalaluddin Haqqani, a celebrated mujahideen commander who had been a recipient of US aid during the Soviet-Afghan War but joined the insurgency after the Americans tried to assassinate him numerous times.). Meanwhile, because the Afghan government had to compete for resources with a multitude of American-backed warlords, it became extraordinarily corrupt.

Under these conditions, the Afghan government has been relying on torture and extrajudicial killings to achieve peace, hearkening back to the tactics deployed by the PDPA government. In fact, many facets of the US occupation, which is now in its eighteenth year, resemble the Soviet attempt to pacify Afghanistan. The Afghan army is highly unreliable — insider attacks and defections are frequent. The US forces, just like the Soviets troops before them, cannot expand their control beyond major cities

EQBAL AHMAD ONCE COMPARED THE HISTORICAL POWER STRUGGLES OVER AFGANISTAN TO THE CENTRAL ASIAN GAME OF *BUZKASHI*, IN WHICH PLAYERS ON HORSEBACK COMPETE TO CARRY A DEAD GOAT OR CALF TO A DESIGNATED "GOAL." THE CARCASS, IN EQBAL'S ANALOGY, WAS AFGHANISTAN, AND THE PLAYERS REPRESENTED THE WARLORDS BACKED BY POWERFUL FOREIGN FUNDERS.

and strategic locations for any extended period of time — repeatedly losing ground to the Taliban in the southern countryside. Atrocities committed by American and NATO soldiers fuel resentment and anger among ordinary Afghans — the same wrath that mobilized the country against the Russians. A particularly ghastly example was the 2012 Kandahar massacre. US staff sergeant Robert Bales entered two villages, one after the other, and murdered sixteen Afghan civilians, including nine children — all in cold blood. Sites like the Bagram Internment Facility are notorious for the torture and abuse of prisoners. The award-winning documentary *Taxi to the Dark Side* explores one such incident — the detention and murder of an innocent cab driver, named Dilawar, at Bagram. There were also the Maywand District murders, where several US Army soldiers killed Afghan civilians and collected their body parts as trophies.

Outside of the eastern borderlands and the Pashtun south, the story is different. In the absence of an omnipresent American military, the traditional tribal structures and alliances persist in fragile equilibrium, constraining the bouts of violence and fostering an intricate peace. As Eckart Schiewek, political advisor to the UN Mission in Afghanistan, told Anand Gopal, the primary reason for the contrasting fates is that "you couldn't call on [foreign] soldiers to settle your feuds."

A FAILED WAR

While the stuttering peace talks between the Taliban and the US are still ongoing, an American withdrawal appears imminent. At the same time, there is a belated realization among the American public that the war has been a failure: in a recent YouGov poll, only 22 percent of Americans described it as a success. The prospect of American departure has renewed hopes that the War in Afghanistan will finally come to an end. But there are many reasons to believe that a haphazard American withdrawal will only lead to the intensification of the dormant civil war, not least because the US has fostered malignant warlords across the country.

The current government in Kabul has been excluded from the peace talks between the US, the Taliban, and prominent Afghan powerbrokers. The Taliban has refused to entertain the possibility of including the Ghani government, claiming that

ACCORDING TO THE PROPOSAL, NOT ONLY SHOULD THE U.S. WITHDRAW FROM AFGHANISTAN, BUT IT SHOULD ALSO CLOSE ITS AIR BASES THERE, SO IT CANNOT NOT USE THE COUNTRY AS A STAGING GROUND FOR FUTURE IMPERIAL ENDEAVORS IN THE REGION.

this would be tantamount to accepting "this stooge regime as a legitimate government" — a development that certainly does not bode well for post-withdrawal peace prospects. This is reflective of a broader and longstanding crisis: no government in Afghanistan has been able to sufficiently establish its legitimacy since the fall of the monarchy in 1973. There has always been a significant portion of the population that has viewed the government in Kabul as a puppet of some foreign power (often correctly). The current American-backed Afghan government is no different. It is likely that just as the PDPA government could not survive the Soviet withdrawal, the current Afghan government will not survive the American departure from the region.

