

# Could the US failure in Afghanistan have been avoided?



# Could the US failure in Afghanistan have been avoided?



*Oubai Shahbandar is a former defense intelligence officer and Middle East analyst with the Pentagon. He has been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and has spent extensive time on the ground in northern Syria. He is now a conflict-zone documentary filmmaker based in the Middle East.*

**F**or the US, the war in Afghanistan is over. But the warning signs about the likely collapse of the Afghan army following the withdrawal of American troops were evident years ago, according to special forces operatives and a “lessons learned” report published in August<sup>1</sup>.

The Biden administration said it was surprised and taken aback by the swift capitulation of Afghan forces and the country’s central government, and shocked by the rapid success of the Taliban blitz<sup>2</sup>.

In a recent address to the nation, President Joe Biden said: “The assumption was that more than 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces that we had trained over the past two decades, and equipped, would be a strong adversary in their civil wars with the Taliban<sup>3</sup>.”

Jen Psaki, Biden’s press secretary, doubled down on this notion when she told reporters: “I don’t think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world. If you have anyone who did, I’d be surprised.”

Long ago, however, the signs on the ground suggested there were ample reasons to worry. My own experience in Afghanistan,

as a former defense intelligence officer and foreign affairs specialist for the Pentagon, provided ample anecdotal and directly observable evidence. Therefore the collapse of the nation-building and train-and-equip enterprises in Afghanistan did not come as a surprise, for a number of reasons.

In 2010 and 2011, I served as an advisor and analyst on Brig. Gen. Scott Miller’s command action group. At the time, he was the commanding general of the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command in Afghanistan. I had transferred recently from the Iraq and Gulf affairs desk in the Pentagon to the Afghanistan team and was eager to volunteer for a tour “down range” as Gen. David Petraeus launched his “surge” in Afghanistan — which would prove to be the deadliest 12 months of the war.

I traveled to multiple provinces, where it became abundantly clear that outside of provincial capitals the central government in Kabul held little sway or authority.

The US military strategy at the time was to pacify what was termed “key terrain districts” in the rural countryside, and to escort and facilitate Afghan Ministerial support to local governance. This strategy failed spectacularly, both during my time there and in the years that followed.

Describing the state of affairs of the US

**It was an experiment with a “bottom-up” approach in an attempt to outmaneuver the Taliban by using their own insurgent tactics against them.**



**US Marine walking with Afghan children in Kabul airport.** AFP

“stabilization” campaign in insurgent-heavy districts in the Southern province of Helmand, one Afghan deputy minister said: “When I had disagreements with the Americans about Helmand, it was because before going to stabilize a district close to Lashkar Gah, for example Nawa, they used to go to a further district such as Garmser and start operations there.

“After the military operation in Garmser was finished, they started shouting: ‘We cleared Garmser, so come here and establish the government administration.’ I used to tell them that I am not coming, because I cannot travel there by the road. ‘You are going there by helicopters,’ I would say. ‘I cannot take all my staff there by plane. How is my clerk able to go through Nawa to get there? He will be kidnapped on his way in Nawa. How are you going to prevent this?’”

Most alarming for the US military and its NATO allies, circa 2010 and 2011 the Taliban had begun to steadily expand its hold not only in the south of the country but throughout northern and north-western provinces, areas that had been considered an “economy of force” deployment — meaning the allocation of the minimum level of essential combat power — for mainly European troops.

Fast forward to 2021 and the Taliban employed a “northern” strategy to take these

provinces first before closing in on Kabul<sup>5</sup>.

Back then, Miller was ordered by Petraeus to “help thicken the lines” and deploy a handful of Operational Detachments-A (also known as “A-teams”), augmented by conventional forces, throughout the vulnerable northern and western provinces, with a command element based out of Mazar-i-Sharif. Our goal was to establish “Village Stability Operations” in key rural districts where the Afghan provincial government had no presence and therefore was ceding key terrain to Taliban insurgents and their “shadow governor.”

The VSO concept was simple: Afghan National Army special forces (aka commandos) and American Special Operations Forces teams would live in key Afghan population centers in rural areas vulnerable to control and influence by Taliban insurgents. A tribal shura, or informal council, would then be established to select young men from the village who would join the Afghan Local Police and be trained by and serve under US special forces.

It was an experiment with a “bottom-up” approach in an attempt to outmaneuver the Taliban by using their own insurgent tactics against them.

