

## The State of War & Peace in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

*With the current heated debates centered around the Afghan peace process, hurried along by the United States, which sent those involved in the Afghan War into a frenzy of activities and political posturing, it is hard to imagine true peace in Afghanistan after four decades of war. After 17 years of American entanglement in Afghanistan, the current US administration is looking for a more permanent solution to end America's longest war – but peace at what cost and at whose expense? The late 2018 indications of President Donald Trump regarding his inclination, however passing, to privatize the Afghan War by pulling out the US troops and delegating the tasks of the US armed forces to a private security company or mercenaries, had raised alarm bells across Afghanistan. The triggered debates in Afghanistan mostly took place in the academic circles, where the educated class interpreted politics to those younger or less educated. While the rhetoric usually was a spectrum of informed and uninformed opinions, surprisingly, on this issue, it was more unified. As the fate of President Ashraf Ghani will soon be decided, either through an election or through a government of compromise, Afghanistan reaches a defining crossroads. The 2018 parliamentary elections and the activities and rhetoric surrounding the 2019 presidential elections, presented strong evidence of popular awakening and a gradual power shift inside Afghanistan, with a possible re-evaluation of Afghanistan by its neighbors. All of these indicate that Afghanistan may be at a critical juncture of a socio-political-economic paradigm shift, where power redistribution process has begun and the key is managing this process.*

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**Note:** This commentary opines the ideas of the author and does not necessarily represent the opinion of the organization.

## **Annals of History**

It is said that ‘history is written by the victors’, a statement that has merit; nevertheless, the downside of history is that it was not written down for most of its existence. And that which is not written, regardless of importance, will be lost if not forgotten. We are fortunate however, through references in the annals of history, to have some indirect references to the practices of lost civilizations. Among those practices, which still continue to this day in some form, is the use of mercenaries. Known as soldiers of fortune and for hire, these professional fighters do their paymasters’ bidding with mixed degree of success – just or not. When managed correctly, mercenaries perform with surgical precision, other times their use becomes a great liability.

The earliest written references of mercenaries go back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century BC, when Pharaoh Ramses II used 11,000 mercenaries in his army for a war. Considering the world’s population at that time being several million individuals, this was a large number to amass and telling of the norm, tradition and frequency of using mercenaries that led to such a developed ‘business’. In addition to Egypt, Carthage, Greece, Persia and many other ancient kingdoms have used mercenaries as well, which only speaks to the long tradition of mercenaries in pre-history. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the purpose and methods of mercenaries may have changed, but their usage for similar purposes by state and non-state actors have endured.

## **Prelude to an Argument**

There is great debate about the use of mercenaries and most of the arguments are not favorable for their usage. The major reason for opposing the use of mercenaries is that they act with impunity and overlook local customs as well as international laws. Certainly, there are many such cases to substantiate this claim. However, the few who

oppose this view – and who are not part of the mercenary companies believe that there are just as many cases of breach of local customs and international laws by the soldiers of any country, if not more, as there are cases by mercenaries; another claim that has substantial real cases in support. It is often argued by anti-mercenary groups that soldiers can be tried by laws and the states are accountable for the actions of their soldiers. Likewise, pro-mercenary groups have argued that mercenaries have been tried in courts and were found guilty, even executed by governments as well. Just as a state would not take full responsibility for the action of a few rogue individual soldiers, which would consequently implicate their trainings as a contributing factor to a particular crime committed by a soldier or group of soldiers, just the same, a mercenary company also would not take full responsibility for the actions of a few rogue individuals they hired. Nevertheless, it is much easier to sue a security company than to sue a state in court.

History has proven that the concept of mercenaries and its use till today is practical and here to stay. Ordinary people in Afghanistan, however, have a mixed response to this. According to a recent survey conducted with more than a thousand individuals from a few provinces of Afghanistan, including Kabul, across age ranges and education levels, many people think that privatization of Afghan War is an ill-conceived notion which would benefit private companies and foreign powers more than Afghanistan and its people.

The survey that was conducted for over two weeks, using a mixed mediums of telephone, internet and face-to-face interviews, around 90% of those surveyed were between the ages of 19 – 50, who are the professionals of this country and those with immediate impact. Of this group 90% have a bachelor or master's degree, and majority are males. Just over 50% do not have a favorable view of security companies and 84% do not think that a private security company can end the war in Afghanistan. However, the survey participants have a

mixed view of who will most benefit from this private war, of which only 6% think people of Afghanistan and 20% think Afghan warlords will benefit. This means that only 26% of survey-takers believe that Afghans, in one way or the other, will benefit from this deal. The majority of the rest believe that outsiders will benefit from the privatization of the Afghan War. These beneficiaries, according to survey takers, include regional powers (10%) and international powers (41%), while 8% think all of them will benefit; this leaves the majority of Afghan people who do not trust privatization of war and private security companies, as they do not see a benefit for Afghans.

