

AFGHANISTAN EVERLASTING CONFLICT

MURAT ASLAN

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| SUMMARY | 7 |
| INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN'S BIG PICTURE | 9 |
| SOCIAL STRUCTURE | 9 |
| POLITICS IN AFGHANISTAN | 9 |
| ECONOMY | 10 |
| ADMINISTRATION | 11 |
| SECURITY | 12 |
| AFGHANISTAN'S INTERTWINED REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PICTURE | 13 |
| AFGHANISTAN'S NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES | 13 |
| CHINA | 13 |
| IRAN | 14 |
| PAKISTAN | 14 |
| RUSSIA | 15 |
| THE USA | 15 |
| PROBABLE <i>MODUS OPERANDI</i> | 16 |
| THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO | 16 |
| THE MOST LIKELY COURSE | 16 |
| THE MOST FAVORABLE OPTION | 17 |
| TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD AFGHANISTAN | 17 |
| CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 18 |

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SUMMARY

Current developments in the Afghan theater indicate the probability of more instability and probable conflict.

The Afghan public demands peace, security, and prosperity. Yet current developments in the Afghan theater indicate the probability of more instability and probable conflict. The worst-case scenario, even though the Taliban are proceeding to build a government, is a civil war that cannot be isolated within Afghanistan. The most likely course is to have a Taliban-led Afghanistan and further reinvigoration of anti-Taliban elements that may pose another potential escalation. The most favorable course, on the other hand, is the start of a peace and reconciliation process, and to appeal to the decision of the Afghan public. The international community should firmly commit to the most favorable course as the alternatives have the potential to spread instability to other countries of the region and beyond. Furthermore, the ensuing explosion of illegal immigration and the exacerbation of the refugee crises have the potential to devastate the international community, bringing about yet another humanitarian disaster.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has become the focus of concern worldwide as the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO escalated the humanitarian disaster and probability of another conflict. In this context, Afghans and the international community have rewound the tape back to 9/11 and prior Taliban era in the wake of the inconclusive struggle inside Afghanistan. It has now become a question of whether peace and stability can be achieved in the country in accordance with the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States. If peace cannot be achieved, a new wave of violence looms over the Afghan public. As the withdrawal process unfolds, the Taliban's advance in Afghanistan and their brutal killing of so many Afghans, including Afghan artist Kasha Zwan, remind the international community of the likely escalation of violence among former warring factions.

The international community, for its part, is concerned about the probable refugee influx towards the West, the expansion of an Afghan conflict toward neighboring countries, and the spillover from the Afghan folder to regional and

global politics. As a safety button, the U.S. and NATO allies had prioritized two courses: providing limited support to the Taliban-led administration and calling upon Turkey to run the Kabul International Airport to maintain a gateway in and out of Afghanistan. The images at Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport availed the drafted plan of them as far as the complete withdrawal of the foreign forces is announced by the U.S. administration. The current success of the Taliban's campaign has challenged these options and hope has already touched the limits of pessimism. Debates and comments about the latest terms of agreement regarding the country have focused on whether the probable Taliban government would be eligible for legitimization, whether it will shift from radicalism towards moderation, and whether it will mistreat the Afghan public or comply with international laws and norms. Yet, even countries that once opposed the Taliban are now delivering messages with a mood of cautious acceptance.

Contributing to the existing debates, this analysis has been drafted to handle the Afghan folder first by presenting the general picture in Afghanistan with an eye toward global and regional attitudes, the probable *modus operandi* of the Taliban and, finally, the basics of Turkish foreign policy regarding Afghanistan, insofar as Turkey may become an essential engaging actor to Afghans. The main question is whether Afghanistan could enjoy peace and stability as a continuation of the state-building that has not been achieved there, or whether it will be dragged into yet another conflict. Hence, this analysis attempts to scrutinize the extent to which peace and stability are achievable in Afghanistan beyond the probable Turkish role in promoting a safe exit for the international community or mediating the reconciliation. It proposes that the

Afghan people have suffered for many decades and deserve prosperity, order, and a resolution of the country's conflicts through fair mediation. In short, it must be the people of Afghanistan who will decide the type of state and government of their country, and not external or internal actors.

UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN'S BIG PICTURE

To portray the big picture accurately, Afghanistan's social, political, economic, administrative, and security aspects need to be examined. The purpose of this effort is not to delve comprehensively into every detail, but to present Afghanistan's general characteristics within the scope of this analysis. The analysis will limit itself to a general overview of Afghanistan in terms of the author's personal observations in the country, and his research and investigation of the relevant literature.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Multicultural diversity is the basic feature of Afghan society. Afghanistan comprises at least 32 ethnicities¹ and languages - this rich composition is the heritage of history and the country's location. Afghanistan's social diversity has been a point of concern as a result of the ethnic offshoots into the surrounding countries. Afghans display a unique identity in the eyes of foreigners, which could however be perceived as a vulnerability due to societal linkage to neighboring states. Another special social feature is the varying teachings of

1. Conrad Shetter refers to a German survey that found 54 ethnic groups in Afghanistan. I had the opportunity to ask Afghan authorities about the official number and their responses indicate at least 32 as a result of the number of dialects.

Conrad Shetter, "Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction in Afghanistan," Center for Development Studies (ZEF), University of Bonn, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/129100/schetter.pdf>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

the Islamic faith. Hazaras are Shia, while the other ethnicities commonly follow the Sunni faith. The variety of Afghan ethnicities and sects have made the internal competition of social units persistent, especially during times of conflict. Afghans are socially well connected in the sense that they approach each other's differences with respect and perceive their multicultural societal structure as a form of richness. Afghans unite under two distinct attributes of self-identification: Islam and a sense of being Afghan. Divisive factors are the power struggle among the key ethnicities, ideological schisms inherited from the Cold War, and radicalism as a reaction to global political and security trends. On the other hand, Afghans are socially communicative and interactive in resolving their disputes, while if polarized, continue to fight. The *jirga* or *shura* system integrates the social structure with informal politics is so far as Afghan social life is well connected to the hierarchy of informal politics from the very local level to the highest political echelons.

POLITICS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Afghan constitution was carefully drafted after the intervention of the U.S. to institutionalize an inclusive democracy.² The political rights of women, for instance, are clearly delineated to guarantee access to voting and the right to stand for elections. The constitution clearly emphasizes that the Afghan government is responsible for preventing the presence of terror networks inside Afghanistan, which was the main reason motivating the U.S. intervention after 9/11. The constitution establishes the political ground for the re-

2. Murat Aslan and M. Nesip Ögün, "Theory and Practice of State Building in the Middle East: A Constitutional Perspective on Iraq and Afghanistan," *Journal of Applied Security Research*, ISSN: 1936-1610, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp. 374-403.

quired formal institutions other than the already intact informal consultation mechanisms. In this sense, Afghanistan has its own *sui generis* political traditions, other than the codified regulations, as can be observed by the establishment of the *Loya Jirga*, which is a widescale consulting body comprised of more than 2,200 members.³ The Waleisi Jirga (House of the People) and Mesharano Jirga (House of the Elders) had formed the two formal political wings of the parliament, reminiscent of the U.S. political system, although Afghanistan is not a federal state.

The structure of the political movements was either based on ethnic and tribal backgrounds, or inclusive political parties that embrace differing ethnicities. Elections in Afghanistan had always been subject to criticism due to low turnout, controversial allegations regarding the winner, and election flaws. Afghanistan's formal and customary political dynamics guaranteed public-level participation in decision-making; however, its flaws should be taken into consideration. For instance, elections could not be concluded but inked memorandums of competing candidates facilitated the establishment of a functional government with a power-sharing agreement.⁴ Another remarkable deficit was the vacant seats in the Mesharano Jirga since district-level elections could not be held. These flaws, as such, did not stop the mechanism of the state from functioning, but challenged the validity of the Afghan constitution.

