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## Afterlives of the United States' Withdrawal From Afghanistan

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Afterlives of the United States' Withdrawal From Afghanistan

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Dedication

This project is wholeheartedly dedicated to my three nephews and my beloved Dad who have been and will be my source of hope and strenght.

To my sisters, mother, and friends who have shared their encouragement and support to finish my studies.

Lastly, I dedicate this project to my fellow people in Afghanistan.

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## **Abstract**

The present research investigated the effects of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 that led to a massive evacuation of thousands from the country and how Afghan Bard College students perceived these events. To gain insight into these questions, I interviewed eight Bard College Afghan students on what they think of the past twenty years of war, the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban and their relationship with al-Qaeda as well as the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the current and future situation in Afghanistan. The results of interviews showed that people of Afghanistan are disappointed and feel betrayed by the US's decision to withdraw hastily from the country considering people of Afghanistan have been US allies in the fight against terrorism. The results also showed that the US isn't seen as a superpower anymore due to its foreign policies toward Afghanistan and terrorism.

*Key words: The U.S., Afghanistan, the Taliban, Evacuation, 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. foreign policy, superpower.*

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## **Introduction**

Uncertainty, chaos and horror started when the Taliban took control of the largest and closest cities to the capital of Afghanistan like Mazare Sharif, Nangarhar, Herat, Kandahar, and Logar in 2021. As the Taliban continued to grow their territory by taking over more provinces, cities and districts, people became more terrified as the possibility of a civil war in Afghanistan increased as well. They started forming lines behind the entrances of banks and supermarkets to get money and food. In all his speeches to the public, Ashraf Ghani, the former president of Afghanistan, assured people of resistance against the Taliban. Meanwhile, on August 15, 2021, the Taliban fighters and leaders entered Kabul City, the capital. Ashraf Ghani ran away with his close friends and allies which led to an even more unpredictable situation.

In a matter of days, everything changed in Afghanistan. A nation of over forty million people collapsed, and the Taliban, a misogynist and terrorist group, took over. The nightmare that people feared for years came to reality. People were trying to hide or take a chance and go to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport to board any plane that could take them to safety. By the end of August 2021, the United States and its allies withdrew from Afghanistan and hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated or forced to flee the country to different parts of the world. Around hundred of those have been relocated to Bard College. The question that this project examines is "did the United State's (US) withdrawal from Afghanistan and the fall of Kabul change Bard College's Afghan students' perceptions of the US, the war, and the current situation in Afghanistan?" This project will be primarily focusing on how the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the following foreign policy changes might have affected these students.

To find the answer, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Bard College students from Afghanistan. The insights gained from these interviews will be presented in the following pages which I hope will contribute to a broader understanding of how the war on terror, more broadly, has transformed the image of the U.S. these students have.

The most important points that my interviewees agreed on are the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan was a tragic disaster leaving millions behind in destitute to a terrorist group. This withdrawal proved that the US failed in, and didn't fulfill, the goals of its mission. There was no clear exit plan leading both countries into over two decades of war. The US foreign policy, according to my interviewees, was flawed and incomplete from the beginning. The US left its allies behind to a terrorist group which has led to further deaths and suffering. This also means that the people of Afghanistan will never trust the US again. Evacuation process was another disastrous event. Majority of those who were evacuated are living in limbo now, two years after they were evacuated.

It has been two years of Taliban reign, and Afghanistan has been going backwards since then affecting the marginalized communities, especially women and girls as they have been banned from work and getting an education. Women are in danger of being eliminated completely from every field of society as they continue to lose all their basic human rights. Teenage girls are being sold or forced into marriages in order to guarantee the life of the rest of the family. Child marriage is becoming more pervasive. People are struggling due to the worsening situation of the economy. The Taliban are on a mission to set up a segregated Afghanistan. No one is allowed to criticize the Taliban; there is no freedom of speech. My



interviewees' agreed that the Taliban's inability to govern due to their lack of experience is also a concern. These events that occurred in Afghanistan have changed how the people of Afghanistan perceive the US. It used to be considered a superpower, but now people cannot trust the US.

## **Chapter 1: The US Invasion of Afghanistan**

Twenty-two years ago, on September 11, 2001, several airliners were hijacked. “A group of nineteen men affiliated with al-Qaeda—fifteen from Saudi Arabia, two from the United Arab Emirate, one from Lebanon, and one from Egypt—hijacked four US airliners and flew two of them into the World Trade Center towers, another into the Pentagon, while the fourth crashed in rural Pennsylvania when the passengers attempted to retake the cockpit.”<sup>1</sup> People were horrified, shocked and in disbelief that something this huge could happen to a superpower. The world changed from that moment and an unending new cycle of events started affecting the entire world.

In this first section of my project, I offer a brief history of the US invasion of Afghanistan and its consequences. I start with the 9/11 terrorist attacks which led to the global war on terror and the invasion of Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden was given a shelter by the Taliban government. I then offer an evaluation of the democratization process and its consequences promoted by the US there and how women in particular benefited from it. I conclude by

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<sup>1</sup> Duvall, John N., and Robert P. Marzec. “NARRATING 9/11.” *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 57, no. 3 (2011): 381. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287207>.

outlining the further losses experienced there after the US withdrawal and Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the US and its allies including Canada, Britain, Germany, and Australia responded immediately starting with strikes and ground operations targeting terrorist training camps run by al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. President Bush's demands from the Taliban were clear; expel al-Qaeda and hand over bin Laden.<sup>2</sup> The Taliban refused. "Mullah Omar also stated that bin Laden and al-Qaeda were guests of the Taliban and the Afghan people and that the Taliban would never surrender bin Laden to the United States"<sup>3</sup> Bin Laden was treated as a guest by the Taliban and a proprietor. The relationship between Mullah Mohammad Omar, the leader of the Taliban, and bin Laden was extraordinarily strong. When Mullah Mohammad Omar was chosen as the Emir of the Taliban group, Osama swore allegiance to him. The leadership of al-Qaeda always supported the Taliban regime and had an enormous influence over them.

The US had not issued a formal declaration of war since World War II; President Bush "did not want a declaration of war from the Congress but would be interested in a resolution endorsing the use of force."<sup>4</sup> This war had the support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan was the first Asian country that NATO got involved to fight terrorism. This war in Afghanistan led by the US was justified. First, Osama bin Laden, the most wanted

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<sup>2</sup> "CIA'S Final Report: No WMD Found in Iraq." NBC.Com. NBC News, April 25, 2005. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7634313>.

<sup>3</sup> Armanjani, Jon. "The Taliban Chapter," *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*. Edited by Muhammad Afzal Upal, and Carole M. Cusack. Brill. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.22>.