Listening to people and reading such surveys mentioned above, one would conclude that the country is deeply concerned about security and foreigners. Afghan people long for normalcy and stability, even if they may have forgotten what that feels like. Ordinary people are tired of lies, deceit and hollow words so much so that they need someone to believe, a leader they can trust, someone who can deliver to them the broken promises of yester years and a hope for peace and prosperity in the near future. If the recent parliamentary elections are any indication, Afghanistan is changing and managing this change is the key to shaping a better future. Notwithstanding some businessmen and family members of political/ethnic establishments who ran for office with the intention of protecting their assets through state power or continuing their fiefdoms under state protection, we witnessed a great spike in the number of independent candidates and fresh faces who were able to collect popular local support.

It was no surprise that political and ethnic establishments were visibly represented; however, the jump in the number of private sector actors, and more importantly, the spike in the number of civil society actors was a bigger surprise. The fall from grace of ethnic and political figures, emboldened ordinary people to stand up and challenge their

legitimacy and leadership. While corruption has been rampant inside the election board, as well as polling stations, and consequently the results of the election may allegedly be rigged, evident from the recent firing of some members of the Election Committee, nevertheless, the huge number of independent candidates' enrollments was a clear indication that people are empowered, emboldened and thus have created an uncoordinated civil movement in sharp contrast to the established elites.

Political parties and ethnic leaders still have the loudest of voices, but now, for the first time in decades, they did not have the support of the masses. Those who still support the old establishment, do so primarily for their career advancement or ensuring their status quo. While it is a mistake to overlook the power and influence that the old establishment still wields, a chink in the armor has been found, which with strategic maneuvering could reshape the balance of power inside Afghanistan.

The political landscape of Afghanistan had increasingly been dominated by ethnic and political personalities first and then perhaps by civil society to a lesser extent. Today, power is a little more diffused and flows out of the political and ethnic establishments to local leaders who once supported the ethnic groups and political parties. Disenchanted with the old establishment, their supporters who were made up of associations, local leaders, influential individuals and small civic groups are looking for new leadership.

### **Looking to the Future**

The early 2019 Moscow-Middle East talks on the peace process and the Afghan government's stand, especially the foreign sound bites hint at a possible democratic process which translates into an election. What is not immediately clear at this time is who will be the candidates; however, there are no indications that in addition to the Taliban, there

would be much change in the list of candidates. That is, if a government of compromise is not formed – even if in a transition capacity.

The most important aspect of this process again is the Afghan people. Agenda has been set by foreigners on how Afghanistan should be managed and it seems few Afghans challenge that notion, while such interference is unthinkable in the interferers' own countries. It is an open secret that Afghans are not consulted about their country's future, instead they are just informed and expected to comply. Any student of politics familiar with Realism knows that in Relational Power where commanding change, controlling agenda and establishing preferences are the usual power plays, which means that hegemony will exert influence on weaker states for their own benefits without the bounds of morality or justice. The realities of a post 9/11 new world order, with its overemphasis on state security and global policing, is reshaping the world and with it Afghanistan, much like the Great Game did in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Consequently, for Afghanistan, being at the bottom of the food chain, all this means that either it has to learn to adjust to an ever changing set of demands, however detrimental to its sovereignty, or pull together to fight the world. Naturally, the latter is impossible, considering the state in which Afghanistan is in currently.

### **The Curse of Geography**

Afghanistan's ancient titles of 'crossroads of empires' and 'gateway to India' gave rise to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'buffer state' of the Great Game, separating Russian dominated Central Asia from British controlled South Asia. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a 'non-allied' Afghanistan that was forgotten and short-changed for regional interests. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century was a witness to the rise of China, spread of political Islam, the isolation of Iran, the rise in tension between nuclear India and Pakistan

and rise of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. More importantly, the post 9/11 new world order changed the role of Afghanistan, from a backwater to front-page news. As Central Asian countries gain independence and being landlocked and dependent on Russian pipelines for exporting gas and oil, as well as trade routes, and Iran under embargos, Afghanistan once again gained geopolitical importance. However, decades of war had destroyed its infrastructures while lack of security and political will were huge factors in its underdevelopment.

With the US seemingly wanting to leave Afghanistan, China, India and Pakistan starved for energy and trade routes, Iran still under UN embargo, the star of Afghanistan maybe rising. With regional projects like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline, Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) Power Project-1000, Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Afghan-Indian air bridge, as well as China's New Silk Road, connecting Far East to Europe, bringing millions of dollars, if not billions, to the region, the tides have changed for Afghanistan. The regional players have agreed, to some extent, that a stable rather than an unstable Afghanistan is a better option for their own prosperity. Naturally, to show good-will and build trust, each side gave sacrifices, which translated into the killing of General Raziq and Maulana Sami ul-Haq, and freeing of Mullah Biradar, among other things. Customarily Afghans have not been invited to the table to make their own decisions, but since Afghan cooperation is needed to make this work, it is a golden opportunity for Afghanistan to play its cards right and benefit from economic-political shift before it misses another opportunity for prosperity and self-determination.