With or without these flaws, however, the opposing factions perceive the Afghan state institutions as puppet mechanisms and the constitu-

tion itself as invalid. The Taliban, for instance, place authority in the Holy Divine Words of God, the sayings and practices of the Prophet, and the teachings of the leading ulema. They argue that these should regulate the state and society. In any case, the Taliban will probably reject "the imposed, man-made" regulations and seek to govern the state with recourse only to religious sources.⁵ The Taliban-led administration is still ambiguous if they will have official parliamentary system or religious consulting body that free-elections would be the outcome of such preference. The future Taliban era in Afghanistan seems not to be bound by a Western-style democratic government but legitimized and justified by religious norms. In this way, the democratic deficiencies of the former Afghan governments will not be on the agenda of future administrations.

ECONOMY

The Afghan economy is fragile and dependent on aid from the World Bank and other donors.⁶ Nevertheless, a decline in pledges during the donor conferences worsened the Afghan economy, and led to increasing unemployment rates since the foreign aid had consolidated the employment level. Production remains very local and mostly agricultural, as "private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment."⁷ The country's economic inadequacy has been the main theme of criticism in the minds of Afghans, since the U.S.

3. Scott Worden, "The Law and Politics behind Afghanistan's 'Traditional' Loya Jirga," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/15/the-law-and-politics-behind-afghanistans-traditional-loya-jirga/>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

4. IANS, "Ghani, Abdallah Ink Deal to End Afghan Political Deadlock," *Eastern Mirror*, May 18, 2000, <https://easternmirrornagaland.com/ghani-abdullah-ink-deal-to-end-afghan-political-deadlock/>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

5. Mujib Mashal, "What Do the Taliban Want in Afghanistan? A Lost Constitution Offers Clues," *New York Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/world/asia/taliban-peace-talks-constitution.html>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

6. World Bank in Afghanistan, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

7. Ibid.

intervention did not bring the hoped-for prosperity to Afghan daily life.

The Taliban era, prior to the U.S. intervention, was not promising either. However, a regime or government change in favor of the Taliban is likely to make Afghanistan even more vulnerable economically. Regardless of who is in power, one significant sector will define the country's overall economic dynamic: poppy cultivation, production, and processing. Afghanistan's black economy is dependent on opium production and trade. The Taliban had banned poppy cultivation prior to 2001, yet more recently turned to benefiting from the generated income to augment their resistance.⁸ According to the latest 2019 report of the UN Office on Drug Crime, the Taliban collected 6% of the overall poppy production directly from the farmers. The income generated by poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is approximately \$2 billion, which makes up almost 10% of the country's overall GDP of \$20 billion.⁹

The Taliban recently announced that they will halt the poppy cultivation as they did prior to the American intervention. This narrative is crucial for two reasons: the economic outcomes of such a ban and the attitude of the drug lords. Those who control the ecosystem of poppy cultivation and trading may wait and see what kind of poppy eradication policies the Taliban will seek to impose and then decide whether they should resist or support the Taliban administration at the very local level. As such, it may be the drug lords who determine the overall course of the country's reconciliation or internal conflict,

since Afghanistan's economy and politics are deeply intertwined with the powerful influence of the poppy-affiliated black economy.

The Trump and Biden administrations, stemming from their withdrawal sentiments, encouraged the Taliban's attempts to "spin" a narrative of their victory in the minds of Afghans.

ADMINISTRATION

The recovery of the Afghan administration was part of NATO's exit strategy - along with self-sufficient security and sustainable development - in order to prepare the appropriate conditions for a complete withdrawal.¹⁰ To this end, the U.S. and NATO allies funded projects to enhance the country's administrative capacity, and NATO put together inspection teams to qualify the administering institutions. The qualified state institutions independently implemented their assumed tasks without the help of the NATO mentor teams. This approach was designed to justify the downturn in U.S. forces by supporting the argument that Afghans are fully authorized to fulfill their responsibilities without assistance.¹¹

The collapse of the Afghan state has pointed to the reverse of the above argument as being true, i.e., that the Afghans appeared to be unable to sustain the state without external security support. The notion that the Afghan administration was able to function independently was dubious for three reasons. The first was that corruption

8. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Drugs, Security, and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan," *Brookings*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/drugs-security-and-counternarcotics-policies-in-afghanistan/>, accessed on July 30, 2021.

9. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2019," https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210217_report_with_cover_for_web_small.pdf, accessed on July 30, 2021.

