



The US' Intervention in Afghanistan 2001 – 2021



Can the US' Intervention in Afghanistan be
Considered a Success? – Alisha Arora | Niamh
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Abstract

This paper explores the success of the US' intervention in Afghanistan, according to the set of goals listed in official government archives from 2001-2021. This paper's definition of 'success' concentrates on the durability of US achievements in the region, and on how long Afghans benefited from the US' intervention.

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Introduction

The US' intervention in Afghanistan is an extremely under-researched area and is a controversial topic. America has been heavily criticised about both their inconsistent intentions and the nature of their withdrawal.

In reaction to the attack on the World Trade Centres in 2001 (9/11), President Bush insisted that his decision to invade Afghanistan was not to build a stable nation, (Biden, 2021) but Biden's abrupt withdrawal of US troops, after a 20-year deployment, sparked outrage in both the general public and the political world. (BBC news, 2021) Troops left Afghanistan in stages, with the final fleet departing on August 30th, marking the end of the longest formal war in American history.

American withdrawal precipitated the return of the Taliban who now control the region from the capital, Kabul. (Kagan, 2021)

With reference to the US' accomplishments as stated in official government archives, this paper will assess whether the US' invasion of Afghanistan was successful. Success will be determined by whether the initial targets were achieved. (Office, 2009)

As seen in the US governments 2001-2009 archives (The Coalition Information Center, 2001), these are the stated objectives of the US during their time in Afghanistan:

1. Begin to destroy al-Qaeda's grip on Afghanistan by driving the Taliban from power and destroy al-Qaeda terrorist training camps.
2. Help the innocent people of Afghanistan recover from the Taliban's reign of terror.
3. Disrupt al-Qaeda's global operations and terrorist financing networks.
4. Help Afghans put aside long-standing differences to form a new interim government that represents all Afghans – including women.

Destroying Al-Qaeda's Grip on Afghanistan

The US invasion of Afghanistan

In 2001, Al-Qaeda launched their infamous attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC. (Laub & Maizland, 2021) What is less known is that Al-Qaeda also approved a fourth hijack which resulted in a plane crashing into a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers and crew onboard regained control of the aircraft. (Onion, et al., 2010) Although Afghanistan was the base for al-Qaeda, none of the hijackers were Afghan nationals. Fifteen Saudi Arabian terrorists were led by an Egyptian, Mohammed Atta. President Bush may have feared that the teachings of al-Qaeda had travelled beyond the borders of Afghanistan; non-Afghans were now joining the terrorist organisation. (Laub & Maizland, 2021)

This prompted Bush to deliver a speech in 2001, in which he named al-Qaeda the "Enemies of Freedom" and referred to them as a "continuing threat." (The Washington Post, 2001)



On September 18th, Bush signed a joint resolution into law which approved the use of force against “those responsible” for the attack on the US. The US’ initial aim was simply to rid Afghanistan of Taliban forces and prevent the return of al-Qaeda. (Kagan, 2021)

The joint resolution paved the way for the US military, with help from the British, to launch “Operation Enduring Freedom” and begin a bombing campaign against the Taliban forces.

The first phase of the War primarily involved US air strikes on al-Qaeda bases from October 7th. Twelve days later, the conventional ground forces arrived, and combat between the Taliban and Afghan soldiers ensued.

The Taliban was further weakened after multiple offensives in Taloqan (November 11), Bamiyan (November 11), Herat (November 12) and most importantly Kabul (November 13). US intelligence pinpointed the location of al-Qaeda’s leader, Bin Laden, before he swiftly escaped to Pakistan.

In 2001, the Founder and leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mohammed Omar, also fled the country. Despite al-Qaeda fighters continuing to hide out in the mountains, the bombing campaign and a lack of leadership caused the Taliban regime to collapse in December of 2001. (Kagan, 2021)

The US’ goal had been achieved. Moreover, their expulsion of the Taliban was swift, taking place from October to December 2001. This efficiency must count as part of their success.

