A Historical Perspective on Forty Years of Conflict in Afghanistan[1]

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Abstract

After four decades of devastating conflict, the United States–Taliban agreement signed on February 29, 2020, marked a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's ongoing quest for peace[2]. This milestone presents both opportunities and risks, with significant consequences for the Afghan people and the broader region. Paradoxically, the Taliban's political leverage and legitimacy have increased following the agreement, further marginalizing the Afghan government and the country's other political groups. The post-agreement period, including its implementation and the initiation of intra-Afghan talks, has already proven treacherous and uncertain. The broader implications of U.S. troop withdrawal, deep divisions within Afghan politics, and a more assertive Taliban insurgency remain underexplored. Afghanistan's recent history brings to light enduring themes, issues, and debates that are crucial for achieving a just, authentic, and sustainable resolution to the country's conflict. These historical lessons remain highly relevant as stakeholders seek pathways toward lasting peace.

Historical insights from prominent Afghan scholars of the 1980s and 1990s illuminate root causes, cultural considerations, and political concerns unique to Afghanistan. These perspectives can help identify and mitigate obstacles likely to afflict upcoming intra-Afghan talks. They provide insights into the challenges facing key Afghan stakeholders in creating a unified and inclusive political system that addresses peace, reconciliation, power politics, and legitimacy. Their utility in informing a way forward minimizes the risk of overreach by either the Taliban leadership or the Afghan government.

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[2] U.S. State Department, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," U.S. Government, 29 February 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.

Today, many Afghans and international observers express serious concerns that both the Taliban and Afghan government negotiating teams lack inclusivity and independence, with foreign powers largely shaping the agenda, process, and outcomes at the expense of a genuinely Afghan-owned and Afghan-led process. The Afghan public remains highly skeptical, questioning the viability of the peace process and its promise of ending violence through a political settlement that enables possible power-sharing and coalition governance among the waring elites.

The Communist Attempts at National Reconciliation

The correspondence between Professor Hassan Kakar (1928–2016) and President Najibullah in 1990 provides critical insight into the context of Afghanistan's protracted war. The bloody coup and repressive policies of the Afghan Communist regime after 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion in 1979, imposed a brutal conflict that killed or maimed over two million Afghans, imprisoned tens of thousands, and forced millions to flee. Professor Kakar and many colleagues at Kabul University spent years in prison for their commitment to their country and belief in freedom and human dignity. This period drained Afghan society of intellectual capital and deeply polarized the population, especially between pro-regime and resistance groups inside and outside Afghanistan.

In his response to Najibullah's outreach following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Professor Kakar is candid and direct. He underscores the suffering and bloodshed caused by the Soviet invasion and the regime's oppressive policies. Kakar disputes Najibullah's proposals, especially regarding the Communist regime's intent and conduct, and highlights the secrecy, injustice, and brutality of the KhAD intelligence agency, recommending its dismantling. His suspicion is understandable as decades of relative peace, harmony, and development in Afghanistan were disrupted by the very individuals who are now pretending to resolve it. Najibullah's letter was sent while KhAD, trained by the KGB, continued to foster animosity and mistrust among Afghans.

Despite his criticisms, Kakar agrees with Najibullah on two key points: (1) the necessity of a negotiated solution among warring parties to facilitate peace and reconciliation, and (2) the restoration of the Afghan people's will through elections and traditional forums such as jirgas and shuras. He explicitly asserts the importance of direct, general elections to reflect people's will.

Kakar also addresses the international dimensions of the Afghan crisis, emphasizing the need for engagement and support under the United Nations. He argues that if the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, can agree on a peaceful solution, Afghans, with their own mores, rich traditions and political skills, can resolve internal issues. However, he laments the loss of integrity and independence

among Afghan resistance parties, which have become subject to regional and international influence due to favoritism and the larger context of the Cold War. Kakar reiterates the supremacy of the Afghan people's will, the need to reduce foreign intervention, and urges Afghan leaders to take responsibility for safeguarding national interests.