10. Peer Gatter, Oliver Schlumberger, Danae Panissié, *State-Building in a Fragile Environment: Strengthening of Afghan Institutions through the Work of Returning and Integrated Experts*, Bonn: GIZ, 2016, pp. 48–94.

11. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) delineates this process in its report on Juvenile Rehabilitation Centers. UNAMA, "Assessment of Afghanistan's Juvenile Rehabilitation Centers," 2016, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_12_04_jrc_report_final-english_1.pdf, accessed July 31, 2021.

was widespread in Afghanistan for a series of varying reasons, such as the low income of governmental officials, inefficient inspection mechanisms, nepotism in the filling of governmental positions, and strong local criminal networks. The second reason was the lack of infrastructure, which made required services hard to deliver, especially in rural areas. This problem was compounded by the constraint of limited budgetary appropriations. Finally, opposing factions had formed parallel state institutions and forced the local population to make recourse to their regulative system rather than that of the legitimate government. These challenges call the country's administrative capacity into question in terms of effectiveness and sufficiency in the eyes of the Afghan public. If the country's administrative capacity remains inefficient, local publics may support the stronger and better organized actor. Currently, the Taliban will put to the test whether they can eradicate these flaws after the collapse of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA).

SECURITY

The security situation in Afghanistan has been fragile since the U.S. intervention. The Taliban preferred a defensive posture until 2005, while two additional years were spent to balance the domination of the coalition in Afghanistan. The year 2007 was a turning point for challenging the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), NATO, and the coalition in terms of shaking the "secured" environment. A recent EU report on the security situation in Afghanistan refers to a UN Security Council report dated March 25, 2021, wherein it states that 25,180 security incidents took place in Afghanistan in the year

2020 - a 10% increase compared to 2019.¹² The level of committed attacks peaked in 2020 in comparison to previous years, mainly through direct armed battles and a reduction in attacks on civilians. The reason for this leap may lie in the incapacity of Afghan security forces to function in rural areas, rendering the GIROA forces' freedom of movement non-existent and resulting in the unsustainability of military campaigns without the logistical support of the U.S. Consequently, the security situation was - and had long remained - highly fragile at the expense of the Afghan security forces.

The announcement of the Obama administration in 2011 that the U.S. would downsize its forces in 2014 encouraged opposing factions to claim victory and intensify their attacks.¹³ In this frame, they built a patrolling system in the rural areas with a show of force strategy. While the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and NATO military presence were situated in well-protected bases, the opposing factions were more visible on the roads and occasionally in urban spaces with the exception of major city centers. Finally, the Trump and Biden administrations, stemming from their withdrawal sentiments, encouraged the Taliban's attempts to "spin" a narrative of their victory in the minds of Afghans.¹⁴ Apart from the psychological superiority of the Taliban, the Doha negotiations provided a legitimization that the Taliban could not otherwise obtain since it was a direct communication of the U.S. government and the Taliban

12. EU Report, Afghanistan Security Situation: Country of Origin Information Report (Brussels: European Asylum Support Office, 2020), p. 56.

13. Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, June 22, 2021, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

14. Jason Hoffman and Devan Cole, "Trump Calls Afghanistan Withdrawal 'A Wonderful and Positive Thing to Do' and Criticizes Biden's Timeline", *CNN*, April 19, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/18/politics/trump-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal/index.html>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

excluding the GIRoA. The Doha Agreement facilitated a safe exit for the Americans while the Taliban were limited not to offend during the withdrawal. Nonetheless, the Taliban continued to mobilize their cells, relying on a technical reading of the Doha Agreement to argue that they were complying with its terms and activating their force posture to gain more ground by not challenging the U.S. troops but rather the Afghan government.

AFGHANISTAN'S INTERTWINED REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PICTURE

The international and regional politics need to be scrutinized to understand what has happened, why it has happened, and what might happen in the immediate future. Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated between major areas of influence in the heart of Asia. The country extends from China to Iran, and, as such, it can facilitate forward basing to counter future conflict scenarios.

