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Afghanistan: A political rather than a humanitarian crisis

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For the development of Afghanistan, the United States spent \$143 billion. It is just 6% of the \$2.3 trillion spent in twenty years of war: but still, it is more than the Marshall Plan they rebuilt Europe with. When they arrived, one in three Afghans were at risk of starvation. When they withdrew, one in two.

After all, in the accounts of the Pentagon there are projects like nine Italian cachemire goats to revive the textile industry. They were paid \$6 million.

And no one has a clue where they are.

The problem is that the United States never had a strategy for Afghanistan. The war started in 2001 as a response to 9/11: but the Taliban played no role in 9/11. And nor they were in al-Qaeda. They are a local movement. They are Afghans. Not Arabs. Osama bin Laden was in Afghanistan, true, but only because he had been expelled from Sudan. And in the end, he was killed in Pakistan: for an attack carried out by nationals of Saudi Arabia.

Two top allies of the United States.

Americans took over Kabul in less than six weeks. With 20 casualties. Just one more than in the invasion of Grenada. They expected to stay for such a short time that in Bagram, which became one of their main military bases overseas, with 30,000 servicemen and a Harley Davidson dealer, there wasn't even a shower.

The washing was shipped by helicopter to the nearest laundry. In Uzbekistan.

And after Afghanistan, they turned to Iraq.

Bombing it into submission because of weapons of mass destruction it did not have.



The result? The Islamic State.

The bloodiest battlefield, here, has been Sangin. A 20,000-people town in the Helmand. The heartland of the Taliban. And of opium production. To reach it, you drive for hours along a road where everything is yellow. Sand yellow. Dust yellow. And from time to time, grey. Where a mine blew up. Or a bomb dropped. Because that's what Afghanistan looks like, out of Kabul. Ruins. Ruins and wall stubs, mud houses which cost three hundred dollars each flattened by B-52s which cost \$70,000 per flight hour. Until suddenly, in the middle of nowhere, Google Maps says: Sangin. And you realize you arrived.

Because Sangin, simply, is no more.

For each American fallen, there is a name, a picture. A story.



Of Afghan victims, there is not even the number.

They were never counted.

And yet, all concern now is for the Taliban. When you talk of Afghanistan, that's the only question you are asked. How are they? Do they still cut the hands of thieves? Do they still stone adulterers to death? Smash TV sets? Or are they different from twenty years ago? Honestly, I don't know. Being a foreigner is not like being an Afghan. Especially today. The Taliban want international recognition, and access to aid. And so they are all kind.

And by the way. The median age here is 18.4 years.

But basically, I don't know because probably no one knows yet. Not even the Taliban. Unlike other Islamist movements, they never set up a shadow state. They never had a military wing and a civilian wing. They are just fighters. And Afghanistan is a country of mountains. Its elevation is 1,884 meters, on average: it is a country of valleys, and communities used to self-government. Used to count only on themselves. And so, for the Taliban all is new, now. We were together in Sangin. It was my first time: but theirs too. They had never been with a girl. And when we met, I was thinking that they

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look so strange, with their tunic, their turban, their cloak, as if they were from another era, when one of them pointed at my Converse sneakers, and said: You look so strange.



They have only a Kalashnikov rifle. And now that the war is over, you see them controlling the traffic with their gun: though to control the traffic you would rather need a traffic light. But that's a classic. For many Afghans, they are the lesser evil.

That's why they are back in power.

Because we have been such a failure, that even the Taliban turned into a lesser evil.

But as usual, now headlines are all about a humanitarian crisis. "The worst crisis we have ever witnessed," said the UN, calling for aid: million Afghans, it said, are on the verge of death. And in this way, it seems it is because of the cold. Of the winter. And yet it's not. The crisis comes from the US decision to freeze the reserves of the Central Bank of Afghanistan: and with them, the entire economy. There is everything here. All kinds of grocery. There are dollars to pay too: but they are stuck in bank accounts.

It is not a humanitarian crisis, it is a political crisis.

You do not die, today, in Afghanistan. You get killed.

And not by the Taliban.

Everybody talks of women rights. But the first right is the right to be alive¹.

¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies