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CONTENTS

REFORMING AFGHANISTAN

Soon after it was established as an independent nation, Afghanistan undertook multiple radical reforms in order to transform the country from a conservative to a modern society. From the rushed reforms of King Amanullah to those in the so-called Constitution era, the reforms were always at the centre of the goverments' agendas, using them as a way to transform Afghanistan according to their vision, taking into little consideration the conditions on the ground or the need of the people. Despite the sincere efforts of the reformers, all reforms came to an end in 1979, and have hardly managed to come around since.

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN is often contrasted with an idealised version of Afghanistan in the 1960s, when the country appeared to be on a path toward a more open, liberal and prosperous society. However, the path of reformation in Afghanistan was a difficult one, filled with conflicting visions of what the country should be. What is more, the reforms were not a result of sustained social movements, but rather efforts of the governments to project western visions of a progressive country on an unprepared Afghanistan.[1]

Afghanistan became an independent nation after the Third Anglo-Afghan War, with the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919. During that time, reformist elements had already appeared in Kabul, among them was the first ruler of the independent Afghanistan was Amir Amanullah Khan, who changed his country from an emirate to a kingdom in 1926. Soon after he succeeded his father, he began a rigorous campaign to modernize Afghanistan through socio-economic reforms, similar to those witnessed in Turkey and Iran in the same decade. His aim was to create a cultivated elite that would be able to promote and to implement his reform program, while limiting the power of local religious leaders and chieftains; A Western-styled cabinet was appointed in 1919 and the country was given its first written constitution in 1923.[2] In order to revise the educational system, the director of the French Archaeological expedition, A. Foucher, became responsible for drafting an educational system based on the French model in 1922.[3]

King Amanullah also focused on advancing women's rights by outlawing child marriages in 1921 and by founding two girl's schools, with Queen Soraya giving public speeches at their inaugurations.[4] Moreover, he attempted to introduce a new, western face to the country, which included the adoption of European clothing, the unveiling of women (three years prior to Turkey) and the prohibition of certain haircuts, as visible markers of modern mentalities and morals.[5]

His economic reforms, particularly his land reform plans, were motivated by the need to expand budgetary resources. However, the state was incapable of asserting its authority over the traditional elite, including tribes and clergy, and was often met with armed resistance which brought even more economic hardships.[6] His vision to transform the country basically overnight, included some reforms that were unrealistic and unnecessary; Afghan society became divided between the forces of conservatism and those of change.[7] Despite the increasing hostility towards his reforms, King Amanullah's rule lasted for a decade. Even though he tried not to clash directly with traditional elements and religious circles, when his intentions on changing the status of women and on the separation of the state from the religion, critics took up arms in 1928 and by 1929 he was forced out of the country. For the next twenty years, only gradual and selective attempts at modernization took place.

A limited freedom of expression in 1949-1951 allowed several political parties to emerge, resulting in a brief period of parliamentary experimentation. This became possible as the government needed public support for its new policies, particularly in its campaign for Pashtunistan – aiming at incorporating the Pashtun-inhabited territories annexed by the British in 1893 that in 1947 became part of Pakistan.[8] Subsequently, the King's cousin, Mohammad Daud, became Prime Minister of Afghanistan, and dominated the political scene from 1953 to 1963. An admirer of former King Amanullah, he began to build up the army and the country's infrastructure, attempting to accelerate the economic development by using US funds as well as Soviet expertise. His social and eco-

nomic policies were cautiously reformist. Through his socioeconomic reforms, especially the expansion of education, an assertive middle class emerged; women are allowed to attend university and enter the workforce in 1957, and two years later compulsory veiling was abolished on a voluntary basis. His reforms were relatively successful, even if he sought to reform Afghanistan exclusively under his own guidance, not seeking political liberalisation. Nevertheless, he intended to introduce political reforms, arguing that the present system of government was no longer viable in 1962.[9]

Daud was forced to resign in March 1963; however, and despite the repressive nature of his regime, he laid the foundation of stability and development that allowed reforms to flourish after his resignation. What is more, the closure of borders with Pakistan, making Afghanistan even more dependent on the Soviet Union, as well as international developments such as a series of coups d'etat in the Middle East, convinced King Zahir to issue a new constitution in 1964, permitting an independent legislature and government ministries. A parliament was constituted and elections held in 1965 and 1969, with men and women alike gaining the right to vote. This period is often viewed as the "golden era" of Afghanistan, easing the restrictions on freedom of thought, expression and assembly, while limiting the power of the royal family.[10] The liberalisation of state and society brought about some new problems and intensified old ones, leading to confrontations between the forces of tradition and modernism, similar to those during the reign of Amanullah.

What is more, as the reforms were coming from the top down, it was easier for the royal leadership to manipulate them; for example, the King's refusal to sign the anticipated Political Parties Bill, which would allow political parties into parliament, showed that the monarch did not seek real change for the country. The failure of real political reforms made existing political structures more radicalized; and, because nationalism did not appeal to the educated class, political activists looked for alternative ideologies, such as Islam or socialism, which promised rapid social and economic development.[11]

As a result of the political situation, the failure of the King to accommodate popular demands and the mounting economic crisis, the Constitutional era was brought to an end when, in July 1973, Mohammad Daud lead a military coup, and overthrew the King and named himself President of the Republic of Afghanistan. Despite the left-wing rhetoric of the President, power remained in the same hands, and the new urban class demanded more change. A few years later, the same officers who brought Daud to power, adhering to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan -or Khalq - overthrew him, and he with 18 members of his immediate family were killed in what was called the Saur Revolution, "The Great April Revolution".[12] Their reform program was a top-down one, and despite having real in the cities, in an overwhelmingly rural country like Afghanistan, it wasn't enough. Meeting widespread resistance, particularly from traditional forces, and fearing for an American intervention, the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan to protect its ally in December 1979.

To conclude, Afghanistan's journey towards reform was

a turbulent one, with many different visions. The reformers achieved a number of their goals but failed in others. Almost all of the reforms were implemented hastily, with limited preparation and lacking the prerequisites for successful implementation. What is more, the disassociation of the leaders in Kabul from the realities in the rural countryside, lead to decision-making with little to no regard for the conditions and real needs of the people of Afghanistan. The failure of real socio-political reforms that would reflect the needs of the people led to the radicalisation of politics and the polarisation of the Afghani society, contributing to the situation that continues to rampage Afghanistan even to this day.

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TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

THE DAWN OF A NEW PARADIGM

Taliban's successful campaign to bring Afghanistan back under their rule reverberates far beyond the country's borders. While international attention shifts to the rising great power competition, Islamist groups across the globe celebrate the failure of yet another superpower to subdue Afghanistan. Taliban's success bears the possibility to turn Afghanistan into a new lighthouse of Islamist activism. While Afghanistan becoming once again a meeting point for jihadists from across the world seems more "logical", what is more probable—and in the long run more dangerous—is Taliban's success to evolve into a new model of strategy that other Islamist/jihadist groups will try to emulate.

Marina Eleftheriadou

TWENTY YEARS AND $2 TRILLION could not subdue the Taliban, who in August 2021 managed to bring Afghanistan back under their rule. The reasons for their victory lie equally in the war fatigue that has driven US policy in Afghanistan for the past decade, the misguided state-building policies that did nothing but enrich a corrupt elite and Taliban's higher resolve and masterful implementation of an attrition strategy. As the dust from the last evacuation planes leaving Kabul settles and while the international focus shifts to the great power competition, it is imperative to look into the lessons that other Islamist groups around the globe draw from the Taliban victory.

The mujahedeen's resistance against the Soviet Union and their local allies in the 1980s became a rallying point and meeting ground for Islamists from across the region, allowing new –and more radical– ideas to emerge. Mujahedeen's victory did not only give birth to salafism-jihadism, but it also legitimized the formulation of the far enemy/near enemy strategy that al-Qaeda pursued in the 1990s, which redirected its focus to targeting the US. Likewise, Taliban's rise to power in 1996 provided al-Qaeda with the territory to organize and implement this strategy. It is no surprise then that the hasty withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the almost immediate collapse of the Afghan government did not go unnoticed in the Islamist circles. Taliban's success prompts a two-pronged question: can Afghanistan become once again a radical Islamist meeting point and what the Taliban victory means to their local struggles? The answer is key to understanding the nature and form of Islamist extremism in the following years.

The prospect of Afghanistan becoming a new gathering point for jihadists should not be excluded but it is not highly probable at this point. The fall of the "Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq has left many, who made (or wished to make) the journey to the promised Islamic "utopia", yearning for a new truly Islamic land, where they can fight and live according to sharia. Taliban's Deobandi Islam is equally harsh yet different from the salafi Islam professed by the supporters of the "Islamic State" and al-Qaeda, which can easily lead to friction. In the past, Taliban could accommodate the presence of al-Qaeda militants –partly out of solidarity and partly out of economic necessity– but they probably will be more hesitant to allow the presence of a large number of fighters, particularly if they plan to relocate their families. One should also keep in mind that travelling to Afghanistan will pose significant challenges, particularly in the current era of COVID travel restrictions.[1]

Pandemic aside, conditions on the ground might change in the future, rendering this prospect more probable. First, if the economic situation in Afghanistan worsens and Taliban's bid to gain international recognition and resume external economic assistance fails, they might see the arrival of foreign fighters as the only solution to secure economic resources or as a tool to blackmail the West that does not want to see Afghanistan becoming a new breeding ground for Islamist extremism. Second, if the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the main

security threat to Taliban's rule at the moment, manages to move from suicide attacks to controlling territory, it might attract militants from other "Islamic State" provinces, particularly those that are struggling to survive after the fall of the "Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq.