<sup>4</sup> Redfield, Marc. "The Sovereign and the Terrorist." *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*. Fordham University Press. 2009. <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823231232.003.0008>.

<sup>5</sup> Hoehn, Andrew R., and Sarah Harting. "Redefining NATO's Role: 9/11 to Afghanistan." in *Risking NATO*. RAND Corporation. 2010. <https://doi.org/16>.

terrorist, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks and the leader of al-Qaeda, was given shelter there.<sup>6</sup> Second, members, fighters and leaders of Al-Qaeda were supported and provided safe haven by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Taliban and al-Qaeda were threats to the safety and security of the world. And, finally, the people of Afghanistan were ruled by a terrorist regime, the Taliban, who needed to be liberated.

### **Afghanistan Post September 11, 2001**

In October 2001, following the refusal of the Taliban to hand over the leaders of Al-Qaeda to the United States, the American military, supported by the British forces, launched airstrikes against the Al-Qaeda terrorist training camps and the military installation of the Taliban regime. At the same time, about 1,000 American special forces started operations against the Taliban in cooperation with the anti-Taliban coalition in northern Afghanistan.

In 2001, Osama bin Laden fled to the “Tora Bora” caves in Eastern Afghanistan, and the Taliban were defeated. Despite the extensive bombings by the United States Army in the Tora Bora mountains bin Laden managed to escape to Pakistan. In the first international conference on Afghanistan, which was held in 2001, in Bonn, Germany, President Bush declared a complete victory over the Taliban. Two years later, the White House declared the US operation in Afghanistan “Mission Accomplished” and the Pentagon announced the end of large-scale military operations in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan. 2002. *Inside Al Qaeda Book Subtitle: Global Network of Terror*. Columbia University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/guna12692.8>.

<sup>7</sup> “Video Rewind: Bush's 'Mission Accomplished'.” YouTube. HLN, May 1, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BIW6qyrdu4>.

However, the American government's decision to attack Iraq in March 2001 caused a large part of the elite military and intelligence forces of the United States to be sent from Afghanistan to Iraq. This new orientation led to the re-establishment of the Taliban, especially in rural areas, and the gradual increase of the United States forces in several stages. In 2010, Barack Obama, as the new President of the United States, ordered the deployment of more than ten thousand soldiers to Afghanistan in addition to the approximately 17,000 United States forces stationed in Afghanistan to continue fighting the Taliban.<sup>8</sup>

Afghanistan's presidential election in 2013 was accompanied by political tension and confusion due to allegations of voter fraud. Finally, with the mediation of the United States, the National Unity Government was formed and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was nominated as the President and Abdullah Abdullah was nominated as the Chief Executive of Afghanistan. In December 2014, the US and NATO forces officially ended their combat mission and while handing over the war responsibility to the Afghan forces, the mission of foreign forces was limited to training the Afghanistan National Army and air support.<sup>9</sup>

In the years 2015 to 2018, the Taliban attacks intensified again, and except for large cities, control of almost half of the territory of Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban. In 2018, the administration of Donald Trump signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar to end the war in Afghanistan. The next US president, Joe Biden, set September 11, 2021 as the last date for the withdrawal of the United States forces from Afghanistan, and in the same year,

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<sup>8</sup> Gray, Andrew. "Obama Orders 17,000 U.S. Troops to Afghanistan." Reuters. February 17, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghan-troops/obama-orders-17000-u-s-troops-to-afghanistan-idUSTRE51G6F920090217>.

<sup>9</sup> "Transition Ceremony Kicks off Resolute Support Mission." NATO News. NATO, Accessed April 8, 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_116351.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_116351.htm).

the US Army handed over Bagram Air Base, the largest strategic and command center of foreign forces, to the Afghan government.<sup>10</sup>

The United States' failure in ending the Taliban and establishing democracy and democratic values in Afghanistan was another perspective of the longest war of the United States in Afghanistan. The cost of this invasion is extremely high and includes financial, and humanitarian costs for both countries. This longest war in US history according to the people of the United States and Afghanistan was a failure, "US and allied operations in Afghanistan have so far failed to capture bin Laden and, more importantly, failed to get Afghanistan on the track toward stability and democracy."<sup>11</sup>

According to United Nations estimates, the number of human casualties (including Afghan civilians and soldiers) reached 241 thousand people. Thousands of military personnel of the United States were killed during this war. The ones who remained alive had multiple surgeries and many of them are affected mentally. The victims of this war also include the NATO forces. Meanwhile, more than three million Afghan citizens have been forced to migrate to Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian, and European countries, and more than four million people have been displaced from their homes. The US Congress allocated more than one trillion dollars from the federal budget to the Ministry of Defense of this country. But it seems that the war in Afghanistan has cost the United States more. With the expenses and costs of the US Department

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<sup>10</sup> Engel, Richard, Courtney Kube, Marc Smith, and Adela Suliman. "U.S. Military Leaves Bagram Airfield in Major Step in Biden's Afghan Withdrawal." *NBC News* (Kabul), July 2, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/u-s-military-leaves-bagram-airfield-hands-it-afghans-after-n1272958>.

<sup>11</sup> Sloan, Stanley R. "Failure, Success or Mixed Bag? The Foreign and Security Policy Legacy of the George W. Bush Administration." *American Foreign Policy and Transatlantic Relations After the U.S. Elections* 32, no. 8 (2008): 16. Accessed April 16, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45280134>.

of Defense, more than 2.3 trillion dollars have been spent on this war so far, which includes increasing the Pentagon's budget for the army, reconstruction and so-called democratization in the Afghan government, and the training of the Afghan army for years. The Afghanistan war, like previous wars, began with optimistic assessments of an immediate victory, and despite George Bush's warning that it would be long, few thought it would last two decades. But 22 years after the start, the United States is still paying the costs of this long war, which, according to the United States estimation, is the biggest blow to the US military in the last 100 years.

During the invasion, more than 2,300 American military men and women were killed and more than 20,000 were injured. But there are still no correct statistics on the casualties of the Afghan security forces, Afghan civilians, and the Taliban. The aim of this invasion was to destroy al-Qaeda as well as its safe base of operations in Afghanistan by removing the Taliban from power. But the result was not what the people of Afghanistan thought, since the US surrendered Afghanistan to the Taliban, the group that they fought against for 20 years.

