



## **The Road to Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan**

**Yossef Bodansky**

**March 2020**

### **Executive Summary**

---

\* Presently, the US continues to focus on the legitimacy and image of the Kabul regime even while the vast majority of the tribal grassroots profoundly rejects the very notion of a viable centralized government overlording the tribes - be it Kabul or Washington. The increasingly popular influence of the Jihadists adds Islamic motivation to the grassroots Pushtunwali-based rejection of the US-led effort at nation building. Thus, no matter what the US, or anybody else, does - there can be no solution to this irreconcilable dichotomy. Meanwhile, the exhausted US-NATO forces are vacating because their governments have given-up on winning skirmishes against Pakistan-sponsored Taliban.

\* The just signed Doha agreement means back to basics and back to the beginning. The Taliban have adamantly refused to accept the participation of official Kabul in the Doha process in order to not even imply acceptance and recognition of a centralized entity in Kabul. The Taliban do not rule out the return to fighting in pursuit of the Pushtunwali-based tribal way of life. And the US, desperate to withdraw as quickly as possible, does not object to the Taliban's position. Hence, the Doha agreement amounts to saying goodbye to the modern centralized Afghan state and possibly the Pakistani one as well. Ultimately, the age-old struggle of the tribes for an independent ruler-less Greater Pakhtunistan has been given a new lease on life by an American administration oblivious of what they've unleashed.

### **About ISPSW**

---

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have held – in some cases for decades – executive positions and dispose over a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.



## Analysis

---

*[W]e today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia. ... [A]ll American forces will be withdrawn from South Vietnam. The people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future, without outside interference.*

-- US President Richard Nixon, 23 January 1973

*We, representatives of the liberation forces of Saigon, formally proclaim that Saigon has been totally liberated.*

*We accept the unconditional surrender of Gen. Duong Van Minh, president of the former government. ...*

*We are facing an immense victory of historic importance*

-- First broadcast of the Ho Chi Minh City Radio, 30 April 1975

Afghanistan has never been a viable political-military entity. It is still not. The territory of Afghanistan has always been an instrument of the grand strategic designs of regional powers. Passing through and using the landscape commonly known as Afghanistan have been imperative to making global and regional power-grabs possible. The bulk of the territory called Afghanistan and Pakistan - more accurately Pakhtunistan - is an amalgamation of Pushtun and Baluchi tribes. Their irreconcilable individuality is at the center of the grassroots population's refusal to accept any central authority from any foreign conqueror. The war the armies of Alexander the Great fought in the region some 2,300 years ago is identical to the war still being waged by the US/NATO/ISAF forces, as have been the countless wars waged by all foreign conquerors in between.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of the US and NATO forces has been worse because of their unwillingness to confront, learn and take into consideration the unique legacy of regional warfare. That the US has been directly involved in Afghan conflagrations since the mid-1970's and has had significant forces deployed and operating since the turn of the 21st Century had little or no impact on Washington's comprehension of the uniqueness of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater and the people thereof. If anything, the overall situation has only deteriorated in the 2010's.

At the peak of the US presence, local civic initiatives were used as instruments to bring in Kabul - thus alienating tribes and villages who would have otherwise cooperated with the US. As US forces withdrew and Afghan mercenaries (that is, the security forces) and corrupt officials replaced them - they only aggravated the situation and the indigenous insurrection escalated. Throughout, Pakistan tightly controlled and cleverly used Jihadist "Taliban" forces for major anti-Kabul operations such as spectacular bombings. As well, Pakistan ensured that the myriad of ISI-sponsored grassroots tribal forces kept resisting and fighting any attempt to establish a viable centralized government in Kabul. Significantly, these tribal forces needed, and still need, no outside push to resolutely fight any attempt to enforce central authority - but the Pakistani support in funds, weapons, expertise

---

<sup>1</sup> For a concise analysis of the overall situation in Afghanistan, see: Yossef Bodansky, Concise History of the Afghanistan-Pakistan War, ISPSW Issue No 495, July 2017.



and fighters has made the grassroots insurrection far more lethal. Ultimately, all these Pakistani undertakings undermined the US efforts to legitimize and bolster the central authority in Kabul.