From observing the joint NATO headquarters in Mazar-i-Sharif it was clear the NATO-allied member states, such as



Afghan evacuee children await their flight in Kabul airport  
AFP

Germany and the Nordic countries, that nominally controlled the battle space in northern Afghanistan were ill-equipped — doctrinally and as a result of self-imposed restrictions — to counter a determined insurgency.

According to one German report published in 2010<sup>6</sup>: “The war has now finally reached the north and the German Army is unable to respond to the attacks in the way the troops in the south are able. This has nothing to do with the professionalism and training, let alone the dedication, of the German troops. They simply don’t have the equipment or the numbers to do much more than to defend their positions.

“Reconstruction work has come to a grinding halt as the situation is too dangerous for the (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) to venture out. As a result, the villages are left to themselves and are becoming increasingly the victims of insurgents, corrupt politicians, police and war lords.”

The VSO strategy under Miller seemed to work for a time but it was more of a Band-Aid than a lasting solution. The program was transferred in 2014 to the control of the central government’s Ministry of Interior, which stole salaries meant for local fighters and disenfranchised the village elders whose validation was central to the success of VSOs in outlying rural districts<sup>7</sup>.

Without the presence of American Special Operations Forces on the ground alongside the VSO efforts, the bottom-up strategy could not endure or prevent the Taliban from filling

the void — an outcome that portended the disaster to come 10 years later.

It was a bitter irony that Miller, who in 2011 oversaw the best chance Afghanistan had to prevent an insurgent takeover, would be the last commanding general of US forces in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban retaking Kabul.

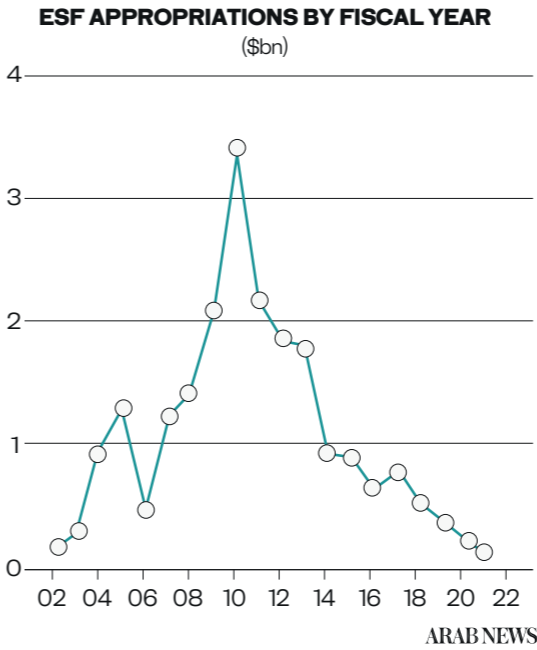
In retrospect, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan should have cautioned policymakers in Washington to be more humble in their outlook.

In a prescient analysis written for the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas in 1996, retired Afghan Gen. Mohammad Yahya Nawroz, a former chief of operations for the Ministry of Defense who later became a mujahedeen strategist, concluded that the Afghan mujahedeen’s victory over a superpower, the Soviet Union, was a result of a confluence of factors<sup>8</sup>.

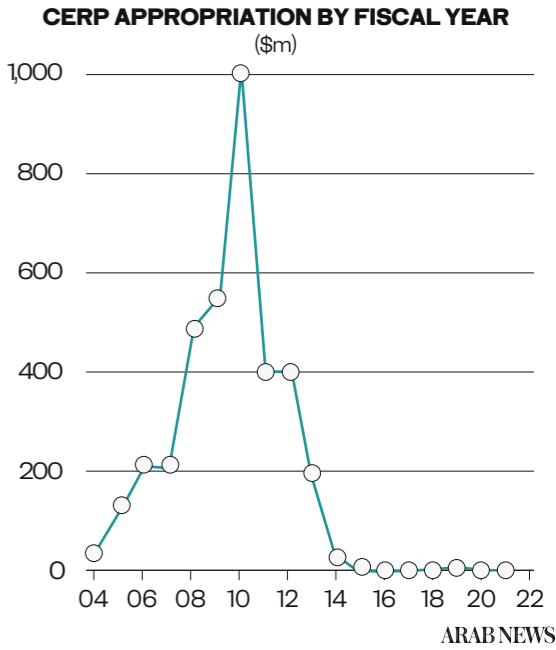
“Contest of endurance and national will,” he wrote. “The side with the greatest moral commitment (ideological, religious or patriotic) will hold the ground at the end of the conflict.

“Battlefield victory can be almost irrelevant, since victory is often determined by morale, obstinacy and survival ... Seizure of terrain can be advantageous, but is usually only of temporary value. Control of the cities can be a plus, but can also prove a detriment. Support of the population is essential for the winning side.”