Nevertheless, the scenario of Afghanistan becoming the gathering place for jihadists collides with another trend that might come out of Taliban's victory. Taliban's twenty-year struggle might become a blueprint for action that other Islamist forces opt to emulate in order to replicate Taliban's success.[2] Indeed, jihadists from Mali to Philippines welcomed the news from Afghanistan, expressing their support for Taliban and offering some initial thoughts on Taliban's model of action.[3] The lesson that these groups draw is, first, that patience and perseverance pay off and, second, that foreign powers get weary of lengthy interventions and eventually pull out their forces, even if this means the collapse of their local allies. The US decision to negotiate directly with the Taliban, effectively sidelining Ashraf Ghani, sent the message that US' desire to withdraw was more important than any actual guarantee that the Taliban would not renege on their promises for an inclusive Afghanistan. That is the lesson that Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), for instance, might draw, given France's recent decision to cut down its military footprint in Mali.[4] Likewise, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) might expect that Russia will eventually pull out of Syria, especially as great power competition intensifies and Moscow feels more pressured to address threats in Eastern Europe. Indeed, HTS seems to be the group most willing to replicate the Taliban model.[5] In the past months, HTS's leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani has engaged in a charm campaign with western journalists to improve the image of the group and signal to receptive ears that HTS could become an acceptable alternative in Syria.[6]

Inevitably, this will lead to a bigger emphasis on local struggles and away from global jihad. One may identify this shift in al-Qaeda's decision to publish, one day before the twenty-year anniversary of 9/11 attacks, an 852-page book on political corruption in Muslim countries, allegedly written by Aymen al-Zawahiri.[7] Zawahiri's book can be interpreted as a subtle message that the near enemy should be prioritized over the far enemy. This does not mean necessarily that terrorist attacks in western countries will diminish because Islamist radicalization in the West is fueled equally or more by local dynamics and grievances, but most probably they will be less sophisticated. In any case, though, as experience has shown, local conflicts tend to metastasize, at first to a regional and subsequently to a global level.

Taliban's successful strategy has an additional implication. After the Arab Spring, moderate Islamist groups followed the path of participation in the democratic process. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia and some salafi parties, such as al-Nour in Egypt, emerged as a new promising model for Islamist activism. Fast forward ten years, the military coup in Egypt and the political coup in Tunisia vindicates those who claimed that the "democratic option" was misguided, as national elites and foreign powers never had the intention to allow these parties to take the power.[8] Hence, the moderate Islamic paradigm, which inspired many people and many debates in the previous years, has lost its appeal. The new paradigm, as exemplified by the Taliban, is that of a protracted war of attrition, akin to a battle of resolves. The repercussions of this new paradigm will not be immediately evident; but neither were the repercussions of the Soviet-Afghan war.

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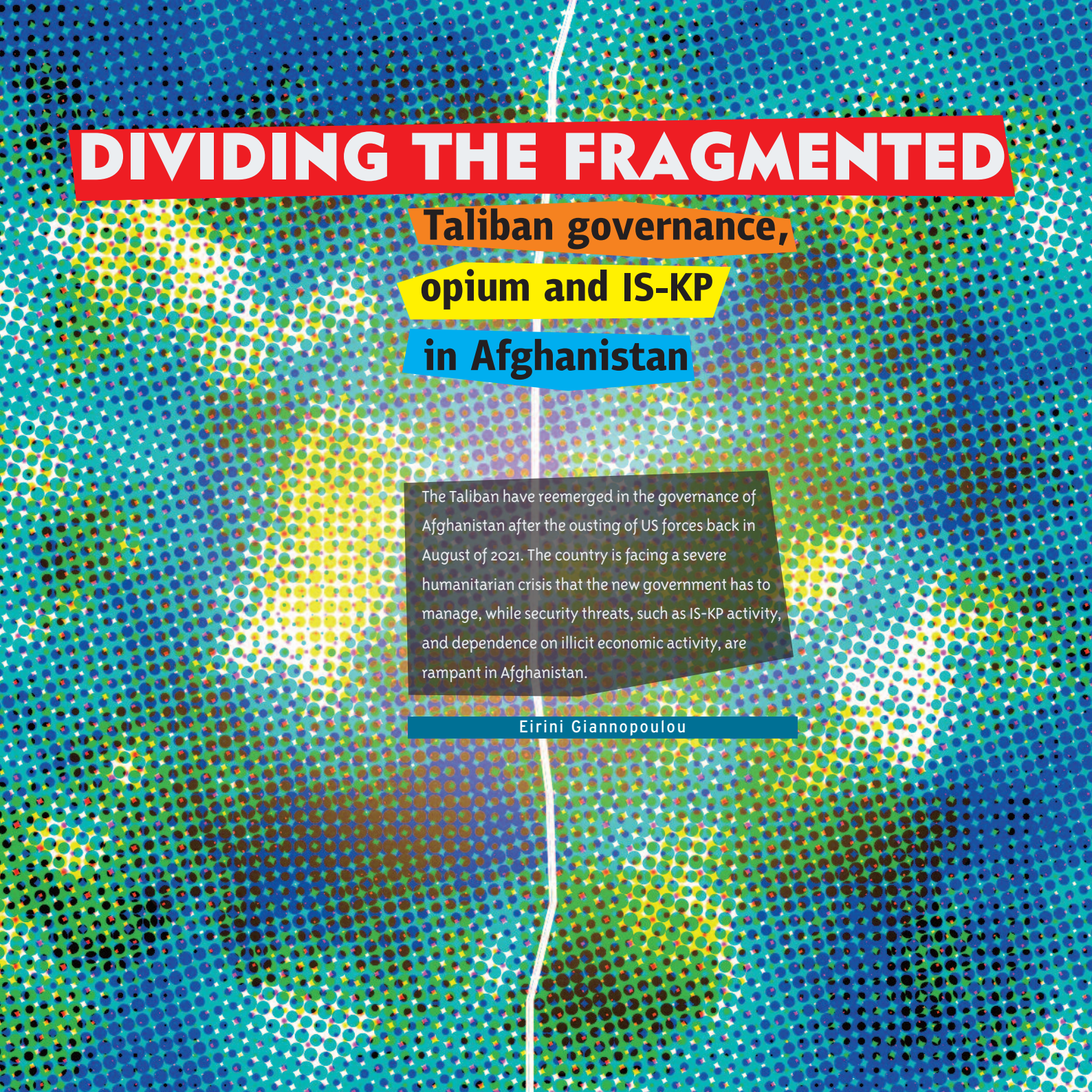

DIVIDING THE FRAGMENTED

Taliban governance, opium and IS-KP in Afghanistan

The Taliban have reemerged in the governance of Afghanistan after the ousting of US forces back in August of 2021. The country is facing a severe humanitarian crisis that the new government has to manage, while security threats, such as IS-KP activity, and dependence on illicit economic activity, are rampant in Afghanistan.

Eirini Giannopoulou

FRAGMENTATION AND THE PERPETUATION OF INSTABILITY have been a consistent pattern in Afghanistan throughout the previous decades. Foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan, from the Great Game of the 19th century to the American withdrawal in August of 2021, has undoubtedly inflamed the division among its people, who are ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse. This ongoing reality has gradually breached the people's trust towards any central government, thus leading to decentralized power led by local warlords and wealthy landowners.

The American state-building plan in Afghanistan partly failed because it enabled the rise to power of corrupt political figures affiliated with other fringe powerholders, who exploited the internationally provided budget for rebuilding purposes for their personal gain. For instance, former President Ashraf Ghani is being accused of fleeing with approximately 160 million USD. The American intervention also failed to maintain the trust and support of the Afghans that were initially in favour of the intervention, mainly due to the unprecedented attacks and atrocities of the American forces and the Afghan national forces, such as airstrikes and ground attacks against civilians, illicit executions, kidnappings and unjustified imprisonments or sexual abuse of village women and young boys.[1] Thus, the Taliban have been gaining leverage for years in certain areas of Afghanistan, taking advantage of the void created from the undermining of US presence.

Along with the aforementioned reasons, attention should be drawn towards the period of the negotiations between the United States and the Afghan political actors, including the Taliban, in 2019 and 2020.[2] The open dialogue between the Taliban and the US during the Doha Peace Talks contributed to the sidelining of Ghani and to the further legitimization of the Taliban, not only among the Afghan public opinion, but also as negotiating partners and political components for the rebuilding of Afghanistan.[3]

The Taliban government of the now called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is exclusively consisted of Sunni males, with Hibatullah Akhundzada as the leader. Most members of the new government are from the older Taliban generation, who also served in the 1996-2001 government, such as Prime Minister, Hasan Akhund. The two Deputy Prime Ministers, Baradar and Hanafi, both held positions in the political office of the group in Qatar. The Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is the head of the militant Haqqani Network, closely affiliated with both al-Qaeda and the Taliban and listed as terrorists by the US. The Haqqani Network has always been supporting Taliban governance, but what is to be seen is whether their relations with al-Qaeda will jeopardize the profile the Taliban are attempting to construct, both domestically and internationally.[4] The Haqqanis are also eager to maintain their autonomy, which might threaten Taliban stability in the long run. It should also be noted that the Taliban have been strengthening their bilateral relations all along, with Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China being some of its most important supporters, mainly in order to reduce American power in the region.[5] Qatar is also one of the most supportive allies of the Taliban regime, acting as the mediator between them and the West.[6]

After obtaining power, the Taliban are now responsible for the actual governance of the country, while attempting to maintain ideological and intragenerational cohesion within the group and effectively combining their violent tactics with their administrative tasks. The use of violence as a suppressive measure against any form of anti-Taliban resistance, combined with surveillance and coercion tactics, was prominent both against mass demonstrations, largely organized by women, in Kabul and Herat and against the

armed resistance of the historically anti-Taliban National Resistance Front in Panjshir Valley in the north.[7] Another prominent security threat is the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP). This Islamic State branch, which follows more of a transnationalist narrative, is mainly based on the border of Afghanistan with Pakistan, with the Nangarhar region being the epicentre of both their activity and their clashes with the Taliban, since 2014. The ISIS-K is also more radical, thus accusing the Taliban of being impure, reformists and traitors for negotiating with the West.[8] The Islamic State cells operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan have taken responsibility for severe and unprecedented attacks against civilians, such as the deadly one in Kabul's airport in mid-August and numerous anti-Shia attacks against the Hazaras, who are largely unprotected, and sometimes even attacked, by the Taliban. If the Taliban fail to tackle the security threat posed by IS-KP's activity as a security threat, then the latter will gain leverage, appealing to those defecting from or disappointed by the Taliban.