Destroying al-Qaeda's camps

Taliban training camps were a target for the US. A multi-day operation by the US in Southern Afghanistan, involving 200 Special Operations forces, attacked ‘probably the largest’ al-Qaeda training camp near Tora Bora. (Myers, 2004). The Taliban movement in 2001, led to Afghan training camps like ‘Khalden’ to be shut down. (Myers, 2004).

The resurgence of the Taliban

Despite the US’ operation being successful up until this point, they would be met with strong resistance by the Taliban. An interim government was created by the US in 2002, lasting until their departure in 2021. (UNHCR, 2003) It seemed as though their initial goal of dismantling al-Qaeda had been met.

However, it can be argued that this success was negated by their hasty withdrawal in 2021.

The congressionally chartered Afghanistan study group alerted the US that an abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan could result in restoration of a terrorist threat to the US homeland within ‘eighteen months to three years.’ (Boot, 2021) Under the Doha agreement of 2020, the Taliban assured President Trump that Afghan territory would not be used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the US. (Biden, 2021)

It was in this agreement that the US also agreed to completely disclose the timeline of their withdrawal to the Taliban and reaffirmed their readiness to conduct military operations, with the



consent of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, to prevent al-Qaeda from attacking American soil. (Laub & Mainzland, 2021)

President Biden's speech in April 2021 announced the timeline for the US' withdrawal.

Immediately, the Taliban, which had been capturing territory across Afghanistan throughout their peace talks with the Afghan government, redoubled their attacks on the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces bases. As the majority of US troops were leaving Afghanistan – there were only 650 still in the country – the Taliban seized more and more territory. The summer of 2021 saw the Taliban threatening and taking government-controlled areas and border crossings. After they captured the capital of Southern Nimruz Province, the Taliban gained control over several other provincial capitals. On August 15th, they entered Kabul, and were met with little resistance from the Afghan army. This prompted the President, Ashraf Ghani, to flee the country. The government created by the US collapsed.

When assessing the US' success in achieving their first goal, it is necessary to remember this detail; Al-Qaeda is associated with the Taliban through a pledge of allegiance called a 'bay'ah' which was established in the 1990s by Osama Bin Laden. (El-Bay, 2021) The US recognised that in order to ensure their safety against al-Qaeda, they had to remove the Taliban from power. Their Doha agreement stipulated that the Taliban would essentially take responsibility for Afghanistan-US relations. This could be interpreted as a resumption of Taliban power in Afghanistan, which could result in Afghan land being used as a launchpad for a terrorist attack.

As of June 2022, the country is run by the head of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhунzada. With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, US safety against al-Qaeda is not guaranteed. Considering the US' reasoning behind their invasion of Afghanistan was to expel the Taliban government, based on the information gathered here the US could be considered unsuccessful in achieving this aim.

It is perhaps too soon to be certain of this failure, as the newly resurrected Taliban Government could go on to operate differently to the old regime for which intervention was deemed necessary by the US Government. Some could argue that while not part of the original objectives, a new Taliban government, that operates in line with the standards expected by the US, could constitute the successful achievement of this initial objective, but via a different route. However, given the recent and ongoing actions of the Taliban, it would appear that this scenario is unlikely – which lends credence to the idea that the US were unsuccessful in achieving this aim.

Helping Innocent Afghans Recover After the Taliban Regime

Following the Taliban's reign, Afghanistan was left in a vulnerable and unstable position. US government archives reveal that the combination of years of civil war, Taliban rule and the worst drought for 30 years left Afghanistan in a dire humanitarian situation. (The Coalition Information Center, 2001) In 2001, President Bush stated that the US was 'united in their concern for the innocent people of Afghanistan.' From 2001 onwards, the US was the primary provider for humanitarian aid.



According to government archives from 2001 to 2009, the US have been involved in extensive programmes aimed at bettering the lives of Afghans.