### **The Reaction of the People of Afghanistan Towards the US Invasion**

The people of Afghanistan had different reactions about the US. Since Afghanistan is an Islamic country most of its people were angry when the US, a non-Islamic country, invaded Afghanistan. They wanted the US to prove to them that Osama bin Laden was one of the most wanted terrorists and he was sheltered in Afghanistan. Growing up in Afghanistan, I have many times heard people argue that surrendering Osama bin Laden would be against the Afghan culture and Islamic beliefs as he was a guest of the Taliban regime and Afghanistan.

Some people were convinced that after the invasion, democratic and western values would be implemented damaging their religious beliefs and practices, and Afghanistan would not be ruled by Sharia law anymore. Women would be allowed to go out of their house for studying and/or working. There were/are many who thought/think that the “war on terror” started just to secure the United States’ interests. As a result, most conservatives in Afghanistan disagreed with the invasion. Those people believed that it was better to be ruled by a “Muslim Terrorist” than a western country. Nevertheless, there were many others, including women and girls, the marginalized communities, and advocates and activists, who welcomed the invasion as it meant an end to the Taliban’s abusive, misogynist, brutal and terrorist regime.

The Bonn Conference in 2001 was considered a new beginning of a new age in creating a stable and democratic government for Afghanistan. The Bonn conference defined the importance of peace in Afghanistan and considered it as a core value to the region’s peace. The approval of the new constitution, the holding of presidential elections, and the establishment of the legislative council were among the political successes achieved jointly by Afghanistan and its development partners and allies.

Afghanistan had come a long way since 2001. Afghanistan had achieved considerable success in the sectors of governance, education, health, infrastructure, and economy. Large provinces such as Kandahar, Mazar e Sharif, Helmand, Herat, and most importantly Kabul, the capital city, benefited from various development projects that were funded by foreign governments and international organizations. These projects were also a source of employment

for many in the country. The economy in Afghanistan also started to improve as more opportunities were created in the county and import and export business expanded.

Women were one of the main groups who embraced the invasion and the positive changes. Simultaneously with the fall of the Taliban and the formation of a new government system in Afghanistan, women also got the opportunity to take part in the social, political, cultural, and economic fields, and the opportunity for girls to go to school and work. Women worked as judges in the high courts of Afghanistan which was completely against the Taliban and Islamic rules. Under Taliban rule in the 1990s, women were not allowed to work or get an education. They were discriminated against in many ways for the crime of being born a girl. This situation changed after the United States' invasion. The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once stated, "there cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women."<sup>12</sup>

The United States and the UN's projects in Afghanistan had a remarkable effect on a country that was a war zone. Women's presence in schools and universities changed their lives positively. During the Taliban's regime, schools were available just for boys; there were no girls in schools. After the US invasion, thousands of schools for girls and short-term educational programs for women were opened in different zones of Afghanistan. The US promotion projects in Afghanistan were also successful and hundreds of thousands of women were able to get admission to leadership programs that were provided by the US government in Afghanistan. The women who took part in this program were able to find their talents, raise their voices by

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<sup>12</sup> "Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story." Amnesty International UK. Amnesty International, Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://doi.org/>.



knowing their rights, and strengthen their communities by finding a job related to what they learned in promotion projects. Because the impact of international intervention has been most consequential for women, I lay out its details below.

### **Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan in the Last Two Decades**

There weren't many educational opportunities for women, especially in rural areas of Afghanistan. The illiteracy rate was at its highest. Projects provided and funded by countries like the US were sufficiently helpful for women who wanted to study and/ or catch up with the years they had lost during the Taliban's regime. In addition to literacy, these projects also promoted human rights' awareness to educate women about their rights within their families and societies. Education is/was the key to women's empowerment. The idea of getting an education is what shaped the lives of women who were living in Afghanistan after the collapse of the first regime of the Taliban. The invasion eased the ability of getting an education, and girls were able to pursue their dreams by formally attending schools, even if it meant having a class under tents.

Hope, energy, and passion were seen among the girls who were going to school all over Afghanistan. They were determined to keep pursuing education. During the invasion, more than at any other time, girls were allowed to go to schools and universities. It was through education that women were able to represent in various fields such as being a teacher, government employees, journalists, police officers, politicians, taxi drivers, and many others. For example, Habiba Sarabi was the first female governor of Afghanistan and used to govern Bamiyan province. She was the role model for most of the women there.

In addition, women and girls also excelled in sports such as football, volleyball, basketball, and taekwondo in the last two decades. Women were practicing courage and self-esteem on the grounds of sports and with their family and society members. The opportunities were at an elevated level, where women felt embraced and welcomed. Afghan athletes had a high affirmative impact on society and played a key role in inspiring other girls who wanted to join sports but just needed an acknowledgment to make sure that the environment is safe enough for them.

Women had an active presence in media such as TV and radio. Journalism and women's rights were the two major and important points of women joining the media. Though they received threats from terrorist groups like the Taliban, they resisted and served the people of Afghanistan with the most up-to-date news of the day from all over the world. Women who worked in the media aimed to raise awareness and increase the ability and capacity of women working outside. The programs women worked in changed their lives in many ways such as knowing their rights, being in public, and making a network that certainly affected their lives positively. Also, women's presence in the media encouraged other women and girls. Media has helped women to play an active and effective role in their societies in various parts of the country.

Considering the religious community of Afghanistan, it was once unthinkable for a woman to divorce her husband. That mindset was slowly changing as society was getting more informed about human and women's rights. Women facing domestic abuse were able to file for a divorce. The Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Women's Affairs, and safe houses for

women funded by many organizations helped victims of domestic violence. Women were learning how to access their rights.

Two decades, trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives later, America's longest war in Afghanistan was announced to be over after a peace agreement was signed between the US and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar in 2021.<sup>13</sup> The same Taliban who had given shelter to al-Qaeda fighters and leaders, and had killed, injured and terrorized hundreds of thousands. One of the main articles of the agreement was a full withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan, which started with Bagram air base, one of the largest military air bases operated by the US. The base was once home to more than 30,000 US troops. Fighter jets, helicopters, and every technology that was used in the war in Afghanistan were gone in the middle of the night. While the Taliban were making advances on the battlefields in different parts of Afghanistan, the military of Afghanistan was left to continue the fight against the Taliban on their own.<sup>14</sup>

The final deadline for the US forces to withdraw from Afghanistan was August 31, 2021. Around this turbulent timeline, thousands of people were evacuated from Afghanistan by the US and other countries to different parts of the world. The last C-17 was packed with American service members, American generals, and American diplomats who left Afghanistan at 3:29

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<sup>13</sup> Dadouch, Sarah, Susannah George, and Dan Lamothe. "US, Taliban Sign Afghanistan Peace Deal in Doha." *Washington Post*. Washington Post, February 29, 2020. <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Gannon, Kathy. "US Left Afghan Airfield at Night, Didn'T Tell New Commander." *AP News*, July 6, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/bagram-afghanistan-airfield-us-troops-f3614828364f567593251aaaa167e623>.