In addition to human rights violations, the Afghans face severe economic hurdles due to Taliban's incompetence to govern. Food and electricity shortages, combined with lack of state resources to pay the salaries of civil servants, is leading the overwhelming majority towards total poverty. Desertification and severe drought are also harming farming and agriculture. Hence, the national income is largely dependent on illicit economic activity, mainly related to poppy cultivation and mineral extractions. The Taliban have been building relations with warlords and powerholders for years, through cooperating in illicit activities, such as opening passages for drug smuggling and imposing taxes. In August, the Taliban announced the complete halt of opium production, but the aforementioned strong ties with drug lords and the stagnation of the Afghan economy, leads many to think that such promise will not be kept.[9] Another field where coercive economic activity is prominent, is the exploitation of Afghanistan's rich natural resources, such as uranium and copper, all important minerals for weaponry and electronics production.[10] The Taliban strive for the capitalization of those unexploited resources, partnering up with regional shareholders and local policemen for taxing products, mostly in Parwan and Nangarhar. All these activities are embedded within administrative corruption, showcased through bribery, patronage and nepotism.[11]

Evidently, Afghanistan is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis that seems to be growing, while the new Taliban government urgently calls for external financial aid and the unfreezing of Afghan assets. By approaching the international community and the West for assistance, the group are challenging its organizational cohesion. Ambiguity between Afghan or Islamic interests and possible interference of other actors in Taliban governance could disrupt core notions and relations within the group itself.

Deadly terrorist attacks, hostility between the Taliban and the IS-KP, illicit exploitation of resources, inadequate infrastructure, food and health insecurity are the reality that is leading the Afghan people to desperation and mass migration. In conclusion, the Taliban's dominance in Afghanistan will be determined by its ability to tackle all the aforementioned economic hurdles and security threats.

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WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Struggling against present and past minefields* of the Western "salvation" campaign and Taliban's rule

Katia Zagoritou

In August 2021, US forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took over, raising urgent concerns concerning women's freedoms. However, the Afghan women's situation had been previously instrumentalised by Western imperialism, while their rights had been inefficiently and unevenly addressed by the US-backed government and its allies. Nowadays, despite their attempts to be presented as changed, the Taliban have already imposed gender-based restrictions. Meanwhile, Afghan women have developed various forms of resistance, contrary to the Western orientalist projections of them as voiceless and without agency. Based on Afghan and Kurdish women associations' statements, a parallel with Kurdish women in Rojava is briefly attempted.

WHEN THE TALIBAN TOOK OVER AFGHANISTAN –in line with the February 2020 US-Taliban Agreement– and following the US withdrawal in August 2021, serious fears had been increasingly raised, particularly regarding women's rights, notably in view of the detrimental impact of Taliban's previous period of rule (1996-2001). Certainly, these concerns are justifiable; yet, the situation of women in the country is not merely the result of the Taliban's policies, and therefore it should not be only analysed through the ideologically constructed binary "before" and "after" Taliban's rule, but within the larger historical context of the region.[1] Hence, in order to examine the current condition of women in Afghanistan, one should consider that gender relations have been shaped by a history of prolonged war and insecurity, Western imperialism, structural poverty, domestic and foreign militarism, and contentious politics of post-conflict aid.[2]

With respect to Western imperialism, the instrumentalisation of women's situation by the Western military powers in order to justify the latter's war in Afghanistan should not be disregarded. The women's "salvation" and "rescue" discourse, aptly resumed in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase "white men are saving brown women from brown men", has been ofttimes used by the Western colonial powers as justification of declaration of wars in the course of history.[3] This colonial mindset has not ceased to exist; on the contrary, since late 2001, it has been embedded in the gender-focused Western aid through which the "liberation" and the "transformation" of women would materialise. The aid included various programmes aiming to encourage women's participation in health and education services, and empower their presence in the political and economic sphere, as well as direct fundings –such as the Afghan Women Empowerment Act (2004)– to institutions and Afghan women's NGOs. "Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs" –known as PROMOTE– mainly aspiring to train Afghan women leaders has been the largest women's empowerment program ever financed by the US. The gender programming has been exclusively built on Western liberal –colonial– understandings of women's liberation and has relied on a hyper-masculine and militarised space that stands in stark contradiction with a gender agenda. Additionally, by focusing on a push into the liberal public sphere, it has failed to see the lived realities and desires of the rural Afghan women, who arguably constitute over 80% of women in the country and their physical mobility is limited to the village and nearby. Although aware of the deep-rooted patriarchy and oppression within their communities, rural Afghan women hold strong ties to their faith, family and community and most of them turn to these local networks as well as to village elders or even tribal leaders in crisis times.[4]

Additionally, the women's situation in Afghanistan has been unevenly addressed by the US-installed Afghan government and the international aid organisations in both discursive and practical terms further widening and deepening the existing major rural-urban divide. Indeed, while the urban centers have enjoyed considerable financial aid and resources, these did not reach the majority of Afghan rural women. Moreover, rural women and a vast number of long-established rural-based informal networks who had efficiently supported women in the shaping of the framework of gender-focused interventions have been excluded from debates and panels as well as from financial international support. Hence, the fact that two Afghanistans have so far existed, a rural one mired in endless conflict and the capital's one being prosperous and hopeful, has had an adverse impact also on women's situation, and might partially account –alongside the human casualties by the NATO airstrikes and the US-installed government's widespread corruption– for the

even favourable reaction of women mainly in the countryside towards the 2021 Taliban's return. The latter performs as a sad reminder that the least-worst option does matter when it comes to survival and security issues.[5]

Post-US occupation – Taliban's return

The return of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, due to several reasons –among them the erroneous Western vision of Afghanistan and the central government's extreme corruption– has raised worrying concerns, especially regarding women's rights and freedoms. Although the international aid did not succeed in efficiently and evenly addressing the gender-based inequalities, in all fairness, several improvements took place since the fall of the Taliban's rule in 2002. This progress concerns mainly the access of women and girls to health-care, education and workplace alongside an increasing representation in the political arena and constitutional protection. Still, there is little evidence suggesting that even a slight difference for gender relations and living conditions of the majority of women has been recorded, mainly in impoverished and rural areas; a view that the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) – a strong critic of both the US occupation and the Taliban's rise to power– shares.[6]

As for now, the Taliban appear divided and share contrasting visions for their Emirate's future, including women's rights. While some Talibs appear –perhaps deliberately– relatively more moderate invoking their acknowledgement of their previous mistakes pertained to human rights violations, others demonstrate no difference in their vision of society-building. Nevertheless, despite their reassurance that they have changed since their last rule in the 1990s, the Taliban have proceeded in several measures against women's rights and freedoms while a climate of fear is prevailing, especially for women's rights activists. In September, they replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) –established by the 2011 Bonn Agreement– with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known as a fierce morality police. Women and girls are currently de facto excluded from workplaces and secondary education, while the Taliban claim that these restrictions are "temporary" until they ensure that these venues are "safe" for women. Fear has been also increased following the assassination of Frozan Safi, a well-known women's rights activist and economics lecturer, and three other people, in Mazar-i-Sharif, in Northern Afghanistan, in November 2021. Moreover, according to the RAWA, apart from the Taliban themselves, Western media and members of the former government such as Fawzia Koofi, one of the first women in the country's parliament and a women's rights activist, have also tried to portray the Taliban as "changed" and having good plans for women in Afghanistan.[7]

At any rate, Amanda Taub echoing Dr. Mukhopadhyay's thought that the Taliban are, in fact, offering security alongside the threat of force suggests that the Taliban's repression of women might be rather viewed in tactical than ideological terms, in that it serves as a forceful demonstration of their power and their capacity –and willingness– to use violence. Yet, considering the serious economic problems and the

need for financial international aid, partially related to human rights considerations, it remains to see how they will proceed. The recent special decree on women's rights, issued by the Taliban on December 3, 2021 barring forced marriage, stating that women should not be considered "property" and allowing widows to freely remarry –without any mention though to female access to work and education– might be read through these lenses.[8]

Drawing parallels between women's movements

Taking into consideration the indisputable differences as well as the commonalities, namely in the face of the jihadist threat, be it ISIS or the Taliban,[9] one could cautiously attempt to draw a certain parallel between the struggles of Afghan and Kurdish women, mainly in Northeast Syria. This linkage has been suggested in the light of statements made by both Afghan and Kurdish women's associations: in March 2021, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) made a reference to the Kurdish women fighters' struggle against ISIS in Kobani, while one of its activists, Samia Walid gave an interview at Kurdish Women's Movement's activists in September 2019, where she stated that "the struggle and sacrifices of the lionesses of Kurdistan have been an inspiration and source of strength" for them. In turn, the Kurdistan Women's Communities (Komalên Jinên Kurdistan, KJK) and the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) made public statements in solidarity with Afghan women in August 2021.[10] Kurdish women's struggle has a long history, especially in Kurdish-majority regions in Turkey, and its current achievements in Rojava (North and East Syria) have been a source of hope not only for Syria but all Middle East. During the 1920s and the 1970s a growing women's rights movement was developing in Afghanistan and urban women experienced top-down imposed social reforms which failed, however, to take roots owing to the localised forces' resistance –local chieftains and mullahs, religious leaders– largely derived from the disregard for (rural) communities' societal and religious sensitivities.[11]

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria's (AANES) project might provide important contributions regarding, inter alia, the respect and the acknowledgement of the social fabric of multi-ethnic and religious diverse regions, and the consequent adjustment of the pace according to which gender policies have been therein implemented.

Despite the limited improvement of women's rights during the last two decades of the US-occupation, gender relations and Afghan women's living conditions have not essentially improved. The Taliban's return has largely raised concerns, albeit not homogeneously in urban and rural regions. Still, avoiding the adoption of a western one-dimensional reading of women's well-being and liberation, we should consider that Afghan women have been producing new local spaces of self-determination, disobedience and freedom (such as the shelters *khana-yi-aman*) which are –and should not be necessarily– not understood via Western frameworks of autonomy and freedom. As Balquis Roshan, former Member of Parliament, highlights, "where there is oppression, there is resistance that will begin and grow against it. The resistance has been initiated by women".[12]

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*This metaphor is simultaneously a sad reality for Afghanistan which has the world's highest number of mines per capita, see Lila Abu-Lughod "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others", *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783.