AFGHANISTAN'S NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

The northern front of Afghanistan borders Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which were once Soviet Republics but are currently independent Collective Security Organization (CSO) countries with the Russian security guarantees. Russia traditionally has interest in the region, and any escalation may provoke Russian mobilization as can be witnessed in the number of military exercises in the northern countries after the Afghan crises erupted. The southern border extends along Pakistan; the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan's

northwest frontier region have become the main origin of the Afghan Taliban, since Pashtuns inhabit this region. The western flank is covered by Iran. It has the capacity to diffuse not only to Western Afghanistan thanks to the two countries' economic interaction and the presence of Afghan refugees living in Iran, but also to the heart of Afghan land due to the Shia Hazaras. All of these countries are involved in global and/or wider regional competition to gain leverage and obtain the most advantages. In this sense, the most important countries interested in Afghanistan need to be delved into in terms of their policy preferences.

CHINA

China, Afghanistan's neighbor on its eastern border, has been identified as a threat by the U.S. security strategy paper issued by the Trump administration and the interim strategy paper of the Biden administration. The reasoning is the future potential challenges posed by its giant economy, its quickly developing military posture, its technology, and its capacity to diffuse to developing/underdeveloped countries.¹⁵ China's Belt and Road Initiative is projected to transit the Central Asian countries to the north of Afghanistan, and China demands flexibility in the region in terms of diverting routes to reach various markets. Afghanistan is considered a future-case scenario for China as a potential cooperating country.

China, in fact, is more concerned about its territorial integrity and stability in its western region, since the Islamic identity of the Sinjar region across the Afghan border appears as a source of vulnerability. The likely diffusion of Islamic con-

15. The White House, Interim National Security Guidance, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

sciousness in this problematic region may provoke the Chinese security perception. For this reason, China has always been involved in Afghanistan through humanitarian support and construction projects, and has played an instrumental role in the Doha negotiation process. Nevertheless, China will insist that the Taliban cut ties with the Uyghurs' East Turkistan Islamic Movement at the expense of lending political and economic support.¹⁶

The security gaps resulting from the withdrawal of foreign forces may serve as an opportunity for Iran to exert more dominance on the Hazaras in order to gain leverage in Afghanistan either to counter or balance the Taliban.

IRAN

Iran is on the U.S. security agenda due to the radical words of the regime and Iran's military activism in Iraq and Syria. The American presence in the Gulf region and Afghanistan pushed Iran to pursue a "smart" strategy to counter any U.S. expedition inside Afghanistan and repel a potential U.S. incursion. Iran has based its strategy on three factors: economic diffusion to Western Iran, Afghan refugees, and sectarian affinity with the Hazaras. Afghanistan is dependent on foreign goods to meet the daily needs of the public, and Iran, Pakistan, and China are the essential suppliers across the Afghan border passages. Hence Iran's economic influence in the west makes Afghans tolerate Iran's soft demands.

The second factor, namely refugees, has the potential to expose the Afghan government - and Turkey as well - to social and humanitarian

16. France24, "Taliban Tell China Afghanistan Will Not Be Base for Separatists," July 28, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210728-taliban-tell-china-afghanistan-will-not-be-base-for-separatists>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

disasters through forced reverse or transit immigrations. The number of Afghan refugees in Iran is officially around 780,000, although undocumented refugees are estimated to number more than two million.¹⁷ Finally, Afghanistan's Hazara ethnicity has been a point of concern for Iranians due to their sectarian Shi'a identity.¹⁸ But the American presence in Afghanistan pushed Iran to be an observer of Hazaras. For its part, Iran established the Fatemiyoun Brigade of Hazaras to be used as a militia either in Syria or elsewhere, and had proposed that the Afghan government send them to fight against the Taliban.¹⁹ Iran does not traditionally favor a Taliban-based regime due to the harsh adherence of the latter to Sunni teachings. However, it did not hesitate to contact the Taliban in the preceding era. The security gaps resulting from the withdrawal of foreign forces may serve as an opportunity for Iran to exert more dominance on the Hazaras in order to gain leverage in Afghanistan either to counter or balance the Taliban. Afghan immigrants may become a bargaining chip to impose Iranian interests on the new Afghan administration or the West. Yet, one should expect Iran to tolerate the Taliban as long as no other force challenges them.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan is arguably more concerned about Afghanistan than any other country in the region, as Afghanistan's security directly impacts Pakistan's internal stability. Pakistan's concern