Eastern Time, just one minute before the deadline ending America's longest war in Afghanistan against the Taliban.<sup>15</sup>

In this section I offered a summary of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. I argued that there were many positive outcomes of this invasion. I also pointed out why the segmented population of Afghanistan did not agree with the US invasion of Afghanistan due to their religious beliefs. I then described how women, children, girls, and minorities were empowered by the projects that were held in Afghanistan with the support of foreign governments like the US, and international organizations. I described how some projects were beneficial for women and girls.

In addition, this chapter covered the critical democratic situation and how the United States was involved in controlling it. Presidential elections were one of the examples that were provided to expand the role of the US invasion of Afghanistan. The importance of the Bonn Conference and the establishment of peace and democracy in Afghanistan were discussed as these were among the major notable events that happened in Afghanistan during the invasion. In general, the US invasion of Afghanistan was good and people in Afghanistan have been empowered by the projects and services that were provided to them. But it came at an extremely excessive cost, resulting also in the death of thousands of Afghan civilians. In summary, twenty years of a deadly war and twenty years of people's empowerment had been the two different faces of America's longest war in Afghanistan.

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<sup>15</sup> Gaouette, Nicole , Jennifer Hansler, Oren Liebermann, and Barbara Starr. "The Last US Military Planes Have Left Afghanistan, Marking the End of the United States' Longest War." *CNN Politics*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/30/politics/us-military-withdraws-afghanistan/index.html>.

However, after the United States' withdrawal in August 2021, all the achievements of Afghanistan citizens, the US government and its allies were lost. Afghanistan collapsed in the hands of the Taliban when it took over after the US withdrawal. In the following sections, I first lay out the major US foreign policy decisions made by different presidents about Afghanistan, and then turn to how the Afghan students who were able to leave Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and settle in New York State to continue their education at Bard College experienced these changes. Specifically, I will examine how these students' perceptions of the US and US foreign policy concerning the war have changed because of these tumultuous developments.

## **Chapter 2: The US Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 led to a massive evacuation of thousands of people from this country by the US military. The ones who were lucky enough to leave Afghanistan were flown to different countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Ramstein, Germany; Doha, Qatar; Rwanda, and Albany were the places where evacuees stayed there for their immigration process to be done. One of the destinations for the evacuees was the United States of America. After the process of immigration which was done in the different military camps of the United States and around the world; the evacuees were resettled in different areas and neighborhoods of the country. Of thousands of evacuees, nearly hundred of them were resettled at Bard College in Annandale on Hudson, New York, studying in different fields.<sup>16</sup> These students were interviewed for this project to gather their expressions and point of views on

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<sup>16</sup> “Collective Defense and Article 5.” North Atlantic Treaty Organization. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 14, 2023.  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm#:~:text=The%20principle%20of%20providing%20assistance,necessary%20in%20the%20particular%20circumstances.](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm#:~:text=The%20principle%20of%20providing%20assistance,necessary%20in%20the%20particular%20circumstances.)

several aspects of the US invasion of Afghanistan and its withdrawal. All eight of the students were born and raised in Afghanistan, and have lived through the US invasion of Afghanistan. They worked in various positions on different projects of USAID and were empowered, improved, and developed during those years.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the major political developments and foreign policy decisions that changed the Bard College students' perception of the US, the war, and the current situation in Afghanistan. I will discuss the United States' foreign policy toward Afghanistan, the current situation in Afghanistan, and the image of the US that the people there held.

The major policy changes that the US government pursued in Afghanistan under four different presidents will be examined below. George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, each had different strategies toward Afghanistan and fighting terrorism. I address these below. The United States sent troops to Afghanistan in November 2001 following the 9/11 attacks. In 2002, the United States put forward the "war on terror" as the basis of George W. Bush's doctrine in the American national security document. The only official argument of the American authorities at that time for increasing their military forces in Afghanistan was fighting against terrorist groups and returning peace and security to Afghanistan. Following the "war on terror", the United States kept sending military forces to Afghanistan in addition to the technologies to assist the army in the war against terrorism.

The United States did not achieve its goals in Afghanistan. In fact, despite the killing and capture of several al-Qaeda members, not only the leaders and members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban were present in Afghanistan and their camps were not completely dismantled, but also

the killing and wounding of Afghan citizens, and the US army soldiers, corruption, cultivation of narcotic drugs, the continuation of the Taliban were the consequences of Bush's strategy toward Afghanistan. Therefore, at the end of George Bush's presidency, there were no plans for the construction of Afghanistan. It was in this situation that Obama, the presidential candidate from the Democratic Party at that time, announced in his election campaigns that he would withdraw American forces from Afghanistan and end this war by the end of his tenure.

During Obama's presidency, he adopted several military-security plans and measures to follow up and implement the White House strategies towards Afghanistan. The policy of the Obama administration in the first four years took the form of a strategic agreement between Afghanistan and the United States signed in 2012. The US transferred military responsibility to the Afghan forces and committed to gradually withdrawing from Afghanistan. The pursuit of peace talks with the Taliban, and the opening of the Taliban's official office in Doha, Qatar was among his policies.

The strategic agreement between Afghanistan and the United States was valid until the end of 2024; however the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan happened in 2021.<sup>17</sup> The most important part of this agreement was the start of negotiations between the two countries to reach a "Mutual Security Agreement". The most important goals of Afghanistan in signing the strategic agreement with the United States, such as stabilizing the position of the central

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<sup>17</sup> "Agreement Between the United States of America and Afghanistan." The Department of State. The Department of State, May 12, 2012. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

government and reducing the role of malicious foreign actors, attracting foreign capital, and advancing infrastructure projects, were mentioned.