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PAKISTAN AND THE AFGHAN TALIBAN

a twenty-year bet still in place

Ilias Mitrousis

The roots of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan lie in the US state-building designs, the deficiencies of successive Afghan governments, and the Taliban determination to never stop fighting. However, there is little doubt among the international community that the Taliban would not have been able to achieve victory without Pakistan's support. And while Islamabad publicly dismisses the allegations, domestically, the Taliban victory was received largely as a long-awaited win of the Pakistani grand strategy.[1]

DURING AND FOLLOWING THE MUJAHIDIN WAR against the USSR in the 1980s, the Pakistani military and intelligence services held the perception that a friendly government in Kabul could provide Pakistan with valuable strategic depth. Under that rationale, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has reportedly assisted the Taliban from early on. The latter were consequently shaped into a valuable ally on whom Pakistan enjoys considerable leverage. Their relationship was not weakened following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. On the contrary, thousands of Taliban members crossed into Pakistan to find safe havens mainly in Quetta and Peshawar districts, and the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Despite the post-2001 Pakistani military operations conducted in the FATA to support the US war on terror, the Taliban were able to regroup under the tolerance of the local authorities.[2] Additionally, their relation with ISI was never severed, thus effectively enabling them to use Pakistan as their strategic depth. The paradox of Pakistan siding with the US in 2001, while sheltering and supporting the Afghan Taliban for twenty years can be explained based on the country's three major concerns: ethnic separatism, domestic Islamist insurgencies, and most importantly, India.

Islamabad saw the American state-building endeavour as the enabler of India's entrenchment in Afghanistan. The Afghan-Indian bilateral relationship flourished in the past twenty years, especially under the Ghani government. India has investments worth 3bn dollars in Afghanistan and has been involved in the development of multiple sectors with more than 400 projects.[3] The Pakistani generals believe that through its presence in Afghanistan, India aims to destabilize Pakistan from the rear by instigating Baluch and Pashtun separatism.[4] No Afghan government –including the Taliban between 1996-2001– has ever recognized the Durand line that separates the two countries. The argument has been that it was drawn arbitrarily by the British in 1893 and dichotomizes the Pashtun heartland. This also plays into Pakistan's fears of irredentism.[5] Hence, Islamabad would under no circumstances abolish its bid for decisive influence on its Afghan near-abroad, especially when it feels that its arch-enemy opts to fill the void. Now, with the Taliban on Afghanistan's wheel, Pakistan's goal of curtailing the Indian influence in the country is probably achieved. Furthermore, the Taliban unitary Islamic ideology is perceived as a bulwark against the individual nationalisms in Afghanistan. On Pakistan's domestic front, the infamous Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organization of various Islamist groups has waged a particularly bloody insurgency since 2007. Being the direct outcome of Pakistan's participation in the US-led war on terror, the TTP seeks to establish an Islamic state under full implementation of the Sharia law in the country.[6] While the organization is independent of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan hopes that the latter -once in power- will be able to influence their brethren into reaching an understanding with Islamabad.[7] Nevertheless, even if the establishment in Islamabad rejoiced seeing its proxies emerging victorious, its calculus could backfire.

Having a friendly power ruling Afghanistan is one –advantageous– thing. Neighbouring a stable Afghanistan with an internationally recognized government is another. The formation of the Taliban 'interim government' out of members from the old guard and younger hardline leaders seriously hinders the prospects of international recognition. The appointment of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the US terrorist-designated Haqqani network's leader, as Interior Minister is a telling example.[8] The same applies to the slow and vague implementation of the Taliban pledges about general amnesty and respect for women and minority rights.[9] On the economy, as hope for an inclusive government faded last September, the US froze 9,5$bn in Afghan central bank reserves, and several coun-

tries and international institutions suspended aid. All these, in a country where 75 percent of government expenditures were directly funded by international aid. Thus, the Taliban are called to address a plunging economy, an increasingly food insecure population, and a war-torn social fabric. In addition, they already strive to provide security from dynamically emerging terrorist actors such as the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP).[10] Pakistan is aware that such conditions if left unaddressed may generate grave problems that could spill over across the border. Afghanistan's downward economic spiral may evolve into a humanitarian crisis that the Taliban will be unable to reverse. They may even be forced to step up repression against rising public discontent. In this scenario, international isolation will be prolonged, domestic peace will hardly be preserved, and Pakistan may also find itself coping with new refugee flows on top of its more than three million Afghan refugees.

Accordingly, the Pakistani government has rushed to urge the international community to engage with the interim government. This has been evident in the Pakistani PM Imran Khan's address to the UN General Assembly last September, as well as during the works of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tajikistan the same month. Pakistan has also raised the issue during its bilateral contacts with Iran in October and hosted a relevant discussion between the US, China, and Russia last November. The argument is that the Taliban should be incentivized to adhere to their pledges through recognition and continuous financial, development, and humanitarian aid. Conversely, protracted isolation will sooner or later lead to a crumbling Afghanistan that regresses into an international terrorism hub. The argument does not lack validity. By striking the security chord, it appeals not only to western sensitivities but also to countries with special interests in the region, such as China, Russia, Iran. Notwithstanding, Pakistan's support for regime change in Afghanistan, has seriously increased India's threat perception and the subsequent insecurity. So did the growing Sino-Pakistani relations and the 2020 skirmishes in the Himalayas that brought India and China to the brink of war. The American perception of the regional balance of power is also affected to a certain extent. That may accelerate the formation of potential alliances in the region, thus complicating the Pakistani self-reimagination as a mediator for peace. All the above mentioned, coupled with the apparent international reluctance on the Taliban recognition, are driving Pakistan to hedge its bets. For that, the country is completing the fencing of its border with Afghanistan and recently secured an Afghan Taliban-mediated ceasefire with the TTP. However, the ceasefire collapsed, thus 'killing' the Pakistani argument about 'good' and 'bad' Taliban, and implying that the Afghan Taliban victory has an emboldening effect for various radical Islamist groups. For the Taliban, though, such a mediation showcases a certain capacity to prevent cross-border terrorism. If maintained, it may gain the interim government some aid or informal international support in the mid-term. As for Pakistan, experience shows that more sophisticated solutions are needed to deal with its TTP problems.[11]

All in all, having a friendly government in Afghanistan indeed satisfies some of Pakistan's core geopolitical objectives. Truth be told, the Taliban need a champion for their international recognition if they are to stabilize their rule. Pakistan has eagerly assumed the role for the shake of its domestic security and for elevating its role as an international mediator for regional peace. That puts both in a relative interdependence. However, Islamabad's influence on the Taliban, while considerable, does neither imply control nor that it will have a heavy say on how they run Afghanistan. None can predict the extent to which the movement will compromise to gain Pakistan's continuous support on the one hand and the international community's on the other. As the realities on the ground imply that the Taliban are short of time, Pakistan is expected to step up its diplomatic advocacy for the international engagement with the interim government. It remains to be seen if these efforts will bear tangible results or the Pakistani establishment will come to regret the energy spent on betting on the Taliban all these years.

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Knocking on the neighbour's door

Iran and Pakistan's "migration management" after the Taliban's takeover

Dimitris Papanikolaou

Kabul's fall to the Taliban enhanced Afghan immigration inflows, mainly towards Iran and Pakistan. Tehran and Islamabad's responses have been strongly securitised, by increasing border controls and reducing regular crossing points. Both states seem willing to capitalise on the momentum and instrumentalise the Afghan refugee influx to promote their agendas and renegotiate their relations with the West. As the EU and Turkey appear unwilling to receive refugees themselves, the future of Afghan refugees in the region heavily depends on its neighbours' intentions and aspirations.

SINCE THE TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER IN AUGUST 2021, many Afghans have fled their homeland. As of November, 22,722 registered Afghans arrived in Iran and 49,639 in Pakistan. Other sources such as the Norwegian Refugee Council suggest much higher numbers, as it is estimated that 4 to 5 thousand Afghans are fleeing Afghanistan daily, making a total of 300,000 people only in Iran, while over 680,000 are internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan. The exact figures are difficult to estimate as many Afghans opt for irregular migration routes and are not registered by the authorities. Although Afghan immigration to Pakistan and Iran have been a common phenomenon for decades, the dynamics seem to have changed since the Taliban takeover.[1]

The "unwanted" neighbor

After accepting the first refugee wave, both Tehran and Islamabad clarified that they would not accept more Afghans and kindly reminded the international community that they already host 80 per cent of the global population of Afghan refugees. Tehran's Minister of Interior stated that Afghans would be repatriated "once conditions improve", while his Pakistani counterpart stated that "no Afghan refugees are coming to Pakistan".[2]

Tehran and Islamabad are known to adapt their policies towards Afghan refugees to their political agenda each time, according to their regional and international aspirations. This time, Tehran's policy has been clear since August. Iran rushed to shut its borders for 'legal' crossings and secure them by deploying more military personnel along its border with Afghanistan. Overall, Tehran's strategy was to discourage inflows by isolating Afghan refugees in temporary camps on the borders with the aim of returning them to their homeland.[3]

On the contrary, Islamabad's approach has been ambiguous and contradictory. Initially, Pakistan completely closed its border and later allowed movement, still restricted for asylum seekers. However, due to the increased securitisation and the hardship to obtain documentation under the current circumstances, the number of Afghans crossing to Pakistan has reportedly been reduced from approximately 6 thousand to 50 per day. Islamabad then shifted from the 'accept no refugees' approach to adopting the 'Iranian model' and set temporary refugee camps along its border, confining Afghans and preventing them from reaching the heartland. However, this approach was short-lived as in September, the Interior Minister announced that Pakistan would not set up more camps. These contradictions stem mainly from Pakistan's weariness of hosting almost 3 million Afghan nationals, as well as from security concerns and possible threats refugees pose, such as triggering internal tensions or even the use of the flows as a Trojan Horse by insurgents.[4]

Afghan refugees: Scapegoats for the neighbour's agenda

Both Iran and Afghanistan have been hosting millions of Afghans for years. In the past years, Iranian officials have instrumentalized the issue of Afghan refugees to influence Kabul's politics, apply pressure to the West considering the sanctions, or use Afghans to fight in Syria. Future instrumentalization by Tehran of the Afghan refugees is heavily dependent on the Taliban regime governance model, thus still uncertain.[5]