Immediate humanitarian aid

USAID (United States Agency for International Development) Administrator Andrew Natsios announced a five-point assistance plan for Afghanistan:

- Reduce death rates,
- Reduce population movements
- Lower and then maintain food prices
- Make sure that aid reaches those who need it
- Begin developmental relief programmes

(The Coalition Information Center, 2001)

USAID provided funding for blankets, shelter kits, plastic sheeting and tents. USAID provided physical mattresses, clothes, stoves, cooking sets, firewood, coal, lanterns and water containers. The US provided medical kits and funds for health centres and mobile clinics in Afghanistan, and sponsored public health education and programmes on hygiene, maternal and childcare, and malnutrition. USAID employed trained personnel to conduct courses on basic health and nutrition, especially for women. USAID helped pregnant women, training local midwives and funding the distribution of vitamins and the immunisation of young children. The US government provided funds for rehabilitation and reconstruction in the areas of housing, roads and bridges, wells and irrigation systems, agriculture and food security. (The Coalition Information Centers, 2001)

President Biden claimed that the US had spent \$2 trillion. (Biden, 2021) According to official documents, from 2002 to 2021, the US spent \$131.3 billion on 'reconstructive activities.' Most of this money went towards developing Afghan forces, the national army and the police force, all with the aim of better protecting the Afghan people. Nearly \$36 billion was assigned to development and governance, with smaller amounts allocated to anti-drug efforts and humanitarian aid. (Sigar, 2021)

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, the US has persisted in sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. As recently as March 2022, the US announced that it would donate a further \$204 million, bringing the total of US humanitarian aid for Afghanistan to \$4.6 billion since 2002, the largest amount of aid received from any country. (USAID, 2022) The US has persisted in providing humanitarian support to Afghanistan and can be considered successful in helping innocent Afghans recover.

The US's development of Afghan infrastructure

As well as helping Afghans obtain everyday necessities, such as food and clean water, the US helped to create a more reliable infrastructure, such as their development of the judicial system, which was lacking under the Taliban's rule. (Hazim, 2022).



Following the Taliban's defeat in 2001, Afghanistan adopted a constitution which incorporated both Islamic and relatively liberal, western principles from 2004 onwards. (Hazim, 2022).

In response to the creation of this new constitution, multiple laws and legal processes attuned to those of the progressive world were passed in the hopes of developing and modernising Afghanistan's justice system. Despite the constitution harbouring several design flaws, it had potential to catalyse a democratic political system and basic rights for all. The US created development programmes with the aim of rejuvenating the Afghan legal system, encouraging institutional refinements and inspiring more people to enter the legal systems as judges or attorneys, most of whom would receive legal education and be given the opportunity to travel as part of their studies. Although in practice, the system struggled with issues such as corruption and poor execution, the US helped to create a stronger, more righteous legal system which served Afghan civilians better than the Taliban's legal system (Hazim, 2022).

Following the US' withdrawal in 2021, it seems as though all that the US achieved has been made ineffective. Although the Taliban has not revoked any of the laws enacted by the US during their 20 year intervention, they have ignored them. They have made clear that they will rule in compliance with Sharia law, although they have not made clear how it is to be interpreted (Jeong, et al., 2021). Other than the Taliban suggesting that they might govern in accordance with King Zahir Shah's Constitution in 2021, they have not considered any other form of constitutional order. They have been purposefully ambiguous on the fate of a number of regulations concerning criminal law, family law and juvenile law. The Taliban have claimed that they respect international law so long as it does not breach Sharia law. (Gul, 2022)

Despite the Taliban's ministry of defence claiming that girls' secondary education would restart, their decision was overruled by the group's central leadership, who insisted that the schools would remain closed until they came up with a "comprehensive" and "Islamic" plan. As of June 2022, three months have passed and there have been no further talks of reopening girls' schools. (Qargha, 2022)

