

The Coming Fall of Kabul

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The city of Kabul has fallen on three occasions over the past generation: to the *mujahedin* in 1992, the Taliban in 1996, and the Northern Alliance (supported by a U.S. aerial bombing campaign) in the aftermath of September 11. Since the Taliban's overthrow, the United States has spearheaded a costly state-rebuilding effort but with little to actually show for it. U.S. military forces now appear to be intent on withdrawing from Afghanistan, and Washington will likely retain only a small contingent force (if any) post-2016. Could Kabul possibly fall again in the near future, presumably to the Taliban?

This memo analyzes whether political violence will remain a standard feature of Afghan politics in the coming years. The chances that the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan will endure past 2016 are very high. Rampant corruption within the Afghan government, operating in tandem with a predominantly drug-based economy, inhibits the consolidation of a ruling regime that is able to assert its political authority throughout the country. Consequently, the Afghan government remains dependent upon the United States for its survival. In addition, the Taliban do not seek to engage in negotiations with the Afghan government, on account of the latter's perceived weakness and the likelihood that foreign aid will begin to dissipate soon. In light of concern over a possible Taliban resurgence, the United States may thus ultimately decide to stay militarily engaged (or perhaps reengage after officially vacating from Afghanistan), but not indefinitely. Acts of political violence will likely continue to serve as a defining feature of Afghan politics, and Kabul might well fall again soon, plunging the country into chaos and despair.

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A Dysfunctional Democracy in Dire Straits

Afghanistan is in bad shape. According to the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index*, Afghanistan's ranking has hovered between "6" and "7" from the years [2009-2014](#), signifying it to be one of the most unstable states in the world. Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* has also consistently ranked Afghanistan from [2009 to 2014](#) as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. How can this be after nearly fourteen years of state-rebuilding efforts? In fairness, Afghanistan has been trying to pull itself out of a cycle of violence that stretches back even prior to the Soviet-Afghan War. Yet endemic corruption continues to stymie economic development. As a result, the Afghan government remains extremely [dependent upon aid](#) from international donors, and a substantial portion of this foreign assistance has been lost. To further complicate matters, the opium market dominates the economic landscape. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the year [2014](#) marks the highest level in opium cultivation in twenty years, with increases occurring every year since 2009-2010.

The Afghan government thus faces a difficult challenge. Years of war have ravaged the country's infrastructure, industry, and human capital, while corruption and the drug trade hinder the resuscitation of the economy. As long as the economy resides in a state of dependency, Afghanistan will stay a failed state incapable of projecting its authority.

That said, Afghanistan needs to also address another major issue in order to free itself from its current hardships; the country is still mired in a protracted civil war with no end in sight. Discussions between the Afghan government and the Taliban have so far yielded no results. Part of the reason why the Taliban do not wish to engage in formal talks is because they are demanding that the U.S. military [completely withdraw](#) from Afghanistan as a precondition to partaking in negotiations with the Afghan government. But the recent spate of deadly attacks in the Afghan capital suggest that the Taliban perceive the Afghan government to be brittle, and that Kabul will be up for grabs once the U.S. military is gone. By killing innocent civilians, the Taliban are not trying to enhance their popular legitimacy. They are, however, striking fear into the hearts of ordinary Afghans and reducing their sense of confidence in the Afghan government's ability to protect them.

Why have the United States and the Afghan government so far not succeeded in militarily suppressing the Taliban? The United States tried to implement a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan several years ago, but it largely failed on account of the fact that the Taliban and other insurgent groups are able to operate from "sanctuaries" inside of neighboring Pakistan.² Although Islamabad has occasionally

² Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* 92.5 (Sep./Oct. 2013): 59-74.

demonstrated its willingness to confront radical Islamic groups within Pakistan's borders, the Taliban have proven to be a very resilient force.