17. ACAPS, <https://www.acaps.org/country/iran/crisis/afghan-refugees>, March 10, 2021, accessed on July 31, 2021.

18. Vinay Kaura, "Iran's influence in Afghanistan," The Middle East Institute, June 23, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-influence-afghanistan>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

19. Sudha Ramachandran, "The Shia Fatemiyoun Brigade: Iran's Prospective Proxy Militia in Afghanistan," The Jamestown Foundation, March 26, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/>, accessed on July 31, 2021.

can be traced to Pashtun demands threatening Pakistan's integrity by challenging the Durand Line. Pakistan's security concerns regarding developments in Afghanistan can also be linked to the strategies of global actors in the region. Although its relations with the U.S. are strained, Pakistan is committed to seeing a stable Afghanistan after the American withdrawal. The Chinese-Pakistani rapprochement has emerged as another dynamic that will affect Pakistani options in terms of establishing a regional balance. As a result, Pakistani leadership may take the policies and strategies of the U.S. and China, along with the dynamics of Afghanistan, as input for its overall strategic assessment. It is still unclear to what extent Pakistan may urge the Taliban to comply with a peace and reconciliation process, as the Taliban's affiliation with networks across the Afghan border complicate any attempt at assessing even the short-term picture. It is certain that Pakistan intends to actively engage with the Taliban administration, and observe the developments in Afghanistan with an eye to shaping the outcome. However, what the latter will look like in terms of a solid strategy remains ambiguous.

RUSSIA

Russia traditionally fills the gap of the American political and military posture, as can be witnessed in Syria and Libya. But the Afghan case is different, because Russia has learnt its lessons from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The security of Central Asia will motivate Russian strategy toward Afghanistan by an 'observe and act' methodology. In this sense, Russia's responsibility under the Treaty of CSO will be the touchstone of Russian policy against developments in Afghanistan. Russia initiated military exercises in Tajikistan right after the eruption of the Taliban's

movement in the north of the country, since radical organizations in the northern neighboring countries had become a concern. Russia has not been an active actor in Afghanistan; however, it will somehow fill the gap of the American withdrawal by establishing a sustainable relation with the Taliban.

THE USA

The United States appears as the country that has lost more than any other actor by withdrawing from Afghanistan with no concrete gain. Al Qaeda is still alive and enjoys a safe haven in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have not changed their radical stance. The Afghan government is another failure for the U.S. in terms of its deficiencies in political democratization, economic development, and administrative and structural capacity. The reason for the U.S. failure could be attributed to its conventional, security-oriented approach to the Afghan case. American statespersons and soldiers were motivated to defeat the opposing factions, but away from the social, economic, and political realities of the Afghan theater. Furthermore, the decisions of Obama, Trump, and Biden to withdraw the American forces were not phrased in the correct wording and method, resulting in the Taliban claiming victory and discrediting the GIRoA. This shortcoming converted the belief and attitude of the Afghan public, especially in rural Afghanistan where the government's limited and inefficient military presence fell short of providing security.

After the overall developments, it is apparent that China will be the advantaged actor in Afghanistan by clear pledges to whomever governs Afghanistan through flexible but conditioned agreements. Russia may be more active and committed to securing its interests and areas of influence in Central Asia. Pakistan has

the flexibility to mediate and urge the Taliban to comply with the demands of the international community. Iran may be more inclined to gain leverage in comparison to its position in the previous four decades. And finally, the U.S. has not only handed over Afghanistan to the abovementioned countries, but has lost its political credibility in the politics of Eurasia and South Asia, and against Iran.

PROBABLE *MODUS OPERANDI*

In light of the dynamics in Afghanistan and taking into account the relevant global and regional shifts, a future-oriented projection that considers all of the probabilities needs to be sketched out to portray the probable courses along which the Afghan crisis can be appropriately managed. The sections below will focus on the worst-case scenario, the most likely scenario, and the most favorable scenario. However, it should be pointed out that there could be many other courses in accordance with changes in the preferences of Afghans and external actors. Fragility in Afghanistan makes all scenarios fluid and very hard to predict the future picture.

THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Civil war in Afghanistan is not a new phenomenon. Afghan society has experienced ethnic-based competition even during the era of Amanullah Khan, ideological polarization during the Cold War, and brutal civil war after the Soviet invasion. If the Taliban do not intend to compromise with a political road map that will initiate peace, reconciliation, and political process, ethnic and sectarian polarization seems inevitable. As the

Taliban are not a Pashtun movement, the Pashtuns may be divided, while other entities may form a competing unity under the umbrella of the emerging leaders. Such a scenario would introduce another civil war with loose and shifting alliances, and another mujahidin conflict would be ignited, reminiscent of the post-Soviet era. External actors, on the other hand, will provide support to either side, not in order to balance the internal actors but the other external actors.

In accordance with the aforementioned input, the worst-case scenario recalls the brutality of the previous Afghan conflicts and continuing suffering of Afghan civilians.

THE MOST LIKELY COURSE

The Taliban's quick diffusion across Afghanistan reminds a solid Taliban-led government in Afghanistan in the coming years. Meanwhile, the opposing ethnicities or interest groups lack an adequate level of organization, equipment, and weaponry. The initial stage of the most likely scenario is low-profile attacks directly targeting the Taliban forces, which have become a conventional military presence along the country's roads. The former mujaheddins who fled to neighboring countries may start a restructuring process for a further resistance to the Taliban. In this sense, the Hazaras have devastating memories from the past massacres by the Taliban. Hazaras may organize to start a low-profile resistance, mainly in Kabul. Dostum-led Uzbek/Turkoman ethnicities and Tajiks do not have the capacity to counter the Taliban because both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani dispersed their former mujaheddin group.

In accordance with the lacking capacity of the opposing militia, low profile attacks may escalate to the highest degree as opposing elements accumulate strength and capacity. The latest

stage, then, would again be a civil war where the emerging networks, such as DAESH, threaten all other warring factions as the Taliban did in the final stage of the mujahidin war. Hence, the factions opposing the Taliban need time and support to initiate a resistance. On the other hand, the Taliban's strategy will clarify the attitudes of these ethnic formations in terms of pursuing inclusiveness or exclusiveness. The transition period, which could lean on public will, will identify the overall attitude of the Afghan public and the potential competing combatants. Meanwhile, the bad memories of the 1990s make a national compromise harder than ever.

THE MOST FAVORABLE OPTION

Afghan peace and reconciliation appears as the most favorable course both for Afghans and the international community, as the Doha Agreement indicates. The integration of competing political wings and the Taliban, as well as the Haqqani group, into an Afghan political body can promote stability in the long term. The late narratives of the Taliban promise such a transition while the negotiation of the Taliban and Hamid Karzai/Abdullah Abdullah indicates this potential compromise.

The factors that could facilitate this course include a common threat perception, say DAE-SH-Khorasan, and a compromise among the external actors. If China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran agree on providing support to the internal actors that promote and do not challenge the peace and reconciliation process, the most favorable option appears achievable. The Taliban's hunger for recognition is also their point of vulnerability. Hence, the combined influence of all the external actors may push the Taliban to comply with

democratic norms and be encouraged to start a political process. It will then be the Afghan public who determine who will be in charge of the country and under what regulative codification.

All in all, the international community should be firm and remain committed to the most favorable course as the other two courses have the potential to spread instability to the countries of the region and beyond. If either the worst-case or the most likely courses materialize, a renewal of internal conflict in Afghanistan will lead to a surge in illegal immigration and put additional pressure on the already volatile refugee crisis, which in turn could devastate the international community and result in yet another humanitarian disaster.

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD AFGHANISTAN

Turkey has never approached Afghanistan with state-centric or interest-oriented thinking. The Turkish attitude is shaped by the good memories of the 1920s whereby Turkey has long been committed to providing humanitarian and technical assistance aimed at supporting the country's state-building efforts. In keeping with this stance, Turkey did not assume any combative role during its 20-year presence in the NATO mission in Afghanistan, and rejected any request from the coalition (or NATO) that would assist them in conducting a military operation there.