The subsequent US experience in



Economic Support Fund. SIGAR  
Commander’s Emergency Response Program. SIGAR



Afghanistan failed to heed this advice. I noted in my after-action report to government colleagues in 2011: “Today, coalition forces and the Afghan army control most major urban areas and key centers in the provinces, and are increasingly pushing Taliban fighters deeper into the periphery. But as Nawroz counseled American military thinkers nearly 15 years ago, such gains can be fleeting.”

The parallels between the Soviet and US military experiences in Afghanistan are striking. Operation Omid — *omid* is the word for “hope” in the local Dari language — was the largest counter-insurgency operation during the surge. Many of the areas the International Security Assistance Force focused on during the operation bear a striking resemblance to the “ring road” strategy employed by Soviet Forces and their Afghan communist proxies.

The Soviets attempted to install a government in their image, while the US attempted a sweeping multibillion-dollar nation-building enterprise. Both strategies failed in similar fashions.

Incredibly, the impact and effectiveness of the US civil and military programs intended to help build an Afghan state through the implementation of short and long-term projects was never truly measured in 20 years.

This resulted in what is colloquially referred to as a “self-licking ice cream cone.” No one in Washington took the time to take a step back and ask: “Is this really working?”

According to the Special Inspector

General for Afghanistan Reconstruction: “US government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts in Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>.”

In its sweeping “lessons learned” report published in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban last month, SIGAR came to the following damning conclusion: “The US government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve in Afghanistan. No single government agency had the necessary mindset, expertise and resources to develop and manage strategy to rebuild Afghanistan.”

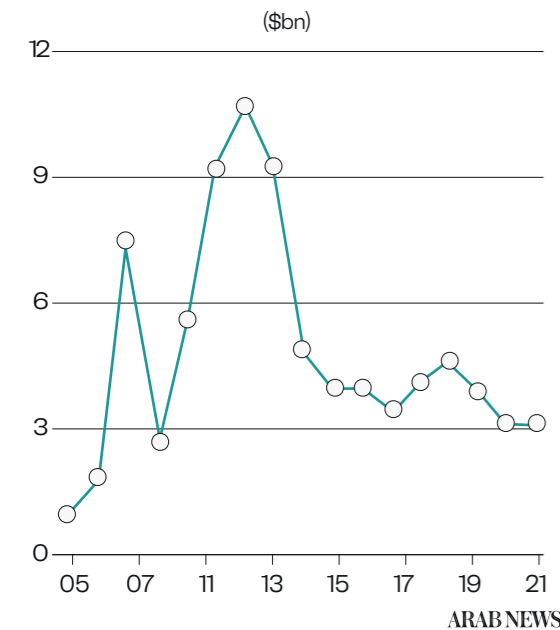
According to SIGAR, the train-and-equip program cost upwards of \$80 billion, and the US was paying nearly a billion dollars a year to the Afghan Ministry of Defense. Unsurprisingly, corruption ran rampant<sup>10</sup>.

Afghan National Army district outposts were constantly low on fuel or ammunition, despite Kabul being allotted an abundance of these resources.

This was very clear to the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command teams. But the train-and-equip program was so massive in scale, the military command in charge of implementing it, the Combined Security Transition Command, never took a serious look at significant red flags regarding its effectiveness<sup>11</sup>.

In short, there was never a coherent plan for Afghanistan. Warnings from the most experienced military operators on the

ASFF APPROPRIATED FUNDS BY FISCAL YEAR



Afghanistan Security Forces Fund. SIGAR

ground, as well as analysts, were not heeded.

Miller’s village-centric strategy and its emphasis on local governance probably would have worked, if not for political restraints imposed on US special forces after 2014 that empowered corruption in the Ministries of Defense and Interior in Kabul<sup>12</sup>.

By 2021, however, the tables had turned. The Taliban was succeeding in building a broad-based cross-ethnic and tribal coalition, as President Ashraf Ghani became more and more isolated from the rest of his country. As a result, key provincial capitals began to fall with nary a fight.

From his vantage point as an operator who has worked with local, indigenous forces in other areas of operations, Joe Kent, a former Green Beret and expert on the special operations community’s doctrine on partnering with local forces, assessed the mistakes he believes were made.

“The biggest mistake we made in Afghanistan was attempting to build an army/government that never existed in the first place,” he said. “We should have partnered with the Northern Alliance and other willing tribal elements via Special Operations Forces and kept our focus on hunting/killing terrorists.”