Gradually and grudgingly, official Washington became cognizant of the fiasco unfolding in Afghanistan and Pakistan but dreaded more the domestic political ramifications of a withdrawal than the global security ramifications of the lingering quagmire. On 9 December 2019, Craig Whitlock exposed in the *Washington Post* the extent of the official awareness of the futility of the US-led effort and the adamant refusal to face reality for political reasons - this, despite the ongoing needless loss of both blood and treasure. John Sopko, the head of the Pentagon's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), noted that "the American people have constantly been lied to" about the conduct and success of the US-led war effort. US Lieutenant General Michael Flynn elaborated that "The reason is that there is a political bias and the reason is that there is lack of courage in senior government officials to tell the truth. That is civilian and in the military."

Former senior officials interviewed by SIGAR for a lessons-learned study were unanimous in their articulation of the futility and failure of the continuing war. "Our policy was to create a strong central government which was idiotic because Afghanistan does not have a history of a strong central government," a former State Department official told SIGAR. These policies and objectives were part of a far bigger problem. "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan - we didn't know what we were doing," US Lieutenant General Douglas Lute (the White House's Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama Administrations) acknowledged. "We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking."

Moreover, explained British General Lord David Richards (who commanded the NATO forces in Afghanistan), the US conduct of the war was focused on short-term undertakings. "We were trying to get a single coherent long-term approach - a proper strategy - but instead we got a lot of tactics," he told SIGAR. "There was no coherent long-term strategy. This is a long process ... but the force rotations still changed the strategy and forced everything to be short-term." Moreover, the US was cognizant that by avoiding confrontation with Pakistan, the US effectively forfeited the chance for success against the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban. "If the enemy has sanctuary you can't compel that enemy," conceded US General David Petraeus (who was commander of both CENTCOM and the US forces in Afghanistan). Yet, the conduct of the US-led war continued without any thorough reexamination of the basic premises and with only cosmetic changes to the modalities of the war-fighting.

Meanwhile, the US continues to focus on the legitimacy and image of the Kabul regime even while the vast majority of the tribal grassroots profoundly rejects the very notion of a viable centralized government overlording the tribes - be it Kabul, Washington, or anybody else. Moreover, with the passage of time, the legacy of the US help for both the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad and the eviction of the Arab Neo-Salafists has all but evaporated, while the influence of the various Islamist-Jihadist entities rises because of their leading and exemplary role in the anti-Kabul fight and the generous ISI-origin assistance channeled through them. The increasingly popular influence of the Islamists-Jihadists adds Islamic motivation to the grassroots Pushtunwali-based rejection of the American-led effort at nation building. Thus, no matter what the US, or anybody else, does - there can be no solution to this irreconcilable dichotomy.

The extent of the despair of the Pushtun and Baluchi tribal grassroots is clear. In slightly over a generation, the uncompromising defiant struggle for preserving their Pushtunwali-based self-identities have taken the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes from one extreme to the other. Back in the 1980's, the tribes felt compelled to make deals with the Soviets against the Islamist threat from Pakistan and the ensuing imposition of Neo-Salafism. Since the early 2000's, the tribal grassroots have been so petrified by the possible rise of Kabul, that they have reached



out to the Pakistanis and their Jihadist proxies. In both extreme cases, the tribes are seeking deals against what they perceive to be profound insensitivities toward, interpreted as intentional threats to, their Pushtunwali-based way of life and value system. The only common denominator of these shifting of allegiances is that the US was, and remains, the preeminent supporter of the tribes' nemeses while claiming to be their savior. The tribal grassroots are reaching out to anybody who would closely cooperate with them against the American mortal threat. None of this should have happened had the US bothered to pay attention to the tribal grassroots - something the US has never done since getting involved in Afghanistan fighting in the mid-1970's.