UN-Led Geneva Talks: Flawed Representation

The exchange of letters between Professor Hassan Kakar and President Najibullah occurred at the end of the Cold War, a period when the United Nations still held significant influence in resolving international disputes. Professor Kakar's emphasis on the UN's role in Afghanistan is best understood in this context. The UN-mediated Geneva Talks between the pro-Soviet government in Kabul and Pakistan represented a major attempt at a political settlement in Afghanistan during the late 1980s. The UN efforts particularly gained momentum after Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in the Soviet Union in 1985. Calling the Soviet war in Afghanistan a "bleeding wound,"[3] Gorbachev indicated the Soviet Union's willingness to consider withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, contingent on political and military concessions from Pakistan and the United States.

Despite producing a political accord and leading to the withdrawal of Soviet combat troops, the Geneva Talks failed to end the war or resolve the deep political factionalism among Afghans. The fundamental flaw of the Geneva process was its exclusion of legitimate Afghan representatives: Pakistan and the Soviet-backed Afghan government negotiated on behalf of the Afghan nation, sidelining the Afghan people and their freedom fighters. This arrangement led to tragedy and Afghanistan's descent into chaos in the early 1990s.

By excluding the Afghan nation and its legitimate representatives, the United Nations-sponsored negotiations effectively denied Afghans the right to self-determination. The architects of the Geneva Talks also failed to include provisions for a post-withdrawal peace and reconciliation process among Afghans themselves. Remarkably, a similar mistake was repeated at the Bonn Conference in 2001, which excluded the Taliban from the process. The consequences and costs of these exclusions have been painfully evident for both the Afghan people and the international community.

Safeguarding Afghan National Sovereignty

[3] Text of Gorbachev Statement Setting Forth Soviet Position on Afghan War, New York Times, February 9, 1988.

The principles of Afghan national sovereignty, the will of the Afghan people, and the right to self-determination, as emphasized in Professor Kakar's letter, continue to offer a viable solution for resolving the Afghan conflict. In particular, Kakar recommends two main principles for any future negotiations: (1) the imperative of intra-Afghan talks, and (2) the importance of Afghan conventions, institutions, traditions, and cultural heritage in advancing negotiations. Building on these, he proposes a two-step process for lasting peace and reconciliation: first, the formation of a transitional administration to build trust among Afghan parties through a United Nations-sponsored process; and second, the establishment of a constitutional government through free and fair national elections based on the principle of true national sovereignty.

Kakar maintains that other foreign and domestic issues should be addressed only after the Afghan nation determines its own destiny. He strongly rejects Najibullah's proposal to make Afghanistan a neutral and demilitarized country at the outset, considering it both unacceptable and risky for Afghanistan's security. Kakar questions the rationale for convening an international conference to "guarantee and protect" Afghanistan's neutral status, arguing that no foreign delegation or international body has the right or authority to decide such matters. He suspects this approach is a strategy by the Soviet Union to retain influence over Afghanistan, noting that the Soviets failed to achieve demilitarization through military force and now seek it through international guarantees.

Other contemporary Afghan scholars, notably Abdul Rahman Pazhwak (President of the UN General Assembly in 1967 and Afghan Ambassador to the United Nations), have also rejected the concept of "imposed" neutrality for Afghanistan. In his writings on the UN-sponsored Geneva Talks, Pazhwak argues that any political arrangement is incomplete and irrelevant to lasting peace and stability if it does not guarantee universal human rights and dignity, including social justice, freedom of belief and expression, and an end to discrimination and inequality. For Pazhwak, unity of effort and equal opportunity for all Afghans—regardless of ethnic, gender, sectarian, or religious identity—are essential for national reconciliation, peace, and security.