Counter-intuitively, the more resources the US government and international donors poured into reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, the less likely was a tangible positive outcome. The premature and massive infusion of international donor capital into the reconstruction fund added an

additional complexity to the conflict that was never resolved in 20 years.

The villages hardest hit by the insurgency did not receive a proportional level of support<sup>13</sup>. During one particularly telling shura I attended in 2011, Pashtun tribal elders from rural villages in the northern Kunduz Province complained that, despite promises of massive infrastructure projects, they had seen practically no activity by the Afghan government in an area the Taliban shadow government ruled with impunity.

Kent’s observations as an operator further add credence to the assessment that the US strategy was not in tune with the local realities or the transactional nature of the relationship between the Americans and Afghan officials.

“The biggest success we had was Special Operations Forces and the CIA working with the Northern Alliance and other existing anti-Taliban elements to topple the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the initial push into Afghanistan,” he said.

“Our ability to conduct targeted strikes and raids against Al-Qaeda leaders was a success, too, and could have been accomplished without the nation-building component.

“The train-and-equip program in Afghanistan failed because it was never capable of standing without us running it. That’s because the Afghan leaders knew their history — foreigners come, bleed and leave — so they viewed our assistance as a temporary payday.

“Many Afghans fought valiantly and died for the idea we were attempting to implement, but the Afghan leaders were never in it and cut side deals with the Taliban or just siphoned off our support and ran. I hope we learn that nation building and building armies in our image does not work.”

As I noted when back in the Pentagon following the conclusion of my Afghanistan deployment: “In a fluid conflict, where one faction in power today could just as well be totally void of authority in the next week, hedging loyalties naturally becomes the path to the populace’s survival.

“Recognition of the Afghan government’s legitimacy — a key component of the counterinsurgency campaign — is no easy task if the people are always willing to



Taliban fighters after taking control of Kabul. AFP

unassisted were roundly ignored at least since 2011. And the criminal ineptitude of the Afghan government was allowed to fester, despite a plethora of warnings from within the intelligence community and military advisors.

Was the final, disastrous outcome in Afghanistan avoidable? We will never know. But the sage advice of people such

as Joe Kent, together with the extensively documented lessons learned from the short-lived success of VSOs and the failures of the reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, should be a starting point for any policymaker who wants to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past that resulted in the squandering of so many lives — both American and Afghan<sup>14</sup>.

## NOTES

1. SIGAR (SIGAR, 2021). What we Need to Learn: Lessons From 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>
2. Miller, Z., Lemir, J. & Boak, J (AP, 2021). Biden team surprised by rapid Taliban gains in Afghanistan. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-afghanistan-taliban-5934ef05b0094d0189b5d900d2380179>
3. Briefing Room (The White House, 2021) Remarks by President Biden on the end of the war in Afghanistan. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>
4. SIGAR (SIGAR, 2021). What we Need to Learn: Lessons From 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>
5. Roggio, B. (Threat Matrix, 2010). Afghanistan: DoD report shows increase in violence. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/11/afghanistan\\_dod\\_report\\_shows\\_v.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/11/afghanistan_dod_report_shows_v.php)
6. Worcester, M. (ISPSW, 2010). Germany's Presence in Afghanistan and the Failure of Communication. [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/115597/Apr10\\_Afghanistan.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/115597/Apr10_Afghanistan.pdf)
7. Altman, H. (Military Times, 2020). Why dissolving the Afghan Local Police program troubles its American architects. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/05/27/why-dissolving-the-afghan-local-police-program-troubles-its-american-architects/>
8. Nawroz, M.Y. & Grau, L.W. (Military Review, 1995). The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War? <https://www.sfr-21.org/sources/afghanistan.html>
9. Rainey, M. (Yahoo Finance, 2021). Afghanistan Watchdog Offers Bleak Assessment of US Reconstruction Effort. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/afghanistan-watchdog-offers-bleak-assessment-225316035.html>
10. Gannon, K. (AP, 2021). EXPLAINER: US, NATO pledge billions to back Afghan forces. <https://apnews.com/article/business-83c0fac2109711d703f4f490798868b9>
11. Everstine, B. (Air Force Magazine, 2021). Watchdog report blasts US military's handling of fuel for Afghan forces. <https://www.airforcemag.com/watchdog-report-blasts-us-military-handling-fuel-afghan-forces/>
12. SIGAR (SIGAR, 2021). What we Need to Learn: Lessons From 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>
13. SIGAR (SIGAR, 2021). What we Need to Learn: Lessons From 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>
14. Ibid.