Afsyraqistan

At present, it is unclear as to whether Afghanistan will descend into chaos and come to resemble Iraq and Syria, in which governments have forfeited large swaths of territory to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an entity that poses a clear and present danger not only to Baghdad and Damascus but neighboring states as well. Theoretically, a Taliban-led state or type of "[phantom state](#)" could come into existence in Afghanistan in the near future, particularly if the U.S. military vacates the country. Thus, Afghanistan may soon start to break apart like Iraq and Syria, but perhaps with one crucial difference. Although the Iraqi and Syrian governments have surrendered substantial portions of their territories, they nonetheless remain intact and will likely endure, for certain foreign powers are willing to assist them and local elites have not factionalized to the point that these governments are incapable of exercising power. The situation in Afghanistan is far more fluid in nature. Will Afghan elites band together or splinter in the face of such a danger? And what will the United States ultimately do if Afghanistan begins to look more like Iraq or Syria?

The United States' decision to militarily confront ISIL indicates that Washington still retains some appetite for war. Might Washington adhere to a similar policy in Afghanistan in the interest of U.S. national security? It seems logical for the United States to want to continue to defend the Afghan government, which the United States essentially founded and has nurtured since ousting the Taliban from power. But if a scenario involving a U.S. military withdrawal (presumably by the close of 2016) and the Taliban's subsequent resurgence were to materialize in the coming years, then the United States would find itself reengaging (in some capacity) based on the objective of preventing the fall of Kabul. And herein lies the difficulty with reengaging; U.S. legislators would have to defend renewed U.S. involvement in a war with few tangible benefits for elected officeholders. Domestic political considerations will surely hamper any sustained U.S. assistance program post-2016.³

Afghanistan is staring into an abyss. The world may soon bear witness to its collapse, with foreign fighters flowing into the country and former Afghan warlords defecting from the government and remilitarizing their own private armies. In the interest of avoiding such a scenario, the United States will likely continue to try to impede the formation of a Taliban state-like entity that could effectively challenge the Afghan government's authority. To do this, the United States has to work with President Ashraf Ghani's administration and neighboring countries (chiefly Pakistan) to thwart the

³ Stephen Biddle, "Ending the War in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* 92.5 (Sep./Oct. 2013): 49-58.

group's quest to conquer territory and amass resources that would allow for it to rule over multiple population centers.

Yet this requires time and effort. Moreover, there is no guarantee that such a strategy would succeed in the long run on account of the extremely fragile condition of the Afghan government. If Kabul falls it most likely will be due to an implosion of the Afghan political system from within. The scandal surrounding the 2014 Afghan presidential election between Ghani and his main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, is a case in point; the U.S.-brokered compromise solution (which arranged for the two men to [share power](#)) revealed the precarious nature of elite rivalries that define contemporary Afghan politics. Acts of political violence will likely keep occurring across the country due to the limited capacity of the Afghan government to protect civilians, the dependency-centric nature of the economy, bitter elite rivalries, and the tenacity of the enemy. Still, by maintaining a military presence in the country and working to inhibit the Taliban's transformation from an insurgency into a state-like entity, Washington can prevent Kabul from falling, at least for the time being.

Hoping for Change

Getting the Taliban to officially renounce the use of violence and accept democracy as the legitimate form of governance for Afghanistan would be a most welcome development. But the fact is that we are nowhere near realizing such aims. The hard truth is that the Afghan government cannot endure without sustained foreign aid, and the Taliban are betting that the international community will soon depart. If the Taliban capture Kabul, then the ensuing fallout will be disastrous for U.S. security interests. The United States (by working mainly with Afghanistan and Pakistan) will thus likely carry on in its efforts to deny the Taliban the opportunity to transform into a state-like entity. Doing so entails the U.S. military remaining engaged in this theater in some capacity for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, Afghanistan and Pakistan need to understand that the patience of the international community is wearing extremely thin. The most crucial steps to bringing about an end to this conflict are improving Afghanistan's domestic governance and revamping Pakistan's foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan stands as a battle of wills among a variety of state and non-state actors. The United States' willingness to keep playing an assisting role in Afghanistan's future largely depends upon Kabul and Islamabad's willingness to change their ways.

If Afghanistan's elites continue to refrain from embracing reform and empowering institutions and Pakistan remains unable and/or unwilling to deny the Taliban sanctuary, then any U.S. strategy to prevent the rise of a Taliban state-like entity will fail in the long run. Bearing this in mind, the United States needs to start thinking about how to deal with a Taliban-led state if such should arise. In the meantime, however,

Washington should also seriously contemplate whether it is in the United States' best interests to continue serving as the lead foreign backer of such a troubled political system if there is little to no hope for change from within.

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