Pakistan's leaders also seem to gradually realize that they have a bargaining tool in their hands concerning their positioning in the region and within the international community. Following the Taliban's takeover, EU leaders were eager to visit Islamabad and offer financial support of approximately one billion euros to Pakistan and Iran in exchange for their assistance in the humanitarian crisis. The EU hopes that Islamabad will host another million Afghans and prevent them from travelling to their preferred destination beyond the region. Fearing for another massive refugee flow similar to that of 2015-2016, the EU appears highly reliant on Tehran and Islamabad, especially given that Turkey is unwilling to accept more Afghans and become "Europe's refuge warehouse."[6] Islamabad, being fully aware of this leverage, has already agreed to receive 30 million pounds aid from the UK. At the same time, it attempts to reinvent its relationship with the West and the EU by renegotiating various issues, such as the favourable trade scheme GSP+, stipulating exportations from Pakistan to the EU under low or zero tariffs, and its 'grey listing' in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). For its part, Tehran will intend to utilize the Afghan immigration issue to come closer to the EU, compensating for its longstanding antagonism with Washington. Apart from that, Iran and Pakistan will unboundedly benefit financially from the EU in order to deal with the elephant in the room, following the model of Turkey and the 2016 Agreement. In essence, they are proposing a 'conditional acceptance' for the Afghan refugees in exchange for benefits.[7]

While Iranian and Pakistani policies towards Afghan immigration differed in the past, their approach has become more similar since August. First, they both view refugees as temporary 'guests', hoping to send them back to Afghanistan when the situation "improves". In fact, both states had started to massively deport Afghans, in some cases, reportedly cooperating with the Taliban. Second, over the past 6 months, Tehran and Islamabad's harsh unwelcoming rhetoric on Afghan refugees had gradually eased when they both realized potential benefits. In practice, however, it still remains unwelcoming. Beyond UNHCR's reports regarding their daily massive deportations, the Afghan refugees living conditions, food insecurity, exposure to COVID-19 and extreme poverty are dire.[8] Third, Tehran and Islamabad are securitizing refugee influx. In late August, Pakistani security forces reportedly killed two Afghans trying to cross the border. Last year, 45 Afghan workers were reportedly drowned by Iranian border guards in the Harirud River. On the Afghan side of the border, the Taliban have also been reported to search and even attack Afghans, crossing to the neighbouring states.[9]

Be that as it may, numbers show that these harsh policies have indeed reduced the regular refugee flows, as both Tehran and Islamabad report a significant decrease in the entries through official border crossings.[10] As a consequence of borders' securitisation, Afghans are forced to take alternative irregular hazardous routes in order to seek refuge from the Taliban. Natural hardships

such as mountains, deserts, rivers, as well as fences, walls, and heavily armed border guards are only some of the precarious obstacles that displaced Afghans might face through irregular corridors. While numbers of regular migration are decreasing, irregular crossings seem to increase. As a result, the journey's costs are higher and less affordable, considering the growing demand and the need for additional bribes to border guards. It is reported that vehicles smuggling immigrants crossing the border increased since the Taliban takeover from 50 to 150. Thus, increased securitization of the borders does not benefit anyone as it is impossible for states to fence and control huge, natural, irregular border crossings and the only outcome of those policies is to nurture smuggling networks and push displaced Afghans towards corridors with extremely high protection risks.[11]

The first and short-term responses by the international community, such as evacuations of foreign citizens and collaborators, had been agile and efficient. In contrast, the solutions that came later are of a temporary nature and, under no circumstances, they are durable or favorable for refugees. Long-term solutions apparently will depend on political factors involving at least the two neighbors and the EU. While Islamabad and Tehran seem to upgrade their political role by capitalizing on the flows, refugees themselves are once more suffering distress and are balancing on a thick rope of insecurity and uncertainty.

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THE TALIBAN AND ANKARA

opportunities, converging interests and sine quibus non

Stavros Drakoularakos

For the better part of 2021, Turkey has been striving to make waves by presenting itself as an actor able to assert its interests in Afghanistan following the NATO forces hasty exodus. The aim of this article is to articulate the driving factors behind Turkish foreign policy with regards to a Taliban-led Afghanistan, as well as to analyse its shortcomings in light of the domestic Taliban priorities and in flux regional developments.

THE FIRST INSTANCE in which Turkey formally presented itself as an actor able to have an active presence in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the NATO forces' withdrawal is found in the summer of 2021, when Ankara offered its services in providing security and technical assistance at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. Soon, in the months that followed, both Turkey and Qatar started working together with the Taliban government in order to assist in the reopening of the Kabul airport to international travel. However, the Turkish security involvement had been immediately taken off the table by the Taliban side.[1] Moreover, Turkey has offered to assist in providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and urged other countries to join in its efforts. In addition, after the previous Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban swiftly seized full control of the country during August 2021, Turkey –in contrast to its NATO allies– opted to maintain its embassy in Kabul, albeit refraining from de jure recognizing the new government in effect.[2] On the other hand, the Taliban self-appointed administration has been applying pressure on Turkey to move forward with the formal recognition procedures of the new status quo, essentially putting a pin on Turkish grand ambitions, and opting instead for keeping the channels of communication open in the event of Ankara potentially being able to broker future negotiations for the Taliban regime.[3]

The above clearly stand as testament to Turkey's emphatic willingness to gain a diplomatic, economic and military foothold in Afghanistan regardless of western withdrawal and shifting priorities. On the one hand, this particular strategy originates from areas in which Turkey considers that its relations with the Taliban government can potentially find room to grow. These areas are twofold: first, Turkish Sunni Muslim religion –as promoted by President Erdoğan throughout his stay in power and his bid for regional hegemony– can be considered either as common religious ideological ground, or, at the very least, as a reading of Islam that is not detrimental to the relations' growth; second, Afghanistan is an untapped market for Turkish economic interests and investments. What is more, the Taliban –ever since their ascent to power– have been forced to deal with a struggling economy in shambles and food shortages and can view Turkey (or Qatar) as viable potential economic partners. Essentially, these factors brand Turkey as an acceptable negotiating actor for the Taliban. Conversely, the reopening of ten girls-only schools by the Turkish state sponsored Maarif Foundation demonstrates a convergence of interests between the two parties.[4] Moreover, following this train of thought, the humanitarian relief efforts originating from Turkey could be considered as an olive branch in favour of establishing future diplomatic and trade ties.[5] As an interesting side note, the now more than ever cliché narrative of brotherly ethnic Turks residing in distant foreign countries such as within Afghani or Libyan territory is again making its comeback through various media platforms as an additional tool in the arsenal of Ankara's foreign policy, attempting to lend additional credence to any Turkish involvement.[6]

On the other hand, this strategy also stems from opportunities in favour of upgrading Ankara's standing in the region. A positive evolution of the ties between both countries would further leverage Turkish momentum and clout within its wider periphery, and add to the broader Turkish aspirations with regards to regional hegemony, especially following its still recent and well-publicized diplomatic and military involvement in regions in crisis such as Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Taking this into consideration, Turkey's relations and overlapping interests with Qatar and Pakistan would be regarded as pivotal for ensuring Ankara's continued

presence in Afghanistan due to the two countries' ties with the Taliban leadership.[7] What is more, Turkey, as a strong mediating partner between the Taliban and other regional hegemons, would go a long way to re-establishing Erdoğan's reputation both in international fora, as well as with regards to his relationship with the current US administration.[8]

Finally, the Afghani refugee influx on Turkish borders stands as another issue pertaining to both domestic and foreign policy. With Turkey already hosting about four million Syrian refugees, pushbacks are being heavily reported, while the refugees' living conditions within the country deteriorate and a 183-mile wall is being constructed on the eastern border with Iran. On the domestic front, the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers' presence represents a concrete and constant reminder for the Turkish people of the crisis in the region, as well as Turkey's inability to handle the ramifications of the Taliban takeover. Hence the Turkish diplomatic efforts for a rapprochement with the Taliban in order to put a halt to the refugee exodus and perhaps to negotiate for a better modus vivendi for those opposed to the regime or fearing for their lives.[9]

Nonetheless, the still tacit approval by the self-appointed Taliban government of Turkish efforts merely ensures that Ankara only retains a marginal role in Afghani state reconstruction despite its diplomatic and humanitarian openings, while other neighbouring regional actors, such as Iran, Russia, China, India and Pakistan are slowly but surely starting to formulate a more active and pronounced policy towards Taliban-led Afghanistan. For instance, in direct contrast to Turkish efforts, during November 2021, Washington and Doha signed an accord for the latter to represent US diplomatic interests in Afghanistan via its embassy.[10] It stands to reason that the Turkish gambit with regards to the pressing and ongoing situation in Afghanistan could offer a number of advantages for Ankara on the long-term. However, at the same time, it could also further damage Turkey's reputation by virtue of association with a self-appointed administration which is heavily criticized and not recognized by the vast majority of the international community for its human rights violations.

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IRAN

ROLE RECALIBRATION IN A CHANGING DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the sequent prevailing of the Taliban in the country and what appeared to be an accommodating stance from the side of Tehran towards the new leaders in Kabul coincided with a historic domestic change in Iran. The rise of the conservative – and closer to the theocratic order – Ibrahim Raisi signalled a significant shift in the strategic focus of the country that was also presented with the historic opportunity of the failure – according to its view - of its Western archenemy. These two concurrent processes shape the foreign policy priorities of Tehran that are appearing to be more assertive, adopting a policy towards the East and forging alliances with China and Russia in an effort to claim regional influence, recover from the burden of sanctions and possibly fill the power vacuum created from the U.S. withdrawal.

