

# AFGHANISTAN 2001-2021

## WHY IS THE WEST ACTING SO SURPRISED?

### MY NAME IS MARCEL HAGENS

and between 2009 and 2016 I spent a lot of time in Afghanistan. I do not claim to be an expert or to know it all but during my visits I had the opportunity to spend time in Herat, Kabul, the Panjshir Valley, Kandahar, & Uruzgan. I Spent time in military camps and HQ's, was invited into private homes, lived in hotels and talked with and mostly listened to ISAF generals & soldiers, (inter-) national journalists, Afghan ministers, military, police, warlords, students, farmers, professors, taxi drivers, business owners, NGO's, bankers, civil servants, airline owners & ambassadors to many western countries. I also was invited to speak on several Afghan Reconstruction summits held in Istanbul and Dubai.

The first thing you need to know about Afghanistan is that I never came across a more friendly and hospitable people as the Afghans I met.

Wherever I came I was met with a smile and the inevitable tea, more often than not I was asked to share a meal even though they themselves struggled on a daily base to feed their families and I learned not to compliment them on whatever they were wearing or had in their house because they would insist on you accepting it as a gift.

This was not at all what I came to expect reading about Afghanistan and watching CNN, BBC and Dutch TV before I first visited, and this immediately triggered my curiosity. If the image of the Afghan people painted in the western press was so far away from my own experience what else could there be different?

Based on my experience and well documented sources I will try to provide some historical background and put the events of last few days into perspective of the past 20 years.



## 7 CURRENT MYTH'S UNCOVERED:

### 1. The west was surprised by the speed of the Taliban offensive.

In 2001 it took the US and allied forces exactly 60 days (2 month's) from the first air bombardment to achieve the full capitulation of Taliban forces. The Taliban offensive in 2021 started in May and ended on August 16th that is 108 days (3,5 months).

### 2. October 11th 2001 President G.W. Bush told the world "The US will fight a war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them" in November he added "if you sponsor terrorists or do business with them you do not do business with the USA".

Although Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization founded by Saudi Arabians, most 9/11 attackers were from Saudi Arabia and several financial links were tracked back to Saudi sources, Bin Laden lived in Pakistan when he was found and Taliban fighters moved freely in and out of Pakistan and the role of Iran in this conflict is even more complex (first supporting the fight against Taliban and later joining the Taliban in the fight against the USA) these nations never experienced the "full force of the US military" or even serious political repercussions.

### 3. The huge ANA fighting force sometimes only existed on paper.

On several occasions it was determined that complete battalions of ANA only existed on paper, even their alleged base did not exist,

corrupt officers and politicians "invented" complete military units to collect the money for food and salaries. It also was not uncommon that the names of soldiers who were killed in action or deserted remained on the list of active serving military. Sometimes to collect money but sometimes also in order to not alarm the politicians about the staggering losses the ANA encountered in the fight against the Taliban.

### 4. Kabul fell without a fight

When you are supposed to fight for your capital and government you would expect that government to stand its ground by your side. Night is falling and the enemy is closing in, In the morning you wake up and find your president has left the country and your allies (NATO) both military as civilian embassy staff are also running for the door. Who are we to judge these Afghans when they also choose to survive (for now)

### 5. Opportunistic tradition

The Afghan tribal history shows that more than once whole fighting militias shift sides during a conflict. Loyalties lie with the strongest force, you do what is needed to survive and live to fight another day. Afghans do not have watches, they have time. They are capable of accepting being ruled by their enemy while, in truth, never giving up the desire to kill and defeat them at the first opportunity.

It was clear to see for everyone who knew where to look on the footage of "Taliban" in the presidential palace and on the streets of Kabul. Taliban fighters preferring, US made, modified M4 rifles while showing an amazing "trigger finger discipline" over the traditional and easy to operate AK47. These men did not receive their weapons training from some mullah in a cave in Tora Bora.

## 6. The Afghan war is the longest war the US ever fought.

The Korean war started in 1950 and till today has not officially ended although no recent major combat operations have been reported since the DMZ crisis 1965-1969.

## 7. The US cannot stay and support a country that is not willing or capable to fight for themselves.

- US presence in Korea is estimated at 27.500 soldiers and their withdrawal would most likely provoke an immediate communist invasion.

- After WWII in 1945 the US kept a military presence in both Japan and Germany to first ensure peaceful transition to a new government and secondly assist with protection against potential Soviet and Chinese aggression. In 2021 still it is estimated at 37.500 soldiers in Germany and 48.500 in Japan.

- NATO mission KFOR has been in Kosovo since 1999. Today 3.500 NATO troops (including US) still deter renewed hostility and threats against Kosovo by Yugoslav and Serb forces.

The US and NATO in Kosovo take decades and almost unlimited funding to (re)build war torn economies and governmental structures after a complete capitulation of their enemy in Germany & Japan, with the proven economic and social success of those nations to support that approach.

Since that time the US and their allies have proven to be governed by short term political motivated mandates and goals and unclear rules of engagement with mostly strategic failures as a result:

**1955-1975** Vietnam war with the fall of Saigon to the communist North **1990-1991** First Gulf war with the resurrection of Saddam Hussein leading to a return during the **2003-2011** Second Gulf War where the US declared victory in 2011 and withdrew all troops but the complete dismantling of civil services and the Iraqi Army caused the rise of ISIL and the need to return in **2014** to combat ISIL.