Meanwhile, by the mid-2010's, the US global shift to prioritizing confrontation with China and Russia revived the imperative to sponsor Jihadists as key elements in the undeclared war to undermine both global powers. The US reliance on Jihadists as undeclared instruments of global struggles started in the mid-1940's, peaked during the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad of the 1980's, survived the aftermath of 9/11, and has been expanding in the 2010's. President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski articulated the US approach to Jihadism in an interview published in the 15-21 January 1998 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* and translated by Bill Blum. Brzezinski acknowledged that the US unilaterally exacerbated the conflict in Afghanistan in the late-1970's in order to ensnare the Soviet Union. Brzezinski was then asked about the rise of Islamist terrorism as a result of the US-sponsored Jihad in Afghanistan. The exchange reveals an attitude still prevalent in official Washington.

Q: And neither do you regret having supported the Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists?

B: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?

Q: Some stirred-up Moslems? But it has been said and repeated Islamic fundamentalism represents a world menace today.

B: Nonsense!

The use of Jihadists in order to destabilize both Russia and China is now the US high priority. This strategic shift requires close cooperation with Turkish Intelligence, the MIT, and the Qatari "Foreign Legion". Both countries have provided, among other things, cover for the CIA-sponsored recruitment of Central Asian - mainly Uzbek and Uighur - and Caucasian - mainly Chechen and Dagestani - Jihadists in Syria-Iraq irrespective of their affiliation with al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and other similar entities. The current rush to shield and transfer foreign Jihadists has led to the on-going Russian-Syrian assault on, and bombings of, the main Turkish-shielded Jihadist camps and convoys in the Idlib enclave in northwestern Syria. The objective of the Idlib campaign is to destroy these Jihadists before they are transferred east. In turn, the current escalation has already led to the accelerated evacuation of foreign Jihadists by the MIT to bases near Antakya in Turkey's Hatay Province pending their dispatch mainly to Afghanistan.

Thus, since the mid-2010's, US and allied intelligence services have been transferring growing numbers of Jihadists to Pakistani and Afghan Baluchistan, as well as to northern Afghanistan and the Fergana Valley. A minority of the Jihadists arriving from Syria-Iraq are sheltered by a myriad of Baluchi Jihadist entities, while most of them operate under the banner of the ostensibly independent JundAllah under the command of Uthman



Ghazi, an Uzbek. That Uthman Ghazi swore allegiance to then D'IISH leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Summer 2015 matters to none of his current sponsors. About the same time, Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hizb-i-Islami Afghanistan, also swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi as a demonstration of his breaking away from the ISI-dominated Taliban-al-Qaida embrace. Presently staying mainly in Kabul, Hekmatyar is considered a key player in the US-sponsored intra-Afghan reconciliation process.

By now, the anti-China and anti-Russia Jihads are already escalating. From Baluchistan, local and foreign Jihadists strike out at the Chinese efforts to build the BRI in Pakistan. From northern Afghanistan, the resettled Jihadists started to launch grassroots Jihads via the greater Central Asia into the Russian soft underbelly and China's Xinjiang. These Jihads will escalate as the weather improves in springtime.

Meanwhile, under such profoundly evolving grand strategic circumstances, neither the existence nor the cooperation of both Afghanistan and Pakistan matter to official Washington. Incapable of reconciling its own war aims with the two-and-a-half millennia of Pushtunwali-based tribal struggle against foreign invaders and centralized governance - Washington has finally faced reality. Hence, there emerged the urgent imperative to placate the local tribes and the Taliban forces fighting in their name in order to enable the US and NATO forces to withdraw from the debilitating quagmire while gaining the Taliban's tacit support for the lingering presence of US-sponsored Jihadist camps and surges. Lavish foreign aid from the US and the EU, as well as cessation of any attempt to block the growing drug economy, would smooth the process.