Many Afghan scholars who opposed the Soviet invasion, including Professor Kakar and Ambassador Pazhwak, viewed the Afghan war as a struggle for independence and freedom. They considered the Soviet invasion an illegitimate use of force by a superpower against a smaller, independent, proud and friendly neighbor. In a 1983 essay, Pazhwak elaborates on the aspirations of Afghans for their country's future, stating:

> "Afghans aspire to live in peace, friendship, and mutual respect and cooperation with other nations and states of the world. The source of this aspiration is their faith in God, and their strong belief in human dignity and human rights. This is an aspiration shared commonly among the people of the world, and therefore, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan is a violation of the legitimate and shared rights of all peoples and nations as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The invasion to impose an authoritarian regime is the extension of the atrocities that the tyrannical regime in Russia has committed in other countries and towards its other neighbors." (Pazhwak 1983).

Foreign Interference and the Rise of Political Islam

Afghan scholars have expressed deep concern about the influence of foreign actors, particularly Pakistan and its Arab allies, in shaping the direction of the Afghan resistance. What began as a war of liberation gradually transformed into a religious conflict. While an absolute majority of Afghans are faithful Muslims and have cherished their faith and belief in Islam throughout the last fourteen centuries, they have masterfully blended Islam with their rich cultural heritage through which an Islamic and Afghan identity has emerged. This fusion of religion and tradition was evident in the absence of religiously motivated suicide attacks against the Soviets' "Evil Empire"[4] during the decade long occupation. Over time, however, Pakistani and Saudi intelligence agencies, in collaboration with the United States, began promoting political Islam as a tool to weaken the Soviet Union and attract resources from the Arab Gulf states, including support from Salafi, Wahhabi, and Takfiri preachers and zealots.

As a result, traditional Afghan Islamic values slowly gave way to more political and militant forms of Islam that were foreign to Afghan society. Afghanistan, and perhaps the world, would have been on a different trajectory if international support for Afghan resistance had not been contingent on the ambitions and approval of Pakistani Islamist generals and the ISI, which directed most covert military and financial aid to radical Islamist groups. Consequently, the Afghan nation and its resistance groups did not benefit from the Soviet withdrawal; instead, proxy wars persisted, leading to civil war and the total collapse of law and order. As Ambassador Pazhwak warned, "Afghans won on the battlefields but lost on the political front—a tragic repetition of Afghan history." [5]

Following the rise of the Taliban in mid 1990s, Afghanistan increasingly came under the influence of transnational Islamist fighters and their regional allies. The fall of

[4] Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire Speech," 8 March 1983
https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/
[5] Pazhwak, Abdul Rahman, Afghan Mujahid Monthly, Vol. 12, 2nd Year, Peshawar, August 1983.

the Taliban and the onset of the Global War on Terror brought US-led international forces to Afghanistan in late 2001. Initially, many Afghans welcomed the end of Taliban rule and Al Qaeda's tyranny. However, optimism faded quickly due to poor political decisions, misconduct by military forces, the creation of a weak rentier state[6], and the empowerment of notorious warlords through official positions and security contracts. The lack of a clear vision and understanding of Afghan society soon led to widespread disillusionment and grievances, fueling the resurgence of a more latent and hardened Taliban. Meanwhile, violent Islamist extremism spread beyond Afghanistan, threatening freedom, peace, and prosperity globally.

The repercussions of Professor Kakar and Ambassador Pazhwak's thoughts and warnings became evident as events unfolded following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Their words and insights continue to resonate amid Afghanistan's ongoing conflict and search for peace. For a sustainable and dignified peace, they emphasize the rights of the Afghan people to self-determination, with the belief that Afghans should have the absolute freedom to choose their system of government and its associated political, cultural, social, and economic institutions through fair and free elections without any foreign influence. These national scholars understood and served their nation. They embodied the best characteristics of Afghan identity and heritage, relentlessly advocating for Afghan aspirations and the country's highest potential. Unfortunately, their thoughts and themes are often ignored by the post-2001, foreign-dominated analysis of Afghanistan. This neglect is especially bewildering.

