



Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks during a congressional committee hearing on the withdrawal of American troops Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, Pool)

## Afghanistan shows the U.S. folly of trying to implant democratic institutions abroad

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The rapid conquest of Kabul in Afghanistan and the triumphant seizure of power by the Taliban triggered shock waves throughout the world.

Since the crumbling of the Afghan government and disintegration of its professionally trained army, a volley of scorching criticisms has been launched at U.S. President Joe Biden's administration for withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan. But the collapse of the Afghan government was likely inevitable.

Furthermore, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and continuing political instability in Iraq provide painful but valuable lessons for those who insist on implanting democracy in a sociopolitical environment that's profoundly shaped by inveterate tribal loyalty, kinship and sectarian affiliation.

Since the triumphant arrival of Taliban forces in Kabul in August 2021, the Biden administration has been the target of harsh criticisms. In order to enhance their electoral fortune in 2022 midterms election, congressional Republicans have seized upon the chaotic situation as a golden opportunity to question Biden's decision-making capacities.



A Taliban flag is placed in the front of a motorbike in Kabul, Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Bernat Armangue)

Islamic groups and regimes like Iran's have celebrated the departure of U.S. forces as a sign of the decline in American world domination.

Even media outlets like CNN have depicted Biden as "the author of the mess" in Afghanistan. Jim Langevin, a Democrat member of U.S. House of Representatives, has characterized the Biden administration's decision as a "catastrophe" on full display for the world to see.

### **Afghan withdrawal was years in the making**

It would be unfair to lay the blame for the tumultuous situation in Afghanistan solely at the feet of the Biden administration.



U.S. President Joe Biden speaks from the White House in April 2021 about the withdrawal of the remainder of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Withdrawing U.S. forces was nothing more than a punctuation mark to end a long sentence of secret negotiations between Barack Obama's administration with the Taliban. Those talks eventually culminated in the signing of a peace deal between the Donald Trump administration and the Taliban in Qatar in February 2020.

Ethnically and religiously motivated political rivalries have been a hallmark of Afghan politics for at least the past four decades. The presence of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan since 2001 provided an incentive for these factional groups to intensify their rivalries.

As long as the U.S. was willing to bear “the brunt of the fighting,” there was no incentive for leaders of these factional groups to reach a lasting political settlement.

Despite declarations of a commitment to building democratic institutions, the western-backed Afghan government was nothing more than a corporate entity. Its shareholders were regional warlords and local officials who exercised enormous control and influence over “the disbursement of financial resources,” including international aid, and bureaucratic recruitment to public positions in both the civil service and the military.

The retention of “former warlords in positions of power” cultivated a fertile ground for corruption to flourish. This was further exacerbated by the lack of effective oversight over international aids and the operations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Afghanistan.

## **NGO corruption**

In fact, corruption, profiteering and extravagant spending by NGO staff fuelled resentment among local Afghans. Ordinary Afghans aware of massive international financial assistance supposedly pouring into the country saw no significant improvement in their lives, but painfully witnessed “the vastly higher standards of living among NGO staff” who happened to be connected to regional warlords and local officials.



In this 2019 photo, a health-care worker provides a supplement as part of a nutrition regime for a seven-month-old baby suffering from malnutrition near Kabul, Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

For the past two decades, numerous official reports and government watchdogs have highlighted the rampant fraud, embezzlement and nepotism that gradually eroded the faith of Afghan people in their government, and hence sapped the strength of the Afghan state.

Unfortunately, U.S. military leaders who were aware of the scale of corruption chose to conceal it so they could boast about the “progress” they were making. But contrary to those assertions, the magnitude of corruption had not only diminished the morale of the Afghan army but had also alienated ordinary Afghans from their own government.

Consequently, neither the Afghan people nor its security forces and army were willing to put up resistance against advancing Taliban forces.

## **Parallels to Iraq**

A parallel can also be drawn between the lack of morale to counter Taliban forces and the collapse of Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014. That collapse resulted in the capture of several major cities and towns in northern Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, ethnic and sectarian politics have dominated Iraqi politics. Like Afghanistan, Iraqi political factions have failed to establish an inclusive form of government. In conjunction with ethnic rivalry and sectarian politics, “deeply entrenched corruption” has become a major force in fostering a sense of disillusionment among ordinary Iraqi citizens.



Children play inside a damaged car amid heavy destruction in a neighbourhood retaken by Iraqi security forces from Islamic State militants near Mosul, Iraq, in 2017. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Political corruption and sectarian appointments in fact eroded the morale of the Iraqi army to withstand the ISIL onslaught.

This summer’s disintegration of the Afghan government and the continuation of political turmoil in Iraq provide invaluable lessons for the United States, which has imposed upon itself the duty of emancipating the world in the name of democracy.

## **Failed ‘democratization’ missions**

The failure to bring democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan is a compelling testimony of the fallacy of the project heralded by neoconservatives and put into action by George W. Bush. The former U.S. president justified these wars as “democratizing missions.”

The abject failure of both missions shows the folly of trying to implant democratic institutions in societies where kinship, tribal loyalty and sectarian affiliation have deep roots. Sectarianism and ethnic loyalty tend to foster environments that aren't receptive to liberal values of tolerance, respect for civil liberty and individual freedom — all of which are essential conditions to develop vibrant and successful democracies.

Loyalty to tribes and sectarian affiliation often impede the development of loyalty to the wider political community. This is a painful reality that must be taken into consideration by those who insist on installing democracy in countries marked by ingrained tribal and sectarian loyalty.

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