### **Why is Peace Impossible in Afghanistan?**

Simple, because in Afghanistan, peace is not profitable and Afghan people lack a culture for peace! After four decades of war, this country is streamlined for war, not peace. Killing the opposition, being

trigger happy to the point of looking for a fight or resorting to violence at the slightest provocation, a prevalent Kalashnikov culture, indifference to the loss of human lives and many other indicators are clear signs of a culture of war. An obvious evidence for this is displayed every day on the Afghan roads. The way everyone drives is the way they feel. There is no respect for each other or for law. No one thinks of anyone else but themselves. If an outsider comes to Afghanistan and sees that Afghans do not respect each other, why would this foreigner want to help Afghanistan? Why should he treat Afghans with dignity and respect when Afghans themselves have no such feelings toward each other?

This animosity, disregard and lack of empathy are symptoms of deeper issues entrenched in crevasses of the Afghan psyche. One of which is the fact that power has been concentrated in the hands of a few so-called ethnic leaders who have monopolized resources for themselves and their cronies, with little regard for anyone else. Having deep roots in this conservative society, even if their popular support has somewhat waned, they are still recognized as pillars of Afghan society and consulted on issues. Power is shared with them, disregarding the technocrats and those local leaders who are qualified, just and legitimate representative of the local people. There is little effort to support the rise of new leadership yet there are cries about why democracy fails in Afghanistan – often by the same people who support warlords calling them power brokers and ethnic leaders. However, once political and financial support is stopped to these traditional leaders, they would no longer be a factor politically.

On the other hand, in a country destroyed by decades of war, where the stakeholders have lived and ruled by the gun, whose entire existence depends on guns, and they have been placed in positions of prominence by using guns, will they be able, even if not willing, to lay down their guns and surrender their armies? As soon as they disarm,



people will attack them with the fury of the past four decades, avenging every land-grab, loot, indiscriminate killing, forced marriage, and the like. Therefore, when wielding guns means power, position, prestige, wealth and longer life, why would the stakeholders seek peace? Thus, peace is not profitable to traditional stakeholders, and consequently sustainable peace will not take place, unless these stakeholders profit from peace, or better yet, they are no longer stakeholders and a new generation of Afghans is empowered.

### **The Proverbial Truth**

It is fashionable to state that ‘I want to know the truth;’ however, in reality we do not really want to know the truth. Instead, we want to hear assurances and get validation, because truth hurts and most of us do not have the maturity to handle it properly. If someone says that ‘Afghans don’t have the culture for peace’, many might readily object, or even be offended. However, deep down, in our considered conscience, we agree with the statement, regardless of how sad it may be. It is not that Afghans do not know what the problem is and how to fix it, but years of broken promises and unpopular political compromises has continuously disappointed people to the point of breaking the Afghan spirit. Thus, they no longer believe in ideals, instead they are taking what they can now, to survive another day. The degree of wrongs to which the Afghan people have been exposed to, have made them desperately vengeful of the process and extremely cynical of politicians, so much so, that having no faith in the democratic process, they sell their votes to the highest bidder, so that they take from the candidates something, over whom they have some influence prior to the elections, knowing that once elected, officials would not be accountable. Consequently, the disappointments, cynicism and short-sightedness have desensitized Afghans severely to the point which they impede any tangible and

solid progress that Afghans could potentially make toward peace and progress.

For example, a smoker knows that smoking is bad for him, possibly it can kill him, but he still smokes. Even the message that ‘smoking may lead to death’ is clearly written on the cigarette package, but this fact is lost on the smoker. Cannot the smoker read and comprehend? Similarly, just as having a lean athletic body is desirable by many, and common sense tells us that to achieve it, one must have uncompromising discipline, exercise regularly and subscribe to a healthy diet. Both, the effects of smoking and exercise are common knowledge, so why are not we all smoke free and in great shape? While positive reinforcement has its merits, the question to answer is: is it really a lack of knowledge or a lack of will that Afghans are where they are?

Afghanistan is not ready for peace because we do not have the preconditions to peace, such as a general acceptance or tolerance of each other, common national identity, a unified nation under common goals and ideals, general trust in each other, common belief in an agreed upon set of rules or values, mutual respect, understanding of one’s place, self-esteem, higher expectations of ourselves and others, a professional class of diplomats, a mature intellectual class, a culture based on reason and logic and fair and just law enforcement agencies and court systems. Thus, any attempts for peace in Afghanistan would be temporary, unless pre-conditions for peace are achieved. Again, it is not that Afghan politicians or our foreign friends do not know how peace is achieved.