## AFGHAN BACKGROUND- INFORMATION

Afghanistan is a country where until the 1970's life in the larger cities could be considered modern. Socially women were equal to men, they attended universities, worked and wore western dresses. Pictures taken in that time in Kabul could just as easily have been taken in Paris. At the same time 85% of the population lived in rural areas of the land, no electricity, sanitation or running water, no education and in a society based on an Islamic tradition. The country exists of many ethnic groups (with the Pashtun, Tadjik and Hazara as the biggest) and its borders are decided in the late 19th century by the British and Russians. As a result, the 25% of Pashtun who represent about 40% of the Afghan population live in Afghanistan and 75% of this ethnic group live in Peshawar (Pakistan) moving freely between the two countries.

In 2001 Afghanistan has a history of almost 25 years (almost a full generation) of constant (civil) war, with no democratic history and a tribal system where your seat at the table was determined by the size of your grey beard and the size of your armed militia. How did it get so far?

### RISE OF THE TALIBAN

The Afghan history with all its warlords and the relations to its neighboring countries is complex and trying to explain everything would mean writing a very, very extensive book, not an article. But watching the popular movies "The kite runner" and "Charlie Wilsons war" will give you a good start.

During the USSR invasion many armed groups, called the mujahideen, battled against the common Soviet enemy although their motives and goals could not have been more different. When that common enemy disappeared in 1989 the warlords like Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Mohammed Omar turned onto each other starting a fierce civil war for the control of the country.

What became known as the Taliban originated in Pakistan during the Soviet invasion. This Pashtun militia funded and trained by the CIA by use of the Pakistani secret service (ISI) The 33.000 madrassa's (Islamic schools) based in Pakistan, were they recruited their soldiers, were based upon Saudi Arabian financial support and Saudi Islamic believes. In their fight against the Northern Alliance for control over Afghanistan only about 30% were Taliban of Afghan nationality and about 55% were Pakistani (military) nationals.

In 1996 the Taliban took over the central government in Kabul declaring the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and some Arabic Gulf states like Qatar. They never gained full control over the Northern part of Afghanistan which remained under the control of the Northern Alliance, backed by amongst others Iran, USA, India and Russia.

### OCTOBER 2001

After 09/11 the US invoked article 5 of the NATO treaty, which states that an attack on one member state (in this case the US) is considered an attack on all members, this meant that NATO effectively was at war with Al-Qaeda and all those who offered a safe haven to Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden (OBL), who was believed to live in Afghanistan under protection of the Taliban regime.



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The Taliban lead by Mullah Omar, who was married to one of OBL's daughters, ignored the ultimatum to hand over OBL and so on the 7th of October 2001 the war in Afghanistan started and one day later a man called Hamid Karzai crossed from Pakistan into Afghanistan on a mission to fight for a better Afghanistan later that month he was joined by 12 US special forces soldiers of the Operational Detachment-Alpha(ODA) 574 lead by captain Jason Amerine.

In the North, the "Northern Alliance" a traditional enemy of the Taliban who managed to prevent both Soviet and Taliban rule over their territory left their traditional base in the Panjshir valley and started their advance on Kabul. Their legendary leader Ahmad Shah Massoud was killed by what was, generally believed to be, an Al-Qaeda suicide bomb attack just two days before 09/11.

## NOVEMBER 2001

As early as November 2001, it was clear that the Taliban would not last long because of the constant attacks by the U.S. Air Force. But Rumsfeld (US Secretary of Defense) would not consider a strategic pause, nor would he ask the State Department to look for political solutions for Afghanistan. There was to be no surrender, no amnesty for Mullah Omar, and certainly no surrender without conditions, Rumsfeld informed Special Forces' Jason Amerine, who in turn was to convey the message to Karzai, Amerine told to journalist and writer Anand Gopal.

## DECEMBER 2001

Karzai initially went his own way. He did want an agreement. On Thursday, December 6th, 2001, he reached an agreement with the Taliban to surrender in the southern city of Kandahar, the last stronghold they held at the time. Karzai ignored the instructions from Washington and spoke to the international press that sixth of December. 'Mullah Omar may go in dignity,' Karzai said. He added that Omar was "a free man," but that 650 al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan would be rounded up and tried.

Traditionally, at Afghan changes of power, large groups always surrender without a shot being fired, hoping to benefit from the new wind that is blowing. You gamble on what you think is the strongest party, and stick around as long as you benefit. That's what happened in Kandahar in December 2001 and also in 2021.

Karzai's announcement that the Taliban had surrendered made all the news media, from AP to The Guardian. The War on Terror, begun by the Americans, had lasted about two months and seemed over: the Taliban defeated, Osama bin Laden on the run.

Without the west realizing it, one by one the Taliban went home. 'Victory was near,' Anand Gopal states in his book. Mullah Berader, the second-in-command after Mullah Omar, was living in his hometown in Uruzgan again. Mullah Mansour, his air minister, lived a half-hour drive from Kandahar center.

## UNACCEPTABLE TO THE USA

But on that same sixth of December 2001, something happened that made Dutch journalist Bette Damme stumble upon this story only so many years later. The news of the surrender was expertly killed in Washington.

Karzai's deal also did not reach the diplomatic corps that was working hard those days in Bonn