

Afghanistan: Four Years Later

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What has been achieved in Afghanistan in four years since the American assault of October 7, 2001? Is Afghanistan back to normalcy? Have the production and trafficking of drugs stopped or been significantly reduced? Has Afghanistan a functional Government now? Is the Karzai Government capable of providing security at its borders and inside? Has democracy made any significant progress? Is the status of Afghanistan as a sovereign state and a full member of the international community of nations reestablished? Have the Taliban disappeared? And, yes, have Mullah Omar and Ben Laden been captured? I believe that four years is a long enough time to allow reflection and review accomplishments. Although time is a relative notion, depending on the perspective from which you're looking at it, four years is roughly what WWI lasted in Europe and, as you well know, it's the length of a presidential term in the United States. So, I think that we can fairly use this October 7, 2005 as a marker to take a look at how things have evolved in Afghanistan during that period.

While the American military onslaught of October 7, 2001 initiated the *de facto* change of political conditions in Afghanistan, where the Taliban had been in power since September 1996, the Bonn Agreement of December 2001 created the framework and the agenda that concretized *de jure* the change of regime and gave the hope that Afghanistan would rapidly get back on its feet. The International community, largely responding to Washington's "friendly" insistence, committed itself to participate economically, militarily and institutionally to assist Afghanistan on the path to recovery.

From the economic and financial point of view, through two conferences, held in Berlin and in Tokyo, Kabul saw an array of countries from Iran to the United States pledging assistance to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, many of whom kept their word, allowing almost twelve billion dollars of aid money to pour in different ways and shapes into Afghanistan.

Mr. Karzai, during a recent visit to Washington, in front of an audience at the John Hopkins's SAIS, acknowledged that donor countries did actually pay what they had promised but, he complained, the money did not go to the Afghan Government itself, suggesting that money was not well spent. So, where did the money go and who misspent it? While it's easy to point the finger at UN agencies and NGOs for their lack of cost-effectiveness in the use of aid money, one can also legitimately wonder if the Karzai Government is reliable enough to be given the management of the reconstruction treasure. Considering the level of disorganization, nepotism and the widespread corruption existing in Kabul and in the provinces, one can doubt that the money would have been better spent if it were solely channeled through the Karzai Government.

The issue of aid money being a mean of profiteering for many and how that money is not just selfless charitable money but comes with strings attached - and many imperceptible consequences for those who accept it - is not new and has many observers and scholars debate about it passionately. In this regard, I had proposed as early as January 2002 the creation of a [Bank for the Reconstruction and the Development of Afghanistan](#)¹

¹ Omaid Weekly, #510 on 28 January 2002.

as a solution to coordinate the efforts of all actors and create synergies to promote an orderly development while avoiding wastes and anarchy. Four years later, I believe that such a body is more than ever needed.

In Afghanistan, we have quite an extraordinary situation where hundreds of organizations are competing to win contracts to perform reconstruction or “humanitarian” tasks. Sometimes, the contracts are themselves “sub-contracted” to third organizations would do a sloppy job without much control or risk of undergoing an audit. The lack of accountability, at all levels, be it on part of outside actors or that of the Afghan Administration’s bureaucrats, is in fact scandalous. All parties should be seriously audited because what they are spending is money received from international taxpayers or from generous voluntary contributors, who are being taken for a ride. It’s easy to mask and make up numbers and stories, invoking the situation of emergency prevailing in Afghanistan and keep reminding people how bad it was during the Taliban years to dodge any questioning regarding today’s results – or rather the lack of it. Accountability and responsibility are essential for all actors if they want to uphold the international community of donors’ trust and continued backing to fuel Afghanistan’s recovery.

The truth of the matter is that in four years, little has been done. No major infrastructural undertaking has been initiated and even less brought to fruition. Some small portions of one or two highways have been renovated, but nothing spectacular. Many of the refugees that have returned – on their own or forced by the host country – are still in need of proper housing and care. Four years and twelve billion dollars later, some returning refugees are camping in dire conditions just minutes away from the palace where Mr. Karzai live and not far away from the area where some of his cabinet members have built multi-story luxurious homes of a dubious taste.