In 1990, when Professor Kakar responded to Dr. Najibullah, the concept of "Jihad" against a Communist regime backed by an atheist superpower (the USSR) was still influential in Afghanistan. Yet, Kakar mentioned "Islam" only four times in his ten-page letter. In contrast, the three-and-a-half page Doha peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban in 2020 references "Islam" or "Islamic" nineteen times, without addressing fundamental issues of rights or justice for those affected by the conflict. Another proposed blueprint for peace with the Taliban refers to "Islam" and "Islamic" over a hundred times. This emphasis is precisely what Professor Kakar, Ambassador Pazhwak, and many other Afghans sought to avoid, advocating instead for the Afghan people's right to freely choose their destiny. The foreign expert and diplomatic community's intense focus on an "Islamic future" for Afghanistan is especially puzzling, given that many of these experts and diplomats come from countries with secular constitutions and a clear separation of religion and state!

[6] Kate Clark, "The Cost of Support to Afghanistan," Afghan Analyst Network, May 2020, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-reasons-for-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/.

Shades of Conflict

The conflict in Afghanistan has never been solely about religion. Religious belief and zeal were among the many values that drove Afghans to fight against the Communists and perhaps is a driving factor for the rank and file of the Taliban in the current fight. Historically and today, the driving factors for Afghan resistance and insurgency have been an invasion of sovereignty, violations of their rights and human dignity, disrespect for their religion, the use of brutal and of kinetic force, predatory governance, and the absence of justice and accountability.

Afghans can resolve internal issues as a "dynamic people." They possess the traditional mores and skills required to resolve their disputes, even with the Taliban. Most Taliban members are Afghans who, if left along, are willing and able to live with full dignity and honor in their country. Decades of war have seen many wrongs committed by those wielding power through patronage networks and official positions. The dangerous blending of Islam and politics during the Soviet war, and the more recent mixing of democracy with predatory warlords, have both proved fatal. Inclusive good governance and justice cannot be achieved by compromised, corrupt, or incompetent leaders propped up by foreign powers.

These are the issues that must be addressed in any genuine peace negotiation. Afghans are not fighting because they are inherently warriors, nor is Afghanistan simply a "graveyard of empires." The war is not fundamentally between ethnic groups, nor is it a Pashtun-versus-non-Pashtun conflict, as some external narratives suggest. Rather, Afghans are at war because their basic human rights and dignity are violated by foreign powers and their proxies; because their diversity is exploited for division and political gain; and because brutal warlords and corrupt technocrats, often installed by foreign interests, have been imposed upon them. The "good enough for Afghans" mentality, invented by Western technocrats, has adversely contributed to the status quo by ignoring and undermining Afghans potentials for peace and prosperity. Despite linguistic and ethnic diversity, Afghans share many common cultural values and similarities across towns and villages. As Dupree notes in his historical work "Afghanistan," the country is a melting pot of influences, with more unifying factors than divisions:

> A Spaniard, Sicilian, Greek, Turk, Arab, or Sephardic Jew would be physically at home in most of Afghanistan. Only distinctive tribal and ethnic clothing, language, religion, and other cultural impediments make the difference. Like the United States, and for a much longer period, Afghanistan has been a cultural, as well as

physical, melting-pot: Persian, Central Asian, Sino-Siberian, European, Indian, Turkish, Arab and Mongol influences rose, fell, and blended. (Dupree 1980)

The Learning Curve

More than thirty years after the exchange of historic letters between Professor Kakar and Dr. Najibullah, few lessons are learned. Had Afghans and the international community heeded the aftermaths of the Geneva Talks and the Bonn Conference, much of the subsequent bloodshed might have been avoided. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided a unique opportunity, but post-Soviet U.S. geopolitics overlooked Afghanistan's needs. The resulting power vacuum was quickly filled by emerging regional powers, while Afghanistan, fragile and divided, became a battleground for proxy forces. Pakistan, in particular, replaced the Soviet Union's influence through its proxies, openly advocating for an "Islamic confederation" with Afghanistan[7]. Not surprisingly, even the Taliban, at one time, proposed a "demilitarized" Afghanistan as a condition for peaceful settlement of the crisis. To many observers, this presented yet another attempt by Pakistan to achieve strategic depth and control over the country.[8]