Turkish involvement was proposed as limited to ensuring the security of Kabul Airport, which was a guarantee for the international community. The Taliban would also benefit from this opportunity to reach a global audience as far as peace and reconciliation could have a progress. Otherwise, in the event of the realization of the worst-case scenario, the international community

may abandon Afghanistan. It should be noted that the presence of the international community consists not only of personnel at the embassies in Kabul, but also civil society organizations, NGOs, and organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. Hence the Taliban's rejection of Turkey's role at Kabul Airport may prevent Afghans from obtaining essential assistance if the current economic situation persists and the lack of infrastructure remains unaddressed. The withdrawal of Turkish soldiers brought pessimism in so far as sustaining international commitment to Afghanistan, though the Taliban's proposal to host Turkish civilian experts may provide a gateway to the desired result. However, Turkey's security concerns need to be satisfied since Turkish civilian presence will be endangered.

Another issue in question is whether Turkey will assume a role in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process. Mediation assistance depends on the mutual acceptance of the negotiating parties. Turkey is likely to promote the reconciliation only if both the political actors and the Taliban accept Turkish inclusion, possibly alongside some other countries. Turkey's intention has been to facilitate all efforts to build a safe and prosperous Afghanistan, although it is the task of the Afghans, not Turkey, to achieve this.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Afghan people are longing for peace, stability, and reconciliation. The Afghan public does not want internal power competition, but prosperity. Hence it is the responsibility of all local actors to compromise on a permanent solution and end the unstable environment. Unfortunately, the obstacles are formidable: internal Afghan dynamics and the state-centric approaches

of external actors have the potential to escalate tensions.

Afghanistan may become vulnerable under the reign of the Taliban as far as the competing actors start a long-term mobilization to counter it. The competing agendas of external actors may deepen the escalation in the medium to long term.

Poppy cultivation and production will be decisive in predicting the probability of a conflict. Drug lords at the very local level may be the key actors to determine who will be in charge of Afghanistan's micro-regions. If the Taliban ban poppy cultivation and processing, the drug lords may be prone to supporting a new wave of insurgency targeting the Taliban.

Following from the scrutiny of the aforementioned factors, the policy recommendations for Afghanistan are not complicated, and are as follows:

- The international community should be firmly committed to supporting a peace and reconciliation process while setting aside state-centric interests. Conflict in Afghanistan has the potential to spill over into neighboring countries and subsequently to the entire world in the form of terrorism and radicalism.
- The Taliban should not insist on challenging the Afghan daily life, but instead rely on the preference of the Afghan public through a political process. Otherwise, the Taliban will be perceived as a common threat by all ethnic, sectarian, and regional networks. Then, universal values will not be a point of reference to stop the atrocities in a scenario reminiscent of the mujahidin war of the 1990s.
- An international conference, like the Berlin Conference on Libya, may be a good starting point for launching a comprehensive political process. The state actors are cur-

rently winking at the Taliban; however, the best strategy is to provide support for the political process so that the Afghan public can decide their fate. Hence the international community should urge the Taliban

to comply with a political process that respects the will of the Afghan public. The essential tool is the concern on recognition of a probable Taliban government that international community may gain leverage.

AFGHANISTAN EVERLASTING CONFLICT

MURAT ASLAN

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The Afghan public demands peace, security, and prosperity. Yet current developments in the Afghan theater indicate the probability of more instability and probable conflict. The worst- case scenario, even though the Taliban are proceeding to build a government, is a civil war that cannot be isolated within Afghanistan. The most likely course is to have a Taliban-led Afghanistan and further reinvigoration of anti-Taliban elements that may pose another potential escalation. The most favorable course, on the other hand, is the start of a peace and reconciliation process, and to appeal to the decision of the Afghan public. The international community should firmly commit to the most favorable course as the alternatives have the potential to spread instability to other countries of the region and beyond. Furthermore, the ensuing explosion of illegal immigration and the exacerbation of the refugee crises have the potential to devastate the international community, bringing about yet another humanitarian disaster.

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