Aid money is also used to help Afghanistan restore and develop its educational system as well as promote cultural enterprises. Many of the educational and cultural products available today in Afghanistan are made and/or conceived and paid for by foreign organizations. Here is an example of how aid money can be spent in ways that can subreptively impact the minds of young Afghans: a few days ago, I was looking at a children’s magazine published by an NGO named Aina, which receives most of its funding from USAID. The magazine named “Parwaz” (flight) was nicely made, with colors and pictures, making it very appealing to young readers in a country where there is not much competition in that area. Short topics had been chosen and translated from diverse sources. But I noticed that, for example, temperatures were given in Fahrenheit, whereas Afghanistan’s long adopted system, like in most of the rest of the world, is the Celsius one. Another example was an article about Gypsies: the article was explaining what their origin and the etymology of their name were, referring to them as the “Romes” or the “Gypsies”, but never using the name under which they are known in Afghanistan: “Jatt”. These are just two examples of what may look to some of you as innocent and inconsequential, but considering that Afghanistan is trying to recover from a quarter of a century of turmoil and is trying to put itself together, it is significant. Whether it’s done knowingly or accidentally, it nevertheless appears to be part of a larger trend to gradually reformat the Afghan society’s cultural stock, starting with the most malleable of its components: children.

The issue of cultural identity is a sensitive and a real one because, just in the last twenty-five years, Afghanistan has undergone consecutive and traumatizing attempts to

alter its nature: first through “sovietization”, then by “jihadization” before being submitted to the “talibanization”. Afghanistan needs the understanding and the assistance of the international community involved in its reconstruction and recovery as well as a real sense of responsibility from its own leaders in order to be able to reaffirm its identity, while absorbing millions of its returning citizens, who’ve spent sometimes decades - or who were born – abroad. But, I am afraid, it is getting the cooperation from neither of them in this matter.

In the 1960, Afghanistan’s Prime Minister Hashem Maywandwal was accused of being a “CIA agent” because he had spent some times in the United States as a student. His detractors were brandishing this accusation to discredit him baselessly. By the same token, any Afghan student who had been sent on a scholarship to the Soviet Union was seen with suspicion and thought of as a KGB recruit. While these exaggerated and somewhat paranoid speculations were the mere reflection of the Cold War era, where anyone was suspecting everyone, they were representative of a spirit that required of every Afghan to be first and foremost patriotic and serve their country rather than serve one of the two competing superpowers, or anybody else for that matter.

Realizing how Afghanistan and Afghans were susceptible to succumbing to outside influence through money and ideology, Afghan Governments tried by all means to limit outside interference in their affairs. For instance, Afghan students sent on a government stipend to study abroad were not allowed to marry foreign nationals. Those aspiring to take over the ministries of Defense or that of Foreign Affairs could not be married to foreign nationals either. Afghanistan was no exception in doing so. Other countries in the world had for long – or still have - similar rules because they felt they were too vulnerable to aggressive policies led first by competing colonial empires and then by larger powers during the Cold War era.

During the Cold War, the world witnessed the not-so-pacific coexistence of two blocs of client nations: one subsidized by the defunct USSR and the other one by the USA. Money, weapons and economic incentives with spoon-fed ideological coating kept those alliances together throughout decades. Money being the nerve of any warfare, alimending subversion and guerillas to weaken the enemy was an admitted practice among those who could afford it: the Soviets did it in Viet Nam and the Americans returned the courtesy in Afghanistan, among other places.

Today, the United States remains the sole superpower, but its leading role and position in the world as the country of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delanoe Roosevelt is crippled by policy contradictions and frankly disturbing incoherence. For example, it’s okay for the CIA today to lead covert operations on other countries soil and even target leaders of other nations, but it would be “outrageous” for anybody in the rest of the world to lead any kind of policy that would be viewed as remotely unfriendly to Washington; It’s okay for Washington to budget the construction of a new generation of nuclear weapons, but God forbids if anybody wants to acquire nuclear power generators for civilian use, let alone trying to appropriate the military pendant of it for its security; It’s okay for Washington to encourage other countries to sign the international treaty banning the use of landmines, but America won’t sign it because it wants to keep all options on the table for its “defense”...; it’s okay for Washington to encourage everyone to recognize the creation of the International Court of Justice, but it won’t ratify it for fear of seeing its

hands tied in conflicts it actively engages in from time to time (presently: Iraq and Afghanistan).