Moreover, it appears that the American withdrawal is setting the stage for a new geopolitical melee over Afghanistan — a fresh round of "bloody games." Eqbal Ahmad once compared the historical power struggles over Afganistan to the Central Asian game of *buzkashi*, in which players on horseback compete to carry a dead goat or calf to a designated "goal." The carcass, in Eqbal's analogy, was Afghanistan, and the players represented the warlords backed by powerful foreign funders. The analogy remains apt today. The warlords of Afghanistan — from Hekmatyar to Abdul Rashid Dostum — continue to be active players in the country's political order. They are joined by the Taliban and various local militias under the auspices of Machiavellian strongmen. As political scientist Gilles Dorronsoro, an expert on Afghanistan, has observed, "India, Pakistan, Iran ... everyone will choose sides." They will be joined by Saudi Arabia, the US, and Russia. The games and the accompanying bloodshed will continue.

Despite the bleak outlook, there are credible proposals to stop Afghanistan from descending into a fresh civil war. In a 2009 article for *The Nation*, scholar and journalist Selig Harrison proposed an exit strategy for the US that could help bring about a stable peace. According to the proposal, not only should the US withdraw from Afghanistan, but it should also close its air bases there, so it cannot not use the country as a staging ground for future imperial endeavors in the region. This is essentially a call to implement a "military neutralization" of the country. Furthermore, a "UN-led regional diplomatic initiative" involving Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia, the US, Saudi Arabia, and China should establish a "timetable for military disengagement." The basis of the UN agreement would be to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a center "of regional and major power rivalries" — that is, the country would go back to a position of "neutrality" and "nonalignment."

In addition to a regional accord of military neutralization, peace in Afghanistan will require broad multiethnic cooperation. The US is pressing for multiethnic representation in the current Afghan government, but given the county's historical hostility to centralized power, this approach may fall flat. This is especially true in the case of the Pashtun majority, whose interests are often perceived to be aligned with

MANZOOR AHMAD PASHTEEN OF THE PASHTUN PROTECTION MOVEMENT ADDRESSES SUPPORTERS AT A RALLY IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN, IN 2018.

the Taliban. That need not be the case.

Across the border, Pashtuns from the tribal belt of Pakistan have started a grassroots and nonviolent civil-rights movement — the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement). As Manzoor Pashteen, a founding member of PTM, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in 2019, the "peaceful movement seeks security and political rights for Pashtuns." In addition, PTM demands that the Pakistani government investigate extrajudicial killings of Pashtuns (predominantly occurring in the tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan) and bring "an end to enforced disappearances." PTM also demands that the Pakistani government end its support for the Taliban. The movement is remarkable for its mobilizing capacity, despite severe attempts at repression by the Pakistani military establishment. Another extraordinary feature of PTM is its progressive nature, with women playing a prominent role in the movement.

Of course, Afghanistan is not Pakistan, and the emergence of a progressive movement in the country will probably require the formation of militias, to counter the innumerable warlords entrenched across the country. A Pashtun-dominated movement would also need to forge relations with other progressive groups across the ethnic divide, just as PTM has done in Pakistan. In spite of these difficulties and the long odds, the success of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement demonstrates that progressive social movements can originate in the unlikeliest of places (the tribal areas of Pakistan, much like Afghanistan, have suffered from decades of war and political malfeasance).

In the prologue of *No Good Men Among the Living*, Anand Gopal repeats a Pashto proverb that inspired the title of his book: "There are no good men among the living, and no bad ones among the dead." Gopal contends that this aphorism has special significance for Afghans: after decades of war, they have realized that there are no "heroes" or "saviors" in their milieu, no group without blood on its hands. That may very well be true. But Afghans are a resilient people, and many aspects of Afghan society have persisted through years of war. Poetry, a mainstay of Afghan and Pashto literature, is written and read by women across the country despite restrictions and reprisals. In Kabul, secret gardens thrive across the city, demonstrating that the Afghan love for gardening has not been eradicated by war. These remnants of a forgotten past continue to provide hope that all is not lost. C