When assessing the US' humanitarian contributions to the Afghan people, the US can be considered successful in their aim to help Afghan civilians recover from the Taliban reign. With starvation and malnutrition rampant in Afghanistan due to the Taliban's neglect, (W Bush, 2001) the US provided necessary means for recovery, which continued until after their exit. Although this portion of their attempt to recover the lives of Afghans could be deemed successful, their developments of Afghanistan's infrastructure were less so. Having granted Afghans a more promising legal system and education scheme, the US failed, in their peace talks with the Taliban, to ensure improvements in legality and education would be upheld. Unfortunately, the Doha agreement only stipulated the US' safety against al-Qaeda but failed to ensure that the infrastructure that they had developed would endure. The US was unsuccessful in ensuring the continuity of essential facilities for Afghans which had been neglected during Taliban rule.



Us Disruption of Terrorist Financing

On November 7th, 2001, the Bush administration released a list of 62 organisations and individuals who they considered to have financial ties with Osama Bin Laden.

In 2004, The Committee on Government Affairs gathered to discuss the issue of terrorist organisations being funded. In this meeting, they vowed to follow Saudi Arabia's suit, and tackle terrorism by cutting off its income.

Closure of banks with suspected links to al-Qaeda

The US tried to disrupt terrorist financing networks by accusing and attempting to close companies or organisations that seemed to fund al-Qaeda missions. Their first target was a Somalian group of companies known as Al-Bakarat, most commonly used to transfer money. (BBC, 2006) In 2001, the US accused Al-Bakarat, claiming not only that broker had funnelled millions of US dollars into terrorist groups including al-Qaeda, thus helping to fund terrorism, but that Al-Bakarat was specifically involved in the transferal of funds used in the 9/11 (Greenburg & Wille, 2001)

The US closure of Al-Bakarat did not affect al-Qaeda's income, but it did mean that Somalis were denied access to the internet and were unable to receive money from relatives outside the country, money that 80% of Somalis depended on. As Al-Bakarat had involvement with telecommunications, banking and postal services, the US' decision to freeze its assets had dire consequences for Somalis. (Barise, 2001)

As part of the US' financial war against al-Qaeda, the US, alongside the Swiss government, prosecuted the Al Taqwa bank as they suspected the bank of financing various terrorist organisations, including al-Qaeda.

It was claimed that Al Taqwa held secret accounts which were used to transfer money to organisations which funded terrorist attacks. The money would apparently flow from Kuwait and the UAE, (Hosenball, 2004). Al Taqwa has never been criminally charged by the US.

The US also went on to launch three new organisations: the Foreign Terrorist Asset Tracking Center (FTAT), Operation Green Quest and the Terrorist Financing Force (The Coalition Information Center, 2001) They froze the assets of an Islamic charity, The Holy Land Foundation for Development and Relief, and prosecuted several of its workers for "enabling support for terrorist groups (The Coalition Information Centers, 2001)

The US' efforts to disrupt al-Qaeda's financial network were successful to some extent. They managed to prosecute specific banks accused of funding terrorist activities. However, as seen in Al-Bakarat's case, their suspicions were sometimes unfounded. (Greenburg & Wille, 2001). The newly created organisations aimed at facilitating the flow of information between different intelligence and law enforcement agencies helped encourage other countries to identify the funders of terrorist activity. This developed into 142 countries issuing orders freezing terrorist funds, and requesting the US' help tracking suspicious financial transfers more efficiently. The US can be considered successful in



leading a global effort to disrupt al-Qaeda's financial network as they managed to disrupt the flow of money between terrorist organisations and encouraged other nations to do the same.

Creation of an Inclusive Afghan Government

Under the Taliban, women were victims of inadequate healthcare, deprivation of education and lack of political voice and power due to the regressive, conservative nature of Afghanistan's society and rules. Following the intervention of the US, women's lives saw some improvement.