It's distressing to witness that the United States seems to have become the sad inheritor of the arrogant European unilateralist policies of the colonial times, forgetting that it was once a colony itself. The American unlawful attack and occupation of Iraq has so far been disastrous. The fabric of the Iraqi society has been dissolved and the Mesopotamian nation is on the verge of a civil war between its different components, all the while non-Iraqi militants hostile to America are pouring in to engage in their own combat, indifferent to the sufferings of the Iraqis. In the fight between George W. Bush's messianic view and that of extremist militants such as Al-Zarqawi, the real losers are the Iraqis, who've gone from under the yoke of a tragic-comically ridiculous tyrant to under that of anarchy, insecurity and the unhappy perspective of a civil war followed by the rule of a theocratic regime. I have a very difficult time figuring out what progress Messieurs Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and their "neo-con-strictor" friends have achieved other than opening Pandora's Box and asphyxiating the Iraqi society.

In today's Afghanistan, battered by twenty-five years of war and as many years of inexistent economy, in a country that was already underdeveloped, American dollars go a long way. From Hamed Karzai to most members of his cabinets, from notorious warlords to smaller commanders, they all are, in one way or another, paid by the US and as such are suppletives of the American expeditionary forces. Washington's money is not discerning or discriminating: It recruits from top to bottom and across to serve a force that has from the international legal standpoint no legitimacy in being in Afghanistan. As I said, Hamed Karzai's cabinet, former Mujaheddin leaders, former so-called "technocrats", younger Afghan-Americans in search of juicy contracts, young local Afghans - including girls that are recruited to serve as translators for the American army conducting operations - all happily accept the comparatively important sums for their services, without realizing the moral implications of what they are doing. I sometimes make jokingly the remark to some of my friends that had the Soviets been more astute, they could have bought the sovietization of Afghanistan.

What will become of an Afghanistan that lives in an artificial economy, financed mainly by foreign aid, the occupier's dollar pump, drug money, and militant money coming from extremist organizations financing what remains of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda?

I had noted once that the [United Nations](#) was not being vigilant in differentiating its peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, known as ISAF, from the operations led by the Americans and members of the Enduring Freedom coalition. My complaint remains that the United Nations is in effect being submissive to the American lead, which - should it be repeated once again - has no legitimate business staying in Afghanistan without clear UN mandate or, if it wants to serve peace and stabilization in that country, it should integrate the ISAF and be responsible of its actions in front of the international community.

I would like to stress anew the importance of Sovereignty and how, still today, four years after the US attack and the fall of the Taliban, it is not respected in Afghanistan by any of the part-takers of the so called coalition, be it the Americans, the Brits, the French or any other of them. In fact, Afghanistan's Sovereignty has not been respected since April 1978, when the Communists took over and delivered their country to the Soviets. The

last Afghan leader, who stood up to defend his country's Sovereignty against foreign interference, was Daoud, the man the Soviet-backed Communists slaughtered with his entire family on a funest morning of April 1978.

Daoud was the man who faced Brezhnev in a time of Soviet fearless ascendance and told him that he would not allow Moscow to meddle in Afghanistan's domestic or foreign policy: a principled courage that cost him his life! From that day on until today, Afghanistan has been led, almost without exception, by leaders who have no sense of national pride, no sense of self-effacement in the face of national interest, no restraint in accepting foreign money to advance their agenda – and that of others –, no sense of what Afghanistan as a country, as a State and, yes, as a Nation, can do or should not do for the sake of its basic interest and that of its standing on the international scene.

For the last quarter of century, those who've successively occupied the Arg have had no clue whatsoever of what Sovereignty means. The most pitiful image and the latest symbolic illustration of this is Mr. Karzai's very visible and invasive US Praetorian Guard in charge of his security, as well as the fact that he has spent most of his tenure being told what to do by his long-time friend - the rather disastrous and omnipresent - American Ambassador in Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad (who's now in Baghdad and one can count on him to improve "dramatically" the situation over there...), dubbed "the Vice-Roy".