Transferring military responsibility to Afghan forces and the gradual withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan was another strategy of Obama. Over time, Obama decided to announce the need to strengthen the Afghan forces. For this reason, in 2011, Obama announced the transfer of military responsibility to Afghan forces from the American Army.<sup>18</sup> With the announcement of the necessity of transferring the responsibility of the battle from the American forces to the Afghan forces, the war was considered to be over for the United States, but the war between the Afghan government and the Taliban entered a new phase. Therefore, the White House thought of ending the war through dialogue, and a turn in the White House's approach took place in the form of adopting a reconciliation approach with the Taliban and ending the war through negotiation. The United States admitted that the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily and that some kind of deal and agreement should be reached with them to end the violence. Peace talks in Obama's time between the Taliban and American authorities started in Doha, Qatar where the Taliban opened their office officially in 2013.<sup>19</sup>

Obama called the opening of the Taliban office in Qatar the first step for peace but emphasized that the Taliban should accept the constitutional law of Afghanistan, end their

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<sup>18</sup> Garamone, Jim. "Obama Announces Troop Reductions, Way Forward in Afghanistan." National Guard. National Guard, June 23, 2011. <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/610547/obama-announces-troop-reductions-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>19</sup> Burchill, Scott. "Obama Announces Peace Talks with Taliban." *The Conversation*, June 18, 2013. <https://theconversation.com/obama-announces-peace-talks-with-taliban-15330>.



relationship with al-Qaeda, stop violence, and respect the rights of minorities and human rights.<sup>20</sup> The Taliban refused direct talks with Hamid Karzai, then president of Afghanistan, announcing that the United States had supported Karzai in coming to power after a military operation to push back the Taliban in 2001 in Kabul. Nevertheless, Hamid Karzai, considering the departure of American forces led by NATO from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, showed interest in the proposal of opening a Taliban office in Doha.

However, when the Taliban raised the sign of “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and its flag on top of their office building in Doha, it faced a sharp reaction from the Afghanistan government. Karzai, who considered the establishment of this “office” as a sign of the Taliban's attempt to introduce themselves as the representative of Afghanistan condemned this action and emphasized that any peace negotiations should be held under the leadership and full supervision of the Afghanistan government in Kabul. The two main parties in peace talks were not the United States and the Taliban, but Afghanistan and the Taliban.

The most important factors that Trump announced in his government's strategy towards Afghanistan were the continued presence of American troops and an increase in their number. Increasing the authority of the American troops to attack the Taliban and other terrorist groups that were active in Afghanistan was also on the Trump agenda as well as the necessity of the presence of the Taliban in “Peace talks”. Trump further committed to strengthening the Afghan

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<sup>20</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Alissa J. Rubin. "Taliban Step Toward Afghan Peace Talks Is Hailed by U.S." *The New York Times* (Washington), June 18, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/19/world/asia/taliban-ready-for-peace-talks-to-end-afghan-war.html>.

security forces, assisting the Afghanistan government's fight against corruption, and carrying out reforms, and promises of the United States in the nation-building process in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

The Trump administration believed that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan should have been based on conditions and situations, not time. Also, he stressed the US's decision on eliminating the Taliban and al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Among other policies announced by Trump was the strengthening of the Afghan security forces. Trump highlighted that the US is strengthening the Afghan security forces to the extent that they can protect security and peace in their country. He emphasized that the United States would not sign a blank check for Afghanistan; it meant that support included time and also has conditions. In his strategy, Trump specified that the presence of American forces in Afghanistan intended to defeat enemies and had nothing to do with the state-nation-building program in Afghanistan.

Joe Biden, the fourth president continuing the war on terror, implemented Trump's strategy in Afghanistan. September 11, 2021 was the last day of American presence in Afghanistan according to the agreement that was signed between the Taliban and the US government. After the signing of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban, Biden's administration started withdrawing, and the very first and strong step was vacating Bagram, the largest military airbase of the US in Afghanistan, without any notice beforehand.<sup>22</sup> This vacancy brought the US withdrawal closer and more visible to the people on both sides that the longest war of the US is coming to an end soon.

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Alissa J. Rubin. "Taliban Step Toward Afghan Peace Talks Is Hailed by U.S." *The New York Times* (Washington), June 18, 2013.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/19/world/asia/taliban-ready-for-peace-talks-to-end-afghan-war.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "US Left Bagram Airbase at Night with No Notice, Afghan Commander Says." *BBC News*, July 6, 2021.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57682290>.

Days after vacating Bagram air base, on August 15, 2021, when the Taliban entered Kabul City, horror and fear spread all over the country. People had no choice but to head to the Kabul International Airport to get out of Afghanistan as soon as possible. The days before withdrawal were horrific and chaotic, and a failure since in addition to thousands that were killed during the invasion hundreds more were slaughtered in the very last days of America's presence in Afghanistan under Biden's presidency by the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), another terrorist and extremist group.

In sum, America's involvement in Afghanistan saw four presidents and four various foreign policies. Bush announced the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, and Obama decreased the number of American soldiers, he was hoping that by strengthening Afghanistan's military and security forces the country's need for international combat forces would decrease. Therefore, tens of thousands of American soldiers left Afghanistan during Obama's presidency. Trump re-started the "peace talks" in 2018 and also signed the "peace agreement" in 2020 with the Taliban which required a full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Biden, the current president of the United States, implemented the "peace agreement" that Trump signed. In the time of Biden, all the American military withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took over the country. Meanwhile, thousands were evacuated from Afghanistan during Biden's presidency which was disastrous and had its own problems for the people of both countries.

In the next section, I turn to the question of how these foreign policy changes and their immediate consequences for people in Afghanistan were experienced.

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<sup>23</sup> "Afghanistan Peace Efforts." United States Institute of Peace. United States Institute of Peace, Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/programs/afghanistan-peace-efforts>.

### **Chapter 3: Post-Withdrawal Afghanistan: Afghan Students' Reaction**

In order to assess how ordinary people in Afghanistan perceived this trajectory of American involvement in their country and what they think about the US foreign policy in the region, I have interviewed eight Bard college students from Afghanistan who left the country during and immediately after the US withdrawal. These students are coming from diverse backgrounds and although this is a limited sample, their views might help us better understand how this group assesses this turbulent political history and dynamics. In the following account, I will draw upon my interviews with these students conducted as part of my senior project and discuss their views on the US withdrawal and its consequences for Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup>

First, the majority of my interviewees perceive the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to be a tragic disaster. They told me that military leadership, advisors, and the president of the United States are being called cowards by the people that they have left behind. Millions of people are left destitute back in Afghanistan. The US made a promise to the people of Afghanistan to stand with them and eliminate terrorism but they did not do it. Thousands from both sides were killed and that must convince both sides, especially the US to stay and fulfill its promises. These views expressed to me suggest that for these Afghanistani students, the eventual US withdrawal led to the loss of the actual goals of the American intervention.

Further, my interviewees argued that any other US interventions in the region must be designed with a clear exit plan and involve people themselves. The United States as a “superpower” is always willing to help other countries and certainly willing to preserve its

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<sup>24</sup> Maryam Shanori, Interviews with students from Afghanistan, March 2023. Unless otherwise noted all future references in the text are to these interviews. The identity of each interviewee is being kept anonymous.

freedom first, but the 9/11 event led the US to an armed conflict in Afghanistan against terrorism. This armed conflict did not have an exit strategy beforehand, and that is one of the main reasons that led both countries to 20 years of war, horror, and killing. These comments suggest that these students thought the US foreign policy pursued in Afghanistan was flawed or incomplete from the beginning.

