

Afghanistan now: a humanitarian crisis with no visible way out

By Nick Nugent, writer and author on Asia and AEJ UK member; 25 November 2021

David Loyn, a former war correspondent who is now an authority on the history of warfare, addressed an online meeting of the AEJ on 24 November, almost exactly a hundred days after the Taliban took Kabul and in same week as the publication in the UK of his new book on Afghanistan, 'The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan Since 9/11'. He analysed the current situation and its implications around four themes: Why Kabul fell so fast. What the Taliban are like now. Regional dynamics. What can the West do now?

According to Loyn, the West lost pretty badly especially when we consider that an earlier Afghan government survived three years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops sent in to support it. The biggest mistakes were made 20 years ago when the Taliban – after being defeated and ousted from government – were excluded from the Bonn process which led to the formation of a provisional government. Another mistake was that US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld refused to put American troops on the ground when its real enemy, Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, were cornered at Tora Bora. More recent mistakes included over-estimating the strength of the Afghan national army with its many 'ghost' soldiers, and not anticipating that Ashraf Ghani's government would 'run away'. During its years in the cold the Taliban had picked up support in the north, from Uzbeks, from supporters of the late Ahmed Shah Massoud whose Northern Alliance rode to power in 2001 and even Hazaras, all of whom were outside its traditional support base of Pashtun territory in the south. The West also failed to anticipate that it was not the Qatar negotiators who would form the new government but a more extreme faction, the Haqqani network, which includes three members sanctioned by the US government, making it virtually impossible for the US to deal with them. Loyn sees the hand of Pakistan – especially its ISI intelligence arm - behind that mini-coup within Taliban that has brought the hardliners to power.

He threw some light on the regional power play between India, Russia and Iran, which he identified as the major players following Taliban's takeover, in particular a meeting last week in Delhi between Russian and Indian national security advisers. India has its only overseas base in Tajikistan, which is likely to become a focus for opposition to the Taliban government given the presence there of Ahmed Shah Massoud's son, and Ashraf Ghani's former vice president. Russia, David Loyn suggested, may be contemplating organising a sort of Bonn-2 process to determine future governance structure not least because the Taliban can expect to come under pressure within 6 months from Islamic State Khorasan and within 12 months from a resurgent Al Qaeda. If that happens the Taliban will have lost their peace dividend, the "only positive tool in their armoury". He referred to two recent articles on these themes: by Lynne O'Donnell (formerly of AFP in Kabul) in the current edition of Foreign Policy, and by Harvard economist and ex World Bank representative in Kabul William Byrd on the USIP website. Drawing on the latter, Loyn spoke of the lack of

liquid currency as the Taliban government's biggest challenge, together with the massive humanitarian crisis faced by the Afghan population following the takeover and the subsequent freezing of Afghanistan's overseas assets; all of that compounded by the country's worst drought for 35 years. William Byrd estimates that 2 to 3 billion dollars' worth of emergency aid is needed urgently. In the article he proposes that the Afghanistan Trust Fund be re-purposed to give assistance to those in need directly, bypassing the Taliban government.

Several additional points came out in questioning as important in assessing the path ahead, including China's business-like dealings with the Taliban and the latter's promise not to feed the East Turkestan (Xinjiang) separatist movement. Also China's deal to exploit a copper mine south of Kabul. Loyn said a minority of provinces are still schooling girls of all ages and allowing girls to attend university, but most are not. Recent decrees include the exclusion from the judiciary of judges who have opposed the Taliban and one laying down strict new regulations about clothing for women appearing on TV. So far there have been no public amputations, though there have been hangings in the west of the country, while countless Afghans are still trying to flee the country and others are in hiding for fear of reprisals. The civil service and regional government structures are surprisingly resilient, at least formally, as demonstrated by the fact that former decrees from the previous period of Taliban rule have been upheld throughout the past two decades. Doctors, teachers and civil servants are still working but have not been paid for months, and there is now no functioning tax system.

For the West, the rapid collapse of the army was the most spectacular intelligence failure, although it was brought on by the abrupt withdrawal of American air support and the flight of top government figures. The West, including Joe Biden and Boris Johnson, have already lost interest in what they regard as 'yesterday's war', but they should be concerned for three main reasons: 1) Basic humanitarian concerns and the West's moral responsibility. 2) A worry that having left in such chaotic circumstances problems will 'come back to bite us.' 3) Training camps: the real risk that IS Khorasan and/or Al Qaeda could get back in business within a short time and once again threaten the world from a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Of the February 2020 deal between the Trump administration and the Taliban, David Loyn said this was not a peace deal but a 'surrender deal', a terrible deal. The Biden government should and could have negotiated a different deal to avoid the humiliating rout that it suffered in the eyes of the world. About recognising the Taliban government, Loyn said this matters a lot to the Taliban. Again recalling mistakes of 20 years ago, he said it would have been relatively easy to bring the Taliban into talks or even into the interim government in order not to avoid handing power to these "really bad people, the former mujahedin". Instead it is now difficult to see the US moving forward towards recognition, in view of the US sanctions hanging over members of the incoming Taliban administration. He recalled how Ahmed Shah Massoud's brother had remained ambassador in London throughout the previous period of Taliban rule (1996-2001). Finally, Loyn insisted that the disastrous finale to America's 20-year war in Afghanistan was not inevitable and he

continues to believe that the Us and some of its allies could have kept the Kabul government going even with a reduced foreign military presence, if the politicians had not lost patience. As for today's Taliban administration, he characterised it as 'not a functioning government; they are a crime syndicate supported by poppy money'. They also have plans to legalise cannabis and market it abroad.