Alexandra Nikopoulou

THE VICTORY OF THE CONSERVATIVE IBRAHIM RAISI in the Iranian presidential elections of June 2021 signalled the –temporary – end of the struggle between the IRGC and the theocratic establishment against the reformists; a rivalry that has been taking place silently since the mid-1990s. The rise of Raisi in the elections, which hit a historically low turnout was a result of both IRGC orchestration and public dissent due to ongoing sanctions and accommodation towards the West, albeit with minimal results. In previous years, Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and his rhetoric regarding a "hardline Iran", in a way strengthened the hardliners and led to the rise of the radicals, while at the same time, the reformists' strategy of pursuing relations with the West had little impact.[1]

When it comes to foreign policy priorities, the new government has already advocated its strategic turn towards the East in an effort to counterbalance the effects of the sanctions strangling the Iranian economy, and reclaim a regional role in a –somewhat– less problematic region. This turn signifies the shift from Rouhani's policy of engagement with the West that was deemed as rather ineffectual.[2] The first successful step towards the implementation of this new policy was the signing of a 25-year cooperation agreement with China in March 2021, aiming at strengthening economic and political ties through trade, economic and transportation cooperation with particular focus on the private sector. According to Chinese President Xi Jinping, relations with Iran have now reached the level of a strategic partnership, a remark that holds significant importance when examining the new role that China aims to play in the Middle East and the support it has provided to Iran amid the U.S. sanctions' impact.[3]

The second part of this policy was realized with the recent admission of Iran as a full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that not only brings Iran closer to China's Belt and Road Initiative, but also enhances its relations to countries in West and Central Asia, such as India and Pakistan. This diplomatic success was followed by an extension of a 2001 cooperation agreement with Russia for additional 20 years, a move that further highlights the dissociation of Tehran with the West, particularly in a period the JCPOA talks seem to have stalled.[4] These initiatives underline the internal rift with policies previously followed by the reformists and aim at creating regional capital for the country in line with Raisi's claim for a "stronger Iran", a view that intertwines regional influence with economic prosperity. Under this light, and as the regime is becoming more aligned with the religious establishment, it is expected that a more assertive foreign policy will sideline previous reformist efforts and exacerbate internal rifts.[5]

The second process affecting the country's role in the Middle Eastern sub-system is related to developments in Afghanistan following U.S. withdrawal. This new status quo has created a unique momentum as well as a certain set of challenges for the Islamic Republic. To begin with, the irregular withdrawal of the U.S. was, at least for Iran, a sign of failure of the policy Washington had been following for the last 20 years. Raisi rushed to comment that this development posed an opportunity for "restoring security and peace in Afghanistan and counter instability instigated by U.S. presence in the region". The following rise of the Taliban was, viewed through Iran's perspective, tantamount with proof that the policy of supporting militias to alter the status quo can pay off, while this opinion was also shared by Tehran's allies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.[6]

Even though traditionally Iran and the Taliban do not maintain good relations, this time around, the two have adopted a more pragmatic approach. Ever since 2014, Iran has been engaging with the Afghan militia by supporting them in their fight both against

ISIL-K and the government and U.S. forces in the country. When the Taliban started consolidating their rule in the country in August, Tehran welcomed them in its Axis of Resistance and capitalized on their rise to revive its regional revolutionary narrative. Albeit Khamenei stated that Tehran's policy would be determined by the Taliban behaviour, the country holds significant interests that tint the balance towards reconciliation. That is also why the Iranian regime is engaging in presenting them as a reformed entity, even though there are voices within the country that oppose cooperation with a militia that could not be trusted and could potentially return to violent policies against minorities (especially Shia Hazzara) as soon as they secure their rule.[7]

The rationale behind this pragmatic rapprochement revolves around three main elements: first, enhancing Iran's regional influence compared to that of the U.S. and its allies; second, increasing revenues from trade with the regime in Kabul and securing the country's eastern border from terrorist threats; and, third, a possible refugee wave that could worsen the grim social and economic situation in the country.[8] Apart from the apparent gains stemming from the retreat of the western camp from the region, this development could also support Iran's ambition to play a further role as a regional actor on a diplomatic level. Tehran has worked towards this direction with a meeting held with the Taliban and the U.K. to discuss issues arising from the events in Afghanistan, while it has also joined forces with China as the latter is willing to work with Iran in establishing security, stability and peace in Afghanistan, according to a statement by the Chinese President.[9] This meeting was followed by another one held in Tehran with the presence of Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia and China, where all parties vowed to prevent a possible collapse in Afghanistan that could have spillover effects in the region.[10] As for the trade factor, Iran is a main exporter of fuel in Afghanistan, even prior to the Taliban rise, with both sides maintaining an interest in sustaining this relation. Shortly after the Taliban took over the country, trade routes were restored while the Kabul regime facilitated Iranians by reducing import tariffs, increasing trade hours and improving road walks.[11] Threats to the stability of the country from the East, be them refugees or terrorist elements, will pose a significant challenge to Iran, however, this will be an issue of the level of control the Taliban will be able to maintain, the way they will choose to rule the country and how they will engage in their relationship with other extremist groups.

These changes in both the domestic and regional scene of Iran create new conditions that facilitate alliances between non-western players and significantly shift the balance of power in the area. The new regime in Tehran will have to maintain a moderate rhetoric regarding its relationship with the Taliban, as the Iranian people are mainly against the group and there are internal rifts in the country's political landscape.[12] However, these developments point towards a new approach adopted by the conservative Raisi government, aiming at strengthening the role of the country and formulating a more assertive narrative that could mitigate the impact of disengagement with the West and allow for new schemes of cooperation that point towards a new status quo in the Middle East and West Asia regions.

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The future of an unlikely pairing

CHINA AND THE TALIBAN

Ilias Tasopoulos

The increased level of coordination between the Taliban and China in the post-US period has led many to believe that a full-fledged alliance is about to be formed. Despite several ideological and pragmatic differences, there are critical points of convergence between the two sides. The tough reality of Afghanistan's humanitarian and social crisis and increased insecurity sets the limits of their cooperation.

SINCE THE US ANNOUNCED their hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, Chinese state media had been covering the emerging Taliban domination with a favourable eye. The Chinese state-controlled media outlets reflected Beijing's approach. The main line was that any US meddling in the region leads to a catastrophe, and any regime in Afghanistan, barring the US-supported one, was preferred. At the same time, it blamed the US for the millions of people that are unable to find neither food nor shelter in Afghanistan.

China is fond of stability in any given situation. More often than not, political affiliations and security concerns have been more central to its planning than human rights and social development considerations. The prospect of economic infiltration has always played its part. These guiding principles informed how Beijing treated the Taliban case. When it came down to Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, securing stable ground preceded development and reforms.[1]

The presence of Uyghur militants in the country has been a serious concern for Beijing. The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), or the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), as referred by Beijing, is considered a terrorist group that fumes unrest in the Chinese western province of Xinjiang.[2] This was a major issue in the publicized July meeting between the Taliban and China in which the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi demanded from the Taliban to sever its ties with Uyghur militants, as the fundamentalist Islamic group prepared to conquer the country.

Beijing had shown an interest to evolve its channels of communication with the Taliban in the face of the withdrawal of American forces. Although Beijing had a working relationship with the previous administration under Ashraf Ghani, a Taliban delegation visited Beijing in 2019 to meet China's special representative for Afghanistan Affairs, Deng Xijun, to discuss the peace talks with the United States that were taking place at the time. However, when the Islamic fundamentalist group eventually claimed control of Afghanistan, China was not certain about the Taliban's future conduct.

The Chinese concerns originated from the previous time that the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, who maintained links with the Uyghur groups and allowed them to operate in the country. Following their domination in Afghanistan last August, the Taliban facilitated the relocation of several hundred Uyghurs that lived in Badakhshan in northeast Afghanistan, along the borders with China, to other areas, including in the eastern province of Nangarhar.[3] This was reminiscent of their practices from 1996 to 2001, when the Islamic group also moved Uighurs from the border regions to other parts of Afghanistan to allay Chinese concerns. Imitating their own behaviour two decades ago, the Taliban neither handed over fighters to China nor expelled them from the country, as Beijing had requested.

Yet, the lack of full compliance with Chinese demands did not hinder cooperation between Beijing and the Islamic militant group that currently rules Afghanistan. Beijing showed its satisfaction with the willingness of the new Taliban regime to cooperate on this issue. China stepped in when the US froze almost $10 billion in Afghan government reserves held in US bank accounts and the European countries blocked the development aid. China asked for economic sanctions against Afghanistan to be lifted and pressed internationally for emergency aid to tackle the humanitarian catastrophe and help the reconstruction of the country. Beijing rushed to the Taliban's aid, by committing itself to donate $31 million worth of grain, supplies, vaccines, and medicines, as the harsh Afghan winter was drawing near.

Following the positive response, the Taliban declared China their closest ally, claiming that Beijing is ready to invest in the country and reconstruct Afghanistan, while their regime would ensure and guarantee the safety of investors and workers. Providing material assistance to the Taliban regime, when humanitarian aid was in short supply, illustrated Chinese strength and gave the new Taliban regime a sign of future good will.

Investing in Afghanistan is not an easy feat for China, however. The security of the investments and the well-being of Chinese workers remain priorities for Beijing. There are several Chinese construction companies that operate in Afghanistan, although they are not led by Beijing. Most of them have won their place in the Afghan economy through participation in competitive biddings and have enjoyed international financing.[4]

In any case, Afghanistan has been part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese plan to heavily invest in major infrastructure works across the world. Afghanistan is also included in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,[5] although no significant Chinese project is under way. The prospect of mining unexplored resources in Afghanistan still concerns Beijing.[6] However, before investing and financing any projects to connect to the "heart of Asia", China demands that the security situation in Afghanistan is stabilized.[7]

At the same time, the way that China moved closer to the Taliban has alarmed India. During the period of US presence in Afghanistan, New Delhi increased its economic infiltration in the country. From an Indian point of view, a US-supported regime in Afghanistan would at least counter the activities of Islamic groups in the country and obstruct their connections with Pakistan. India seems to reject entirely the new landscape that has emerged in Afghanistan, favouring China and Pakistan.[8] Indicative of its frustration, India hosted talks on Afghanistan, without the participation of any Afghan official, while Pakistan and China declined its invitation. Eventually, security chiefs from coming only from Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan attended the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in October 2021.[9]

Whether the Taliban managed to maintain power and smash opposition to their rule remains to be seen. The Islamic State – Khorasan Province, (ISIS-K), an affiliate of the Islamic State, has emerged as their big rival, following their longtime enmity. Among other bloody attacks, (ISIS-K) assumed responsibility for a suicide attack of an ethnic Uyghur, who blew himself up outside a Shiite Mosque in Kunduz. ISIS-K claimed that the Taliban had pledged to expel and oust Uyghurs at the request of China, aiming to erode the Islamic regime's credential of solidarity for their fellow Muslims.

Linking China's relations with the Taliban and the Uyghurs in Afghanistan set Beijing as a target for jihadist groups for the first time after a long period.[10] The prevention of attacks from radical groups from Afghanistan is the basis of the Taliban-Beijing cooperation, a pattern set by

the United States' agreement with the Taliban, that led American forces out of the country. For China to move into the next level of alliance building, and start, for example, to invest in the country, would need much more to be done.

Having noted their moderation façade, China is willing to help the de facto Afghanistan ruling regime to join the international community, regardless of their radical beliefs. Beijing has asked the Taliban to increase the inclusiveness of their regime and protect the legitimate rights and interests of women and children. For the time being, China will not even be the first to recognize Afghanistan's Taliban government, if the other regional players are not convinced and a certain level of normalcy is restored.