Students believed that people were trying their best and wanted to use every opportunity that was provided to them, and they did not even think of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The sacrifice that people made from both countries were meant to be permanent but in a matter of days and even hours, everything was lost. The Afghan military fought against the Taliban and was on a mission to help the US overcome the biggest threat to Afghanistan and the world. Nevertheless, this mission failed and caused further persecution, torture and killing of activists, journalists, former government employees, former members of army and military among others by the Taliban. What they told me about the US gave me a hint of a lack of trust in America by the people of Afghanistan, since the US was not able to protect even their allies and left them behind.

Of the thousands murdered by the Taliban some of them were lucky enough to have their bodies found and returned to their motherland or their families inside Afghanistan. All of them were killed in the worst situation ever with a high level of persecution by the Taliban. All of them fought for freedom and a country with no threat of terror either inside or outside of the country. But, all the efforts were surrendered to their butchers and now they are governing Afghanistan which is a threat to the region and also the US since the Taliban are still in a close

relationship with the al-Qaeda terrorist group. These points of view of the students about surrendering Afghanistan's people to the Taliban could be interpreted as a betrayal to both countries since the US let the Taliban claim victory. Also, the US is not seen as the "superpower", but a loser letting the Taliban return and gain power after fighting the group for over twenty years and losing thousands of its own citizens.

In addition to the concerns above, my interviewees expressed their ideas about the years before 2001. They argued that the Afghan veterans who were fighting against the Taliban during the invasion were peevish. They do not want to be enlisted once more for the same war. They do not want to fight with the same enemy. They do not have that moral anymore, because, at the end of the day, they already know what is going to happen next. They have experienced a total failure by the United States government and its allies. For them, it was not only a matter of the twenty years of war and occupation, but also about a humanitarian disaster that happened there. People in Afghanistan were promised that America would have their back and stand with them in every situation but they did quite the contrary. The analysis of this part of the interviews shows the fear of abandonment and lack of support due to which the people are currently suffering and living in constant fear. My interviewees added that they were disappointed about America denying support to the National Resistance Movement of Afghanistan (NRFA) that is fighting against the Taliban.<sup>25</sup>

When Kabul was handed over to the Taliban, people hoped that Taliban would fulfill their promise of "having changed" and setting up an inclusive government. However, when the

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<sup>25</sup> O'Donnell, Lynne. "Afghan Resistance Sees War as Only Option." *Foreign Policy*. September 29, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/29/afghanistan-taliban-resistance-terrorism-jihad/>.

Taliban announced their new government, they also made it clear that they were not interested in power sharing. When the US fully withdrew with its allies, Taliban declared themselves the victors of the two decades war and are considering themselves the sole rightful ruler of Afghanistan. After the Taliban's rejection of an inclusive government, a national resistance movement was formed to continue the fight for human rights and democratic values in Afghanistan. This movement is led by Ahmad Masoud, the son of the late Ahmad Shad Masoud. He is leading a political and armed opposition against the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

Another concern that all of my interviewees had was the tragic and disappointing process of evacuation. People who helped American forces in Afghanistan during their mission were left behind. Now they are going through the multi-step visa process to get out of Afghanistan. This process itself is designed to fail and keep the applicants waiting for months and years which is another failure following the withdrawal. They agreed that the days when people were looking for even a tiny place to hide from the Taliban were the worst days of their life. They told me that it took hours, days, weeks, months, and even years of waiting for them to be out of Afghanistan. On the other hand, the Americans who were eager to evacuate endangered Afghans were overwhelmed by the messages they were receiving and were not able to check on all the victims and endangered people. They were worried about the situation and future of their Afghan allies who helped them in many possible ways during their mission in Afghanistan.

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<sup>26</sup> Shekhawat, Shivam . "Resistance to the Taliban: Current Status and Prospects for the Future." Observer Research Foundation. Observer Research Foundation, January 10, 2023.  
<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/resistance-to-the-taliban/>.

## **Afghanistan Today**

Another point of concern for my interviewees is the current situation in Afghanistan. The past two years under the Taliban have been hugely different with harsh, misogynist and extremist rules. Schools are banned for girls above grade sixth. Women are not allowed to go to their jobs. University education is not allowed for women. Media is restricted. Former government employees and members of security forces are being hunted, tortured and brutally killed. Minority groups are being driven out of their lands and homes and being discriminated against. Any critic of the current regime is imprisoned. Any foreign funding sent to Afghanistan is not reaching the needy and deserving. Corruption is still at its highest. And, many who are still in hiding find it very difficult to get to safety. Now the ultra-conservative group called the Taliban is setting more rules and regulations for the people, especially women.

Women with high education degrees that previously worked with the government of Afghanistan and NGOs are now staying inside their homes due to the Taliban orders. Women have completely vanished and been removed from society. Afghanistan's poor rural areas and provinces are now poorer under the reign of the Taliban. My interviewees expressed concerns talking about teenage girls being sold or forced into marriage to secure the survival of the rest of the family. They are too worried about the ongoing child marriage in Afghanistan. Child marriage is prohibited in Afghanistan, but it became more pervasive in that country after the Taliban's reign. The girls and women are left far behind in a new and dark Afghanistan.

Elimination of women from society and depriving them of basic rights were among the main concerns that my interviewees pointed out. The current regime in Afghanistan is all male;



coming from the Taliban, by the Taliban, and for the Taliban, there is no place for other genders. Women and girls struggle for basic rights in Afghanistan. The Taliban promised an open and inclusive government for the people of Afghanistan, but nothing happened as they promised; a promise that remained unfulfilled to this day. Everything, including women's rights, is being demolished. These restrictions have been in place since August 15, 2021, a day that is impossible to forget, especially for the ones who dreamt of pursuing an education, and a career in their lives in their own home country.

In addition, my interviewees highlighted that the Taliban's violation against women is increasing day by day and they are depriving women of all their basic rights. According to the Taliban's point of view, women have lesser brains and are not good believers. That is they have removed women from the workplace. They also require women to be accompanied by a male guardian, and if any woman does not follow the rules, their male guardians and they would be severely tortured in public and even imprisoned and killed.

Moreover, the other disquiet that my interviewees talked about is the decisions of the Taliban which are less focused on the main hardships that people are facing, but all they focus now is on gender segregation in Afghanistan. Women are struggling to find their place in a male dominated and extremist society. Now women are hopeless. They feel like prisoners in their own homes and country.

This lack of freedom is perhaps the most acute concern for my interviewees, people are destroyed, and they do not have the motivation anymore to continue where they left off. Most people of Afghanistan, especially the young generation are experiencing mental health battles.

The Taliban have a very harsh reaction to people's protests. No one can publicly criticize them. If anyone would do so, they are facing the risk of arrest, torture, or even death.

They expressed concern that women's demonstrations do not last more than ten minutes because the Taliban would start shooting and beating them on the streets. Or arrest and torture them for weeks and months to discourage others from protests. There is no place for opponents in Afghanistan anymore, they are being called westernized, infidels, seculars, and foreign spies. My interviewees believe that more than forty years of war brought many changes and difficulties for the people of Afghanistan. Everyone has a different and dark memory from those years; but today is the darkest time for this country. According to my interviewees, lack of support from the international community, poverty, cruelty, slaughtering, and brain drain are among the problems that make the current situation in Afghanistan unbearable for its people.

Further, the interviewees spoke about the Taliban's inability to govern a country. Two years of the Taliban reign in Afghanistan, the country is going backwards on everything. They claim that the war is over but there is still no peace since ISKP is still active, Taliban leaders in disagreement, Taliban are unable to control their foot soldiers, and the humanitarian crisis continues to get worse. The economic crisis poses an extreme threat to the people due to lack of economic opportunities, especially jobs. People are desperate as they are sitting on the streets for just a loaf of bread. Children are doing labor work for a few cents. People are selling their household belongings.

Concerns about the loss of expertise in medicine is also what my interviewees spoke and shared their thoughts about. Health service in Afghanistan is in a much bigger crisis since most

of the doctors and nurses were evacuated, or are in hiding and there is not enough service for people in hospitals or clinics. The withdrawal of the US and its allies, and lack of funding in Afghanistan for health care has turned this vital section into a chaos.

Children, the very vulnerable part of a society, are suffering from malnutrition due to the economic situation, and there is no way for them to receive the needed service. There is no exact and efficient program or at least an immediate short-term solution for this problem since no policymaker remained in Afghanistan; all of them were forced to flee from the cruel group of the Taliban. The doctors now in Afghanistan are fighting a medical emergency every hour. No resources, no money, and no medicines, and lack of service and doctors have created a health crisis in Afghanistan. The Taliban and their supporters around the country and abroad are celebrating their takeover while life is getting harder for people.

The loss of international aid was also highlighted as another concern of the interviewees. The funding that is being sent is mostly bundles of cash. There are reports that the Taliban are misusing any aid they receive and those in need continue to suffer. Afghanistan has become an isolated nation, no single country is recognizing the Taliban. The main victim of this situation is the people of Afghanistan. No one trusts the Taliban as they are unable to govern, mostly illiterate, powered by their revenge towards those who oppose them, and too focused on imprisoning women and girls. Sadness, anger, and fear came to Afghanistan since its collapse to the hands of the Taliban.

One of the other important worries of my interviewees is the endangered fate of minorities in Afghanistan. While the Taliban, ISIS and other militant groups commit human

rights violations against all people of Afghanistan, the Hazaras are at high risk due to their ethnic and religious affiliation. Various rulers of Afghanistan have persecuted Hazaras. In the late 19th century, Abdur Rahman Khan, a Pashtun king and ruler of the time, waged a brutal war against the Hazaras because they refused to accept his rule. His war led to a bloody massacre, looting and enslavement of Hazaras. According to reports, around 60% of Hazaras were wiped out during his rule. In August of 1998, the Taliban massacred thousands of Hazara men and boys in Mazar-e-Sharif while conducting house-to-house searches.<sup>27</sup> They also kidnapped and imprisoned thousands of Hazaras. In January 2001, the Taliban executed over hundred Hazara men with aid workers and a UN employee in Bamyan.<sup>28</sup> Such persecutions by ISKP and the Taliban continued after the US invasion of 2001 through targeted attacks at Hazara homes, schools, hospitals, places of worship, education centers, sports centers, highways, and buses. With the return of the Taliban, the Hazaras are in even greater risk.<sup>29</sup>

Hindus, another minority community of Afghanistan, have been discriminated against. Their temples were blown and in every terrorist attack against this community, hundreds were killed and injured. Such violations forced this community to flee Afghanistan. The Taliban's vision of Afghanistan is binary, people either be Sunni (the Taliban's religion) or evil infidels subject to harsh treatment by the regime.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-I Sharif." RefWorld. Human Rights Organization, November 1, 1998. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/45c9a4b52.html>.

<sup>28</sup> "Massacres in Yakaolang." Amnesty International. Amnesty International, March 1, 2001. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa110082001en.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> "Timeline: Killing of Hazaras in Afghanistan." Kabul Now. Kabul Now, May 20, 2021. <https://kabulnow.com/2021/05/timeline-killing-of-hazaras-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>30</sup> Bharath, Deepa. "Attacked at Home, Afghan Sikhs Find Community on Long Island." *Associated Press*, August 29, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-islamic-state-group-kabul-taliban-f4fcea832e983f282d5f411059ca4a35>.

The LGBTQ, another minority and marginalized community, was growing in Afghanistan; despite numerous challenges. More people were expressing their sexual orientation publicly. The society in Afghanistan has never been accepting of this community, nevertheless, they have been advocating for themselves. Before the Taliban regained power, some people, mostly in large cities and urban areas, were becoming more tolerant. However, since August 2021, the situation has totally changed. That has completely changed as the challenges for this community have multiplied. There have been reports of rapes, arrests, tortures and murders.<sup>31</sup>

Domestic violence is at its highest level during the reign of the Taliban. According to Human Rights Watch,<sup>32</sup> 87 percent of Afghan women are experiencing severe domestic violence and yet the Taliban refuse to solve their cases and deny any divorce under Islamic law. There is no way and place for women who are in abusive relationships to go for justice, and they force divorced women to be with abusive husbands.<sup>33</sup> The crime level is at its highest level too. People are being severely injured, beaten, tortured, and killed in cities or rural areas regarding domestic acts of violence and the Taliban do not take any steps toward making crime less in that country. The Taliban put pressure on people to accept what they say, even if their decision causes the death of a person. Since the Taliban takeover, no one sees a good future for Afghanistan, especially for girls. Cruelty, injustice, and violence are some of the key points in the Taliban's

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<sup>31</sup> Rouhani, Wajid. "Afghan Transsexual with Tearful Eyes: "They Burned Me, Death Is Better than This Life"." *Etilaatroz*.

