

Reckoning and Reparations: U.S. Government Owes Afghan Civilians for Past 20 Years of War and Brutal Impoverishment

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In mid-July, 100 Afghan families from Bamiyan, a rural province of central Afghanistan mainly populated by the Hazara ethnic minority, fled to Kabul. They feared Taliban militants would attack them in Bamiyan.

Over the past decade, I have gotten to know a grandmother who recalls fleeing Taliban fighters in the 1990s, just after learning that her husband had been killed.

Then, she was a young widow with five children, and for several agonizing months two of her sons were missing.

I can only imagine the traumatized memories that spurred her to again flee her village today. She is part of the Hazara ethnic minority and hopes to protect her grandchildren.



Girls and mothers, waiting for donations of heavy blankets, Kabul, 2018. [Source: Dr. Hakim]

When it comes to inflicting miseries on innocent Afghan people, there is plenty of blame to be shared.

The Taliban have demonstrated a pattern of anticipating people who might form opposition to their eventual rule and [waging “pre-emptive” attacks](#) against journalists, human rights activists, judicial officials, advocates for women’s rights, and minority groups such as the Hazara.

In places where the Taliban have successfully taken over districts, they may be ruling over increasingly resentful populaces; people who have lost harvests, homes, and livestock are already coping with a third wave of Covid-19 and severe drought.



An injured man receives treatment at the Ibn-e-Sina Hospital in Mazar-e Sharif following a bomb attack in Balkh province on June 6, 2021. [Source: [Afghanistan-analysts.org](#)]

In many northern provinces, the [re-emergence](#) of the Taliban can be traced to the Afghan government’s incompetence, and also to criminal and abusive behaviors of the local military commanders, including land grabs, extortion, and rape.

President Ashraf Ghani, showing little empathy for people trying to flee Afghanistan, [referred](#) to those who leave as people looking to “have fun.”

[Responding](#) to his April 18 speech when he made this comment, a young woman whose sister, a journalist, was recently killed, tweeted about her father who had stayed in Afghanistan for 74 years, encouraged his children to stay, and now felt that his daughter might be alive had she left. The surviving daughter said the Afghan government could not protect its people, and that is why they tried to leave

President Ghani’s government has encouraged the formation of [“Uprising”](#) militias to help protect the country. Immediately, people began questioning how the Afghan government

could support new militias when it already lacks ammunition and protection for thousands of Afghan National Defense Forces and local police who have fled their posts.

The main backer of the Uprising forces, it seems, is the formidable National Directorate of Security, whose main sponsor is the CIA.

Some militia groups have raised money through imposing “taxes” or outright extortion. Others turn to other countries in the region, all of which reinforces cycles of violence and despair.

The staggering loss of [landmine removal](#) experts working for the nonprofit HALO Trust should add to our sense of grief and mourning.

About 2,600 Afghans working with the demining group had helped make more than 80% of Afghanistan’s land safe from unexploded ordnance strewn over the country after 40 years of war.

Tragically, militants attacked the group, killing ten workers.

Human Rights Watch [says](#) the Afghan government has not adequately investigated the attack nor has it investigated the killings of [journalists](#), human rights activists, clerics, and judicial workers that began escalating after the Afghan government [began](#) peace talks with the Taliban in April.

Yet, unquestionably, the warring party in Afghanistan with the most sophisticated weapons and seemingly endless access to funds has been the United States. Funds were spent not to lift Afghans to a place of security from which they might have worked to moderate Taliban rule, but to further frustrate them, beating down their hopes of future participatory governance with 20 years of war and brutal impoverishment.



Disabled people from the war are a common sight across Afghanistan. [Source: [progressive.org](#)-photo taken by Dr. Hakim]

The war has been a prelude to the United States’s inevitable retreat and the return of a possibly more enraged and dysfunctional Taliban to rule over a shattered population.

The troop withdrawal negotiated by President Joe Biden and U.S. military officials is not a peace agreement. Rather, it signals the end of an occupation resulting from an unlawful invasion and, while troops are leaving, the Biden administration is already laying plans for [“over the horizon”](#) drone surveillance, drone strikes, and “manned” aircraft strikes which could exacerbate and prolong the war.