Women's Health

Women of reproductive age faced problems due to inadequate health care and the conservative views of Afghan society. More than 90% of women gave birth at home without professional assistance. Even if a primary health clinic was available, 70% failed to offer basic child and mother services, and 90% of hospitals lacked equipment to perform C-sections. More than 80% of functioning health facilities had NGO (non-government organisation) involvement; however, aid was unevenly spread, concentrating on urban areas. (Reddy, 2014) After the downfall of the Taliban and during the US's intervention, 3,135 functional health facilities were constructed. (Felbab-Brown, 2020) This offered 87% of Afghans access to medical aid within 2 hours distance. Therefore, it can be derived that the US's intervention had a positive impact on the healthcare system in Afghanistan.

Women's Education and employment

The Taliban limited access to schooling for Afghan women. Not only was there a lack of both facilities and female teachers, but a culturally determined notion held that education for women was "unnecessary" or "harmful". (Reddy, 2014) This could imply that the US's objective of 'building a nation' was being met, and the US did have a positive effect on the standard and quality of living for the next generation of Afghan women.

The Taliban banned all female employment. A dominant contributor (roughly 80-90%) to the Afghan economy was the informal sector (part of the economy that is not taxed or monitored by the government). Exchange services between households made a large contribution to monetised work in the economy. (Olivier, 2014) The only jobs women could partake in outside their homes were poppy cultivating and opium harvesting. Considering women were such a driving force of the informal sector, the Taliban came to a compromise. Data from 2003, states that 21% of all permanent government employees were women. By 2021, 21% of Afghan civil servants were women and 16% of those women were in senior management levels. (Reddy, 2014)

Legal system and judiciary and Women's political participation

There is ambiguity in what exactly were the laws set for Afghan women, however what we can be sure of is their conservative and prejudiced nature. Women were not allowed to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male relative. Their testimonies, according to Sharia law, were worth half of that of a man, making it tougher for female defendants to be proven innocent in court. On 5th



March 2003, the government of Afghanistan gave formal consent and signed a treaty with the UN's 'convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.' (The United Nations, 1979) The judiciary, to date, is a male dominated board, with only 27 females and 2006 males. We could infer from this data that the US' intervention didn't have a large impact on women's participation in the legal system.

Ten years after the 2001 attack on the Taliban, Afghanistan had 69 female members of parliament. Though progress is inferred to be uneven and fluctuating, the US's intervention did make significant steps to meeting their aims and bettering the social and economic state of Afghanistan. (Reddy, 2014)

Conclusion & Discussion

In conclusion, the US made considerable progress in Afghanistan. Their development of the infrastructure and efforts to improve the standard of living for women meant that Afghanistan evolved into a more stable nation. Their dedication to providing humanitarian aid made it so that civilians received the necessities that they had been denied under Taliban rule, and their primary aim of expelling the Taliban was achieved in under a year.

The word successful means 'accomplishing a desired aim or result'. In accordance with the definition and the aims stated by the archives, it could be argued that the US did accomplish their set goals for their intervention prior to their withdrawal. However, their goals were only met for as long as the US remained in Afghanistan, and their withdrawal nullified most of their success. Afghanistan, as of June 2022, is in a similar position to that before US involvement. The US' withdrawal is integral in understanding the US' lack of success. Their desperation to pull out meant that the Doha Agreement of 2020 did not rigorously ensure the longevity of the changes they made to the country; the US may have feared that complex stipulations which the Taliban would contest may extend their presence in Afghanistan.

The resurgence of the Taliban in the wake of the American withdrawal, meant that much of what the US had achieved was negated. The US' developments in the infrastructure were reversed by the Taliban, and women reverted to a passive role in society. By creating a situation whereby, the Taliban could return to government, the US has limited Afghanistan's potential to develop in the future. The decision to invite the Taliban back to power also contradicts their primary aim of expelling them, meaning the US has failed at achieving their most fundamental goal.

This paper can outline American aims and their outcomes clearly; however, there is a lack of concrete evidence in relation to the actual structure of Afghanistan's economy and government prior to US intervention. This leads to ambiguity in any conclusions drawn regarding growth and development during the intervention. Further research may also be needed on the impacts the state of the Afghan economy prior to US intervention and their attacks on al-Qaeda camps.



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