<https://www.etalatroz.com/133868/afghan-intersex-with-teary-eyes-i-was-burned-death-is-better-than-this-life/>.

<sup>32</sup> "Afghan Government Ignoring Violence Against Women." Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch, May 30, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/30/afghan-government-ignoring-violence-against-women>.

<sup>33</sup> Tsui, Karina. "Violence against Women Rampant under Taliban, New Report Finds." *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/27/afghanistan-women-taliban-rights-violence-amnesty-international/>.

government. This is the hard and sad reality of Afghanistan nowadays under the Taliban and Afghanistan is facing a humanitarian crisis.

### **People's Perception of the United States**

A last point my interviewees expressed their concerns and deep disappointment about is the United States. Not only do they believe that the US democratic restructuring initiative failed in Afghanistan, but also proved the actual weakness of this country that claims to be a superpower. The longest war of a superpower against a group of terrorists had one loser and that is the United States of America. The country that was attacked by the Taliban's most important ally al-Qaeda surrendered Afghanistan to the Taliban and again made this country a safe heaven and shelter for al-Qaeda and other terrorists making the world less safe. Now the entire region is being affected by the US withdrawal. Import and export of terrorism will be on the same level as before the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Further, my interviewees noted that the goals of the US and its allies' mission in Afghanistan were not fulfilled at all. Afghans will not trust the US again. For them, the current situation in Afghanistan is a repetition of history. The last generation of parents was obliged to leave their own country and be an immigrant, now their children are experiencing the same situation. These students believe that if they go back to Afghanistan their children are going to have a worse situation. They do not believe in the continuation of the Taliban's rule either. They are not going to be ruling Afghanistan forever; changes are going to come. But, when and who will intervene again?

To answer this question, my interviewees said that people do not even think of re-trusting America, since they would leave people again even if it were to help and surrender them to another terrorist group that might be the Taliban, ISKP, or anyone else. The image of a “superpower” is now equivalent to a loser that does not fulfill its promises and is now responsible for the current situation of the people of Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a tragic disaster and many allies were left behind to die. There is a loss of actual goals of the American intervention. The twenty years of war in Afghanistan ended without fulfilling the war’s mission. However, this war took the lives of hundreds of thousands from Afghanistan, the US and many other countries that were present in the country. Additionally, the war cost the US over trillions of dollars.

The US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 after the Taliban’s refusal to surrender bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Taliban were defeated and bin Laden fled to Pakistan. In 2001, in the Bonn conference, a complete victory over the Taliban was announced by the US government. However, the Iraq war and deployment of American troops there caused the re-establishment of the Taliban in rural areas of Afghanistan. In 2014, NATO and the US officially ended their combat against the Taliban and limited their resources to training the Afghan National Army. At this time Afghanistan and the Taliban entered a new phase of war. Between 2015 and 2018, the Taliban’s attacks intensified and almost half of Afghanistan was controlled by them.

While many people, especially women and girls, from Afghanistan initially welcomed the US invasion, there were others, mostly religious conservatives, who opposed it fearing loss of their religious values to democratic values. Success in various fields of the country such as health, education, governance, economy were seen from 2001 to 2021. Women saw positive changes since they were allowed to get an education and pursue their careers and dreams. One side of the twenty years of war included trying to bring peace, establishing democratic values, eliminating terrorism, promoting human rights and women's rights, progress and development, but the other side was continuing to fight with the Taliban and other terrorist groups who were terrorizing and killing a nation of over forty million.

In the twenty years of invasion, the US had four different presidents, which led to changes in the US foreign policy towards Afghanistan. The "war on terror" started with the order of President Bush leading to the deployment of thousands of American soldiers in Afghanistan. In the tenure of Obama, the number of military personnel decreased. His administration also started pursuing peace talks, and opening of the Taliban's official office in Doha, Qatar, signing strategic agreements between Afghanistan and the US, transferring military responsibility from American soldiers to Afghan forces. The increase in narcotic drug cultivation, Taliban's continued resistance and widespread corruption in different levels of the government in Afghanistan contributed to a change in Obama's policy towards Afghanistan. Trump restarted the "peace talks" and signed the "peace agreement" in 2020 which required a full withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. Joe Biden implemented the "peace agreement" and fully withdrew from Afghanistan. This also led to an incredibly messy and chaotic evacuation



from the country that included evacuation of personnel, citizens, green card holders as well as allies.

To understand the consequences of this withdrawal for ordinary Afghanistans, I interviewed eight Afghan students of Bard College who were evacuated immediately during and after the US withdrawal. My interviewees agreed that the withdrawal and evacuation were disastrous. It created panic which led to further deaths in the hands of terrorist groups like the Taliban and ISKP. They also pointed out that the US, once a super power, has now lost credibility and others won't be able to trust anything the US government or its officials say anymore. Afghanistan was abandoned to a terrorist group without thinking about its forty million plus citizens and the twenty years of investments and gains. Taliban who claimed to have changed have reversed everything in the country and went back to their first regime's way of governing. And, they are still closely tied to al-Qaeda. In addition, my interviewees deprecated the denial of the US support to the NRFA- the National Resistance Movement of Afghanistan who have continued the fight against the Taliban after the US left.

The current situation of Afghanistan is the most important point that each of my interviewees were worried the most about, especially two years of harsh and extremist rules on people of Afghanistan especially women and girls. Girls above 6th grade are not allowed to go to school. Women cannot go to work and university. They have been completely removed from every aspect of society. Minorities are still facing a great risk of being persecuted and forcibly displaced. LGBTQ community of Afghanistan are now facing a great risk of being killed violently. Media is restricted. Any critic of the regime is arrested, tortured or worse, killed.

Women's protests are shut down and protestors are imprisoned and tortured. Foreign journalists critiquing the regime are banned from entering the country. Foreign fundings is not reaching those in need, but is instead used by the Taliban fighters and leaders. People are getting poorer and poorer day by day. They are selling their household goods and organs to survive.<sup>34</sup> Teenage girls are being forced into marriages. Domestic violence and crime level is at its highest rate in Afghanistan. Decisions of the Taliban are not focused on main problems; they are more focused on implementing their interpretation of the Sharia law which mostly includes setting up a gender apartheid regime. People have lost hope of any good change. Considering the situation of the education system now in the country, the next generation will be illiterate or brainwashed. Afghanistan went twenty years backward on everything.

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<sup>34</sup> "Desperate Afghans Sell Kidneys amid Poverty, Starvation." *Al Jazeera*, February 28, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/desperate-afghans-resort-to-selling-kidneys-to-feed-families>.

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