And so, on 29 February 2020, a major agreement was signed in Doha, Qatar, between the US and the Taliban. The agreement was signed in the aftermath of a week-long effort to reduce violence against US and NATO forces but not the Kabul Government. A senior Afghan official explained to the RFE/RL that "the Taliban had committed to reducing its attacks from around 75 operations per day to under 15" during this week. What was signed in Doha is not a peace agreement but an agreed-upon mechanism for the safe withdrawal of US and NATO forces while secretly sustaining the Jihadist springboards. Sajad Abedi, in the 24 February 2020 issue of the *Asia Times*, elucidated that "concerning the effects of this US effort on the future of Afghanistan, there seems to be no peace with US troops present and no prospects for peace with US troops removed."

For official Washington, explain several Qatari, Turkish and Taliban seniors, what matter most are the "four secret annexes" and/or the "four secret understandings" (with both terms used interchangeably by the sources). These four items (annexes and/or understandings) formulate the conditions under which "the US is not going to completely withdraw militarily from Afghanistan" in order to sustain the Jihadist surges while not interfering with the Taliban's anticipated ascent to power in Kabul and beyond. The first item defines the size and location of the remaining US forces. The second item defines the Taliban's denouncing of "violent extremism" in vague terms. The third item stipulates the criteria for the semi-truce to be sustained while intra-Afghan talks will take place. The fourth item stipulates the modalities and guidelines under which the residual US forces "will operate in Taliban-controlled areas." All the Qatari, Turkish and Taliban sources emphasized that the only US actions permitted are in support of the Jihad in the greater Central Asia. Should the US discover that "known terrorists" returned to Afghanistan - the US will have to notify the Taliban and await their decision whether the threat is valid and how to address a valid threat. The Taliban warned the US that unilateral undertakings such as drone strikes are unacceptable.

Rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Washington does not care what will be the ultimate fate of the government in Kabul once the US withdrawal is formally completed. Explicitly, the Doha agreement glosses over the feasibility and possibility of a future agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. The



Taliban and the Kabul Government (that the Taliban refuse to recognize) are merely encouraged to negotiate the future of Afghanistan. There is no formal commitment to such negotiations.

Moreover, the Doha agreement leaves the door open to the resumption of inter-Afghan fighting should one side do something the other side “deem inappropriate.” With such a vague criterion - the road to a renewed Afghan civil war is very short. Indeed, on 2 March, the Taliban announced the resumption of attacks on the Afghan security forces. “The reduction in violence ... has ended now and our operations will continue as normal,” Zabihullah Mujahid stated. “As per the [US-Taliban] agreement, our mujahedin will not attack foreign forces but our operations will continue against the Kabul administration forces.” A few bombs exploded in Kabul and Khost shortly afterwards. Thus, given the entrenched positions of the Pushtun tribes and the Taliban, an Afghan civil war can easily erupt over the validity and viability of a centralized government in Kabul and its commitment to modern-day borders - namely, the Durand Line.

So, it’s back to basics and back to the beginning in Afghanistan-Pakistan - except that the US will no longer be officially in Afghanistan except for the clandestine and deniable sponsoring of a new cycle of Jihads against China and Russia. The Taliban have adamantly refused to accept the participation of official Kabul in the Doha process in order to not even imply acceptance and recognition of a centralized entity in Kabul. The Taliban do not rule out the return to fighting in pursuit of the Pushtunwali-based tribal way of life. And the US, desperate to withdraw as quickly as possible, does not object to the Taliban’s position. Simply put, the US will not return to fighting in Afghanistan in order to save its erstwhile allies in Kabul from a Taliban onslaught. Hence, the Doha agreement amounts to saying goodbye to the centralized modern Afghan state and possibly the Pakistani one as well. Ultimately, the age-old struggle of the tribes for an independent ruler-less Greater Pakhtunistan has been given a new lease on life by an American administration oblivious of what they’ve unleashed.

\*\*\*

**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



## About the Author of this Issue

---

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



*Yossef Bodansky*