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IRAN AFGHANISTAN PAKISTAN THE SHARED LEGACY OF THE SILK ROADS

Amalia Chappa

Facilitating far-reaching exchanges in goods and technologies, the ancient Silk Roads linked multiple peoples, religions and artistic conventions. The legacy of these interconnected routes is reflected everywhere across Central Asia. Although distinct, Balkh (Afghanistan), Taxila (Pakistan), Bam and Nishapur (Iran) are only but a few of the sites at the crossroads of this complex web which illustrate the pluralistic and cosmopolitan character of the cities which were impacted by the scale of this movement and became the meeting grounds of different cultures.

THE SILK ROADS WERE A VAST NETWORK of shifting, unmarked land and sea routes spanning across East Asia, India, the Mediterranean basin and eastern Africa. With their central part being commercially active as early as 2000 BC, the birth of the ancient Silk Roads is typically dated at the opening of state-sponsored trade between China and Central Asia during the Han Dynasty, which ruled China between 206 BC and 220 AD.[1] The network meandered into three major routes: the northern route connecting China to the Black Sea, the central running westward to Persia and the Mediterranean Sea and the southern leading to regions which today include Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. These were used to funnel merchandise and precious commodities, but in fact, also served the active mixing of populations and a widespread transmission of knowledge, technologies, cultures and religions with a profound impact on Afro-Eurasian history and archaeology.[2]

In early 1st century AD, the Hellenistic Bactrian kingdoms covering much of present-day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, were overpowered by the semi-nomadic tribe of the Kushans who established a large empire encompassing much of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal and northern India. Acting as the patrons of Buddhism (which spread in Afghanistan before arriving in China) in their territory and as middlemen between China, India and Rome, the Kushans seized control of the portion of the Silk Road running through Bactria, fostering multi-cultural interactions and a syncretic culture, mixing up tribal traditions with Hellenistic and Buddhist ideologies.[3]

On the plain between the Hindu Kush Mountains and the river historically known as Oxus, the ancient cosmopolitan Silk Roads city of Balkh became one of the four major urban centres in greater Khurasan (the other three being Bukhara, Merv and Sarmaqand). Known to Ancient Greeks as Bactra and once a spiritual centre of Zoroastrianism, it was captured by Alexander the Great and became the capital of the Greek satrapy of Bactria, falling thereafter under the influence of the Kushans. Under their empire, the lands through which caravan routes passed were divided among co-existing states which submerged their differences in the interests of trade. Balkh was one of these cities whose early stability was largely owed to this co-existence, as it served as a transhipment point for the world's luxuries. Being a stop for caravans that travelled towards Herat and the Iranian Plateau or across the Oxus to Samarqand and China, it brought in monks preaching the new religion of Buddhism.[4] Today, ancient Balkh comprises a large urban site with a diverse material wealth spanning from Zoroastrian temples, Buddhist monasteries, medieval caravanserais, Samanid buildings and Abbasid stucco works.[5]

The complex Silk Roads web of overland caravan tracks gave rise, over the years, to a number of sub-routes and off-shoot deviations. One of these routes corresponded to Uttarapatha ("The Northern Road"), one of Asia's oldest roads, which is reported to have existed since 500 BC and ran across the shoulders of the Indian subcontinent from West Bengal to Afghanistan, passing through Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore and Peshawar.[6] Located just off Uttarapatha in the Rawalpindi district of Punjab (northwestern Pakistan), the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Taxila which was excavated by British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham between 1914 and 1934, is another site illustrating all the different stages of development of a city under Silk Road influence. With the complex links of Afghanistan and Pakistan being a vital aspect of the Silk Road exchanges, empires and rulers vied for Taxila's control over the

centuries and the city evolved into a thriving trade hub. The vast region of Taxila, whose ruins are divided into three major cities (Bhir Mound, Sirkpap and Sirsukh), was alternatively influenced by Persia, Greece and Central Asia and includes everything from Mesolithic settlements and Achaemenid house structures to Hellenistic temples and Indian architecture, Buddhist stupas and monasteries and Muslim madrasas. Its museum accumulates over 4,000 objects of Greco-Roman origin Gandhara art, the syncretic Buddhist visual style which thrived under the Kushan Empire (1st-3rd centuries AD).[7]

In Iran, the major routes developed since the 1st century AD. In Kerman Province, on the southern edge of the Iranian high plateau and close to the Pakistan border, the oasis city of Bam, whose heyday was between the 7th and 11th centuries, was an important fortified settlement strategically situated at the crossroads of the Silk Road connecting it to Central Asia in the east, the Persian Gulf in the south and Egypt in the West. Its cultural landscape was included in the World Heritage List in 2004 as an outstanding example of citadel in the Central Asian region and an exceptional testimony to the development of a trading settlement along the Silk Roads.[8] Depending on its qanats (underground canals) for its irrigation and survival and on its walls for protection (established during the Sasanian period, its citadel is considered to be the largest mud building in the world), Bam is also treated as a unique representation of interaction of man and nature in a desert environment. Today in ruins, the city was once an important centre for manufacturing and exporting cotton garments, including scarves, napkins and turban cloth.[9]

At the foot of Binalud Mountains in eastern Iran, the city of Nishapur, which was founded by Shapur II during the Sassanian period, was also a cultural hub which beautifully prospered from the Silk Roads. In the 4th and 5th centuries, Nishapur served as a fortified commercial outpost: located on the natural corridor on a main caravan route, it was protected by ramparts and served both as a residential site and a major economic production centre.[10] At its peak between the 9th and 13th centuries, Islamic Nishapur developed a famed glazed ceramics market and turned into a major economic centre that relied on trade heavily. As attested by contemporary writers, Nishapur was frequented by Iraqi and Egyptian merchants and was the home to many religious scholars. It was a source of turquoise and a centre for growing cotton and producing cotton textiles and silk fabric. Archaeological evidence and findings, although relatively poor, yet do point towards a city with pluralistic influences: colourful murals, wall iconography inspired by Buddhist paintings and unique-to-the region ceramics showcasing its links with Sassanid and Central Asian art.[11]

Balkh, Taxila, Bam and Nishapur, although with their own distinct histories, yet preserve an underlying unity of cultural pluralism effected by their share in the global economy of the Silk Roads. Together with a plethora of many other important learning centres, trading cities and

cultural hubs across Central Asia (including Bukhara, Bamiyan, Khiva, Merv, Ray, Samarkand, Tashkent and Urgench, to name just a few), they were all part of the same extensive ancient web of routes, each representing a narrative about movement, religious interactions and artistic exchanges across ill-defined borders and against the background of the rise and fall of different empires and kingdoms encompassing a wide range of cultures. With the exception of Nishapur (whose study has so far been poor since excavations by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1935 were heavily driven by the need to source museum-value ceramics), it is not a coincidence that all other three cities are currently under UNESCO's World Heritage list, as prominent sites with universal value and a crucial share in the Silk Roads rich history.[12]

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THE GAME OF "TRIBES"

The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has provoked multiple questions in the western discourse around the devitalisation of the state as the main form of political organisation and the passing to the game of tribes. While the understanding of the political and social dimensions of Afghanistan are analysed first and foremost through social structures such as tribes, a closer analysis based on the historical formation of the term will provide an enlightening at the colonisation that the concept embodies. The untouchable and one-dimensional character of "tribe" has been utilised as a stepping stone for the legitimation of the foreign interventions, performing a dangerous knowledge production of colonialism and imperialism.

Eleni – Panagiota Stoupa

IN AUGUST OF 2021 –after 20 years of expulsion by US troops– the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, occupying one by one its provinces. The capture was held gradually, beginning with a military attack against the government, fostered with the flee of President Ashraf Ghani from the country, and completed with the evacuation of American citizens and Afghan partners by the international community and the United States. The chaos created by the Taliban in their passage developed a frequently asked question in the western discourse, regarding the re-establishment of the Northern Alliance of tribal leaders and warlords, who opposed the Taliban from 1996 until 2001.[1] Under the same discourse –besides all the fear, the terroristic and the monstrous interpretations– the collapse of Afghanistan and the takeover of Taliban has triggered discussions about the enfeebling of the state as a form of political organisation in the Middle East, and its replacement by other social units such as tribes.[2] For some academics –such as Sumit Guha– 'tribe' represents a powerful form of political organisation in Afghanistan that stands against the government and the state. As decentralised and pastoral units with social organisation, tribes are empowered by the atmosphere, survive through kinship networks, resist the intruders, and bring creative changes in the political sphere.[3]

The discourse of the politically unstable and "tribal" Afghanistan has shaped an interesting dynamic. Most of the analyses, media and political approximations seem to correlate Afghanistan with an undetermined notion of tribalism, provoking an exotic imagination of the region and a legacy of 'otherness'. As a concept of great challenge and ambiguity 'tribe' has been inextricably linked with the region of Afghanistan, representing a term in which "the coexistence of coloniser and colonised is crystallised and foregrounded" used by scholars, researchers, military planners in order to describe, understand, criticise and analyse the Afghan reality.[4] Nevertheless, through the understanding of politics, alliances, mindset, and the governing structure of the region, Afghanistan has been formed as a tribal society based on simplified classifications structured by the colonial interventions.

Dethroning 'Tribes' in a tribal society

Throughout the centuries, in its attempt to understand and manage the amalgam of the region, the West cultivated a strong bond between Afghanistan and tribes. For centuries 'tribe' has been used for the definition of the Afghan social organisation, while it has also been defined as a security problem and a political threat against the national building.

Since the founding of Afghanistan's modern state in 1747 by Amad Shah Durrani (Abdali), tribes have gained an important role in the political scene, as well as in the formation of order and safety, especially in areas with very low security.[5] Though, the understanding of Afghanistan as a preponderant tribal community should be tracked back to Mountstuart Elphinstone, who first applied the concept of 'tribes' during the 19th century, using his own experience as Scotsman to correlate the Scottish notion of clan with the social organisations in Afghanistan.[6] While through the years his socio-political context faded, a timeless image of Afghanistan as a country of tribal disorder and corruption has remained. At the colonial period, in an attempt to cooperate –as well as control– the indigenous population, the British administration developed a strong instrumentalisation of the knowledge around Afghan culture along with series of stereotypes. In the same century, during the fireworks of the Great Game, the enthroning of Abdur Rahman Khan

developed the relevance of the tribes with the political regime, by favouriting Pashtuns in the national state building. In the 20th century, an increased essentialisation of the tribe has been provided by the western discourse, which was minimised after the three Anglo-Afghan wars and the removal of the British Empire, and launched out again through the images of freedom fighters.