U.S. citizens ought to consider not only financial recompense for destruction caused by 20 years of war but also a commitment to dismantle the warfare systems that brought such havoc, chaos, bereavement, and displacement to Afghanistan.

We should be sorry that, during 2013, when the United States [spent](#) an average of \$2 million per soldier stationed in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan children suffering malnutrition rose by 50%. At that same time, the cost of [adding iodized salt](#) to an Afghan child’s diet to help reduce the risk of brain damage caused by hunger would have been 5 cents per child per year.

We should deeply regret that while the United States constructed sprawling military bases in Kabul, populations in refugee camps soared.



U.S. military base outside of Kabul. [Source: [wired.com](#)]

During harsh winter months, people [desperate](#) for warmth in a Kabul refugee camp would burn—and then have to breathe—plastic.



Refugee camps provide a stark contrast to U.S. military bases. [Source: unhcr.org]

Trucks laden with food, fuel, water, and supplies constantly [entered](#) the U.S. military base immediately across the road from this camp.

We should acknowledge, with shame, that U.S. contractors signed deals to build hospitals and schools which were later determined to be [ghost hospitals and ghost schools](#), places that never even existed.

On October 3, 2015, when only one hospital served vast numbers of people in the Kunduz province, the U.S. Air Force [bombed the hospital](#) at 15-minute intervals for one-and-a-half hours, killing 42 people including 13 staff, three of whom were doctors. This attack helped greenlight the war crime of bombing hospitals all around the world.

More recently, in 2019, migrant workers in Nangarhar were attacked when a [drone fired missiles](#) into their overnight camp. The owner of a pine nut forest had hired the laborers, including children, to harvest the pine nuts, and he notified officials ahead of time, hoping to avoid any confusion. While the workers were resting after an exhausting day of work, 30 were killed and another 40 were badly wounded.

U.S. repentance for a regime of attacks by weaponized drones, conducted in Afghanistan and worldwide, along with sorrow for the countless civilians killed, should lead to deep appreciation for [Daniel Hale](#), a drone whistleblower who exposed the widespread and indiscriminate murder of civilians.



Drone whistleblower Daniel Hale spoke out against the atrocities of the drone war and was sent to jail, while the criminals who ordered the murderous attacks live in luxury. [Source: progressive.org]

Between January 2012 and February 2013, according to an [article](#) in *The Intercept*, these air strikes “killed more than 200 people. Of those, only thirty-five were the intended targets. During one five-month period of the operation, according to the documents, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets.”

On July 27, Hale was sentenced to four years in prison under the archaic Espionage Act.

In a statement to the court, Hale said that he was standing before the judge on that day because he [“refused to take something that was never mine to take—precious human life. For that I was compensated and given a medal. I couldn’t keep living in a world in which people pretended that things weren’t happening that were. Please your honor forgive me for taking papers instead of human lives.”](#)

We should be sorry for night raids that terrified civilians, assassinated innocent people, and were later acknowledged to have been based on faulty information.

We must reckon with how little attention our elected officials ever paid to the quadrennial “Special Inspector General on Afghan Reconstruction” reports which detailed many years’ worth of fraud, corruption, human rights violations and failure to achieve stated goals related to countering narcotics or confronting corrupt structures.

We should say we are sorry, we are so very sorry, for pretending to stay in Afghanistan for humanitarian reasons when, honestly, we understood next to nothing about humanitarian concerns of women and children in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s civilian population has repeatedly demanded peace.

When I think of the generations in Afghanistan who have suffered through war, occupation and the vagaries of warlords, including NATO troops, I wish we could hear the sorrow of the grandmother who now wonders how she might help feed, shelter and protect her family.

Her sorrow should lead to atonement on the part of countries that invaded her land. Every one of those countries could arrange visas and support for each Afghan person who now

wants to flee.

A reckoning with the massive wreckage this grandmother and her loved ones face should yield equally massive readiness to abolish all wars, forever.

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A version of this article first appeared on [The Progressive Magazine](#).

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Featured image: An Afghan man and children, suffering hardships from America's longest war, pose for a portrait in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 19, 2021. [Source: theintercept.com]

America's "War on Terrorism"

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September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington's agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State.

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