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Book Review: The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan

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The recent historical survey *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan* is a deservedly cutting reflection on mistakes made and lessons not learned during the Afghanistan War. A necessary read for practitioners engaged in security assistance, it has obvious specific relevance to anyone involved in the Afghan endeavor (particularly those who continue to work in the field). The publisher’s website advertises the book as “a searing indictment of how Afghan elites and the Western powers pulled the rug on the Afghan people, abandoning them to their fate.” Offering valuable perspective on the 7,176 days of Republican Afghanistan, the tone is measured and tactful, given the moral injury of the fall of Afghanistan (as well as the physical danger, with one author having fled Kabul for his life in August 2021 due to his tenure as director-general for international relations on Kabul’s National Security Council) and the whimpering end of the post-9/11 “forever wars.”

In truth, I had mixed feelings about taking on the task of digesting this book and the ability to separate my involvement in the American effort from the content and experiences Ahmad Shuja Jamal and William Maley offer within the book. The authors’ thematic (rather than strictly chronological) organization, however, usefully cut the immense task at hand into digestible considerations. Following the introduction, chapters 2 through 5 address political legitimacy, pathologies of aid, the persistence of insurgency, and leadership problems. Chapters 6 through 8 instead focus on the factors that “finally brought the Republic down once it became clear that President Biden was going to adhere unconditionally to the approach adopted by President Trump” (xxx).

The week after Kabul fell, I was on a plane to Mogadishu, struggling with echoes of doubt and fear following prior conversations with counterparts about the American abandonment of the Kurds in 2019.
and the withdrawal from Somalia in 2021 and counterparts telling me point-blank that the United States was not a trusted partner. Keeping these benchmarks in mind, specific warnings from Jamal and Maley resonated with me due to their applicability in other areas of responsibility, including the disproportionate funding and resource allocation across both ministries and geographies as well as the pursuit of projects that “reflect donor rather than recipient priorities” (55); the growth of a “second civil service” consisting of nongovernmental organizations, consultants, advisers, and employees of the United Nations and other international agencies (59); the importance of denying sanctuaries, given their military significance, as they “provide safe venues for the preparation of attacks and reduce critical vulnerabilities” (77); the outcomes of dislocated populations and generational trauma; and vulnerabilities attributable to “dependence on services provided by allies . . . [including] air cover and medical evacuation capabilities, intelligence, and logistics” (84); and reliance on contractors, of whom 17,000 withdrew abruptly the month prior to Kabul’s fall.

Discussing outcomes of dislocated populations and generational trauma, to include the characterization of the security forces, Jamal and Maley write of the “orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived” for whom war had become “the only occupation they could possibly adapt to” (70). As Afghan General Sami Sadat highlighted in a New York Times article featured in the book (163), failure to give soldiers a wartime narrative for which to fight can be fatal (177).

Other repeated insights include the importance of understanding money as a weapon system and a destabilizing vulnerability if not administered responsibly (52–56). Shortfalls in the allied effort mentioned were poor donor coordination (45, 49, 56), high personnel turnover (52), the lack of a whole-of-government approach to security sector reform, and the inclusion of the “BLUF” (bottom-line-up-front) assessment of a 2019 RAND study that states: “A precipitous departure, no matter how rationalized, will mean choosing to lose. A preoccupation with an unachievable conception of ‘victory’ can distract attention from the central reality that not losing can be a legitimate focus of statecraft and military strategy, since the possibility of parametric shifts in the operating environment can never be discounted” (91).

Authoritative and uniquely incisive, this book is a valuable read for the guard getting older and for newcomers to the community of practice. Notably, the book’s final section is simply titled “On Betrayal”; I have yet to work up the wherewithal to face my feelings about the subject—a sentiment I expect many who would benefit from reading this book share, perhaps all the more reason why anyone who was involved in the endeavor should read this book.

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