The 9/11 set Afghanistan at the epicentre of the Western discourse. After the intervention of US troops in the region, tribes has been treated as the main locus of research whose structure and character assumed as the key for the sociopolitical and economic understanding of the region, as well as a significant tool from war architect's and military planners in their attempt to understand and win hearts and minds.[7] By using the academic legacy of the past along with the descriptions of US soldiers tribes were presented as the core culture of Afghanistan, whose understanding would resolve the problems of the inhabitant population and ensure the security of the US.[8] Upon this ground, the US Army Training and Doctrine Command created the US Army's Human Terrain System (HTS) back in 2007 frightened in the view of their defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq.[9] Responding to the needs of the military leadership, the HTS represented an experimental effort to increase the knowledge around the sociocultural perspectives of the battlefield by engaging multiple researchers from social sciences, strongly criticised for their violent ends. Such ventures fostered the weaponisation of knowledge in the arms of the US army and promoted the monstrous and dehumanised nature of Afghan tribes highlighting the legitimacy of their interventions as a necessary evil against their barbarism.

The concept of 'tribe' –forged for centuries– has been designed and used as the main stable indicator of the Afghan society and identity. Ethnicity and tribalism are often equated and used as the main reasons for conflicts, war, and destruction of state order.[10] Having an imaginary unchangeable character 'tribe' has been used as the key to understand the social dimension of the region and the tool to legitimate any foreign interventions to reduce barbarism and provide the modernisation. However, the one-dimensional focus on this concept has transformed it into a dangerous knowledge production of colonialism, turning away the focus from the various small-scale communities that are formed inside kinship networks, representing important aspects of political clientelism. These social structures and communities are extremely heterogenous, changing from place to place, defied by religious, geographical and cultural features. The Afghan "qawm" –vaguely translated to "solidarity groups"– is an important social capital for the Afghan community, principles of social order, crossing the borders of ethnic and tribal edges that have served as a blueprint for political alliances and confederations. Among these 'qawm', Pashtun that constitutes the biggest part of Taliban should be analysed first and foremost through Pukhtunwali, their ideal code of life.[11]

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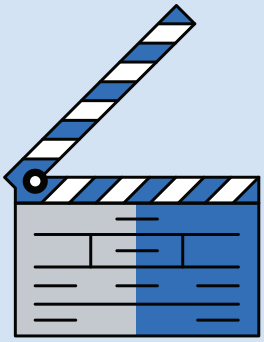
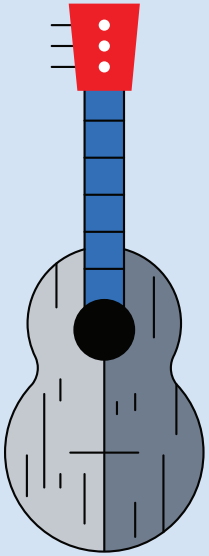
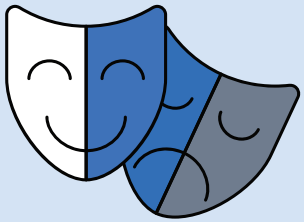
CINEMA THEATRE AND MUSIC

in Afghanistan under the new Taliban regime







Artemis Papadaki

After the establishment of the Taliban regime in August 2021, the wind of change that was previously blowing through the art scene of Afghanistan, bringing more and more creative people together, suddenly stopped. Art forms like cinema, theatre and music, which flourished in the period between 2001-mid 2021, have now come to a standstill. Since the Taliban regained power, the number of bans has increased across the country and artists, who depend on social and political freedom to express themselves, are currently oppressed.

AFGHANISTAN'S RICH AND DIVERSE HISTORY in the arts is to a great extent owing to its position along the Silk Road. The region was exposed to a lot of cultural influences spread through trade. Still, the constant turmoil in Afghan politics has not allowed a steady development of the arts in the country. Arts in Afghanistan throve only during short periods of time in between wars and foreign invasions.

In the period after the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), NGOs and foreign institutions played a vital part in the reconstruction of the Afghan cultural scene, which had previously suffered from restrictions to the freedoms of expression, speech and self-disposition, among others. Western countries located, through their institutions, in Afghanistan, attempted to organise and westernize the country (France with Institut Français, Germany with Goethe Institut, USA and Great Britain with their embassies in Kabul, etc.). This overall colonial project ended abruptly in the middle of 2021 when Biden's administration decided to continue Trump's plan to "stop a never-ending war in Afghanistan." All foreign powers agreed to flee the country and let Ashraf Ghani's corrupted government deal with the upcoming Taliban forces. The Taliban managed to take control of Kabul in August 2021 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Today, after more than a hundred days, Afghanistan is experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in its history. The banking system is suffering from a cash liquidity crunch while banks are expected to collapse in a matter of months.[1] Also, due to international sanctions, aid is frozen and the Afghani (currency of Afghanistan) has dropped to a record low and more than half of the population is at risk of starvation. Politically, the Taliban are not yet recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Culturally, Afghanistan's cinemas and live performances have been forced to shut down, while a lot of artists have fled the country.

Afghan film director Sahraa Karimi, is one of them. Today, the director of "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha" (2019) is a refugee in Ukraine. In an interview, she says, among others, that "We have one of the richest archives which is now under the control of the Taliban", when referring to Afghanistan's National Film Archive.[2] After 2001, women were heavily involved in the film industry, either as crew members or directors and actors. But due to the restrictions on women's rights during the first Taliban regime, the social stigma was still immense. Today the situation seems to have returned to the 1996-2001 state. The Taliban Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice banned the broadcasting of all films that are "against Islamic or Afghan values". It also banned soap operas and dramas featuring female actors.[3]

In Afghanistan's film archive, there are a lot of films that refer to the first Taliban era (1966-2001). Some examples of these films are "Kandahar" (2001), which was mainly shot in Iran and, secretly, in Afghanistan, as well as "Osama" (2003) and "The Black Kite" (2017). Cinema in the period 2001-2021 also documented Afghanistan's political and cultural life. Documentaries about music and theatre offered an insight into the country's cultural scene. "Breaking the Silence: Music in Afghanistan", by Simon Broughton, was released in 2002 and presented an overview of the music scene and culture of the country as well as the Afghan diaspora.[4] The 2008 documentary "Reconstructing through Theatre" by Alexandra Paraboschi follows a group of actors and their director rehearsing for a play. These are mainly male, with only a few female actors on stage. In 2007, performing arts were still

perpetuating gender discrimination, especially within family members and local communities. As a result, female roles were mainly played by men. In the documentary, the theatre group presents the joy of creating theatre.

Theatre in Afghanistan is associated with a long tradition of oral practices, for example, by professional storytellers (madabs) who performed heroic tales, poems, and love songs in crowded bazaars. Theatrical performance in the country is also associated with weddings, which are an essential part of Afghani culture and an opportunity for celebration involving dance (particularly Attan dance, which comes from the Pashto ethnic group).[5] In Afghanistan, classical western-type theatre repertoire was brought for the first time in the 1920s, but the first classical plays by Moliere, Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett, started being performed into Dari in the 70s, the same period in which the Italian renaissance-scene theatre "Kabul Nadari" was built.

Apart from artistic expression purposes, theatre in Afghanistan served as a tool for healing collective trauma. Participatory theatre forms, like Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, served as means for the participants to analyse their trauma and negotiate issues of reconstruction of the nation, based on equality and equity.[6] A lot of foreign Organizations like the A.H.R.D.O. and Bond Theatre, went to Afghanistan to orchestrate community-based theatrical performances. "Infinite Incompleteness", for example, was a performance which came as a result of the participatory theatre form, Playback Theatre. Ten individuals (both men and women) coming from the four main ethnic groups of Afghanistan presented on stage their own stories related to death, in their own language.[7]

After August 2021, cinemas and theatres have stopped operating and their re-opening is once again depending upon the Taliban government. By explicitly referring to music, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that "in Islam, music is prohibited".[8]

Music continues to be a matter of debate in Islam. Some religious scholars believe that music can be a distraction from worshipping activities and, all the more, push people away from religion.[9] These opinions derive from different interpretations of the Hadith (a record of words and actions of Prophet Muhammad), at the same time that the Qur'an, the first source of legal authority for Muslims, contains no direct references to music.[10] The Taliban, drawn by this interpretation of Islam, have banned altogether any musical activity with only the singing of religious songs –called Anā shīd (plural)– being allowed. These songs are either sung a cappella or with instruments, according to a particular style or tradition within Islam.

After the American invasion in Afghanistan in 2001, pop/folk, rock, metal, and generally up-tempo music were the most popular, especially among the young, as the elderly preferred traditional and folk music. Metal bands such as "District Unknown" (formed in 2009) or Rock bands like "Kabul Dreams" (established in 2008 in Kabul) influenced

a large part of the Afghan youth.[11] Alternative artists, such as the female band "Burga Blue" which was formed in 2002, use sarcastic lyrics and music videos to oppose the first Taliban regime's restrictions on women. Some years later, in 2015, the first all-women music orchestra was formed by the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. The Zohra orchestra toured around the world, performing both classical and traditional Afghan music. In August 2021, all members of the orchestra attempted to flee the country along with their families. But in the total chaos at Kabul airport after August 15th, when Afghan citizens were trying to flee the country, the manager of their flight was nowhere to be found. A few hours later, the airport was completely closed and the members of the orchestra did not manage to flee the country. Later in September 2021, their musical instruments were found completely broken.[12]

Radio stations also played a vital role in the establishment of modern music in Afghanistan between 2001 and mid-2021. Today, they are either under the control of the new Taliban regime, or closed or underperforming. For example, Urooj radio, which used to air 19 hours of live program each day, today airs only one hour of religious music.

The period between the Taliban regimes facilitated freedom of speech and expression, thus creating an opportunity for the arts to flourish. Although it is too early to know how the new regime will deal with the arts, a lot of artists have already fled the country, while women are barred from public life. Currently, after more than one hundred days of Taliban power, Afghanistan is facing a deadlock, and arts, among others, are suppressed all over the country. This regress will, unfortunately, lead to a total collapse of freedoms, thus creating a situation in which the art-scene in Afghanistan will be forced to diminish.

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