Afghans remain deeply concerned about the United States–Taliban agreement and its implications for their future. Many Afghans distrust both the Taliban and the prospect that the agreement will bring lasting peace and security. Critical voices and analyses that question U.S. engagement in Afghanistan are often sidelined. U.S. administrations have struggled to define clear national interests and strategic objectives in Afghanistan, rarely maintaining consistent or long-term policies. While the United States can absorb the costs of its engagement and move on, Afghans must be vigilant, as their very survival is at stake if the United States withdraws completely and adheres to the agreement with the Taliban.

Serious doubts persist about the Taliban's willingness and ability to fulfill their commitments under the Doha agreement. While the Taliban has gained political legitimacy and recognition, it remains unclear whether the United States can achieve its goals in Afghanistan and the broader region going forward. Political Islam can mobilize insurgencies, but as seen in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and later in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, such movements have struggled to govern effectively or honor their commitments.

[7] Hekmatyar Disappoints Again, Setback for Pakistan, https://www.khaama.com/hekmatyar-disappoints-again-setback-for-pakistan-98760/

[8] http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/03/c_137797447.htm
https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2019/02/12/feature-03

Political turmoil in the United States has further damaged its credibility and moral authority, as it fails to uphold global rules of engagement and established diplomatic norms. The Afghan public and government are increasingly losing confidence in U.S. commitments under the Bilateral Security Agreement and other arrangements. A premature U.S. military withdrawal would embolden Afghan warlords and militias, prompting them to seek protection from the Taliban. Regionally, the United States has largely failed to contain the Pakistani military, whose double game allows it to support proxies, including certain elements within the Taliban movement.[9] With the rise of global power competition—especially from China and Russia—an American retreat may trigger new hedging strategies that could prove detrimental for Afghanistan.[10]

Anxieties and Uncertainties Remain

As Afghanistan entered 2020, a peace agreement with the Taliban appeared to be the best hope for ending the war and reducing US military involvement. However, the future of the Afghan peace process remains uncertain, as neighboring countries and regional powers continue to adjust their strategies to protect their interests in Afghanistan. While the Afghan people are eager for peace and the Taliban hold significant leverage, questions about the outcomes of intra-Afghan negotiations remain a major source of anxiety and uncertainty.

It is unlikely that the Afghan people will accept a peace deal negotiated between a corrupt and disconnected government and an insurgent group with a troubled history and no clear vision for the future. The ruling elites in Kabul have become increasingly detached from the well-being of the country, focusing primarily on their own interests and patronage networks. The Taliban, due to their past actions, have fostered deep mistrust among Afghans. As with Dr. Najibullah's failed reconciliation efforts, current peace talks with the Taliban risk failure if issues of accountability and justice are not addressed and if a diverse, inclusive group of Afghans is not meaningfully involved.

As history has shown—and as Professor Kakar and Ambassador Pazhwak warned—poorly constructed agreements have led to new cycles of conflict in Afghanistan. Wars in Afghanistan often have far-reaching consequences for the region. Achieving a just and lasting peace will require time and for Afghans to take responsibility for their country's future. As the process unfolds, it is essential to heed the insights of Afghan scholars who have long advocated for independence, national sovereignty, social justice, civil and political liberties, human rights, freedom of

[9] "The Haqqani network … acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's intelligence," Mullen, https://www.cnn.com/2011/09/22/us/mullen-security/index.html
[10] Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/politics/russia-afghanistan-bounties.html

expression, and non-discrimination for all citizens. These are the foundations of the peace Afghans desire and deserve.

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