Afghanistan is facing a real leadership problem. The current resident of the presidential palace has been imposed from the outside, as it has been the case for its predecessors during the last 25 years! I'll spare you the details, but the issue is that, still today, the persons who are in charge of the affairs in Afghanistan, as well as those who aspire - with some real chances - to replace them, are all part of a generation of politicians who have grown politically during the years of war. Whether a good deal of their time was spent in exile or not, it's mostly through foreign assistance that they have been able to strengthen their positions on the internal Afghan exchequer. Americans, Soviets (now Russians), Pakistanis, Saudis, Iranians, Indians, French, etc, have all cajoled their friends – i.e. clients – on the Afghan scene. These Afghan politicians and "warlords" have been so accustomed to the "clientelist" game that even today they remain dependant on outside financing, which they sometime double with their own resources driven from drugs or from levying taxes wherever they reign.

The result of that very unfortunate situation is that these leaders and their aspiring replacements have been so much conditioned in clientelist relationships that they are in no position to lead Afghanistan in an honest and independent way that will uphold the country's sovereignty. For this class of politicians, retirement is not too soon! But alas, they have been able to take advantage of the lax electoral system to legitimize their rule over large portions of the country. No doubt that most of them have no or little interest in serving their constituencies, but rather that the constituencies become "legalized" continuations of their fiefdom, made to serve them, and not the other way around. It's interesting to witness that former Communists, former friends of Ben Laden, such as Abdul-Rab Rasul Sayyaf, and former Taliban leaders, such as Abdul-Wakil Muttawakal, were able to run freely in the past elections, whereas they all should have been disqualified and furthermore tried and duly jailed for crimes against humanity!

Four years into operation “Enduring Freedom” and Ben Laden and Mullah Omar are still at large; remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda continue to find the resources to conduct military operations and put the country’s security in jeopardy. The border with Pakistan remains as porous as ever, allowing militants to go and come as they please. On top of all that, Afghanistan remains by far the world’s top drug producer. Four years later, Afghanistan still doesn’t have an army that can call itself such. In four years, the US-backed government has barely been able to reach the ridiculously low number of 35,000 men, whereas the country, the size of Texas, would need at least 175,000 of them to face the security problem at its borders and to asphyxiate the insurgency.

Elections are always good, even when they have a lot of shortcomings. But it’s very interesting to witness how the participation rates seem to have been low in Kabul, the capital, where probably the voters had the most freedom to express their opinions. The fact that almost 70% of them did not vote is quite meaningful. It suggests at least two things: 1) that probably in other parts of the country, voters have been “strongly” encouraged to go and vote for the local cacique or the dominant warlord; 2) that Afghans put little faith in the new Parliament’s influence to change things because they believe the real power is elsewhere.

Security is the sine qua non condition. Without security, there is no durable economic development, no expansion of Kabul’s reach, no real progress of democracy, no real advancement in the field of human rights in general and that of women in particular. Security is paramount and for it to happen, serious policy and financial measures need to be taken, otherwise the country’s latent insecurity and low-level insurgency will progressively sink Afghanistan into another chaos.

A final thought: Afghanistan has lived through History’s convulsions with damages, traumas and wounds. But no matter the avatars, it behooves to its Government and to the State, viewed as a structuring entity, to live by some principles that take into consideration the country’s history and background to settle itself harmoniously today and work towards a better tomorrow for its people. After a quarter of century of turmoil, the present Government needs to seek regaining Afghanistan’s position on the international scene. One word that has been often associated with Afghans is “independent”: independence of and for its people; and also independent diplomacy – sometimes equated to “active neutrality” – in the international arena. But, alas, I am afraid that, in a world where blocs have disappeared, Karzai & Co. have managed to make of Afghanistan a US satellite, lacking of independence at home and abroad, perhaps even ambitioning to make of it another Porto Rico...

As for measuring the success of the American-led international implication in Afghanistan for the last four years, let us ask some very simple and very direct questions: can Mr. Karzai hold the country if tomorrow the twenty-something thousands US troops and six thousands or so ISAF forces were to suddenly withdraw from Afghanistan? How long before Kabul collapses into factional battles? How long before the Taliban come down the mountains to take Kandahar, Helmand or Zabul? How long before Ismail Khan moves back to his Emirate of Herat, and Dostum and Atta launch adverse assaults to seize control of Mazar-e-Sharif...? Not very long, I am afraid. And that’s where we stand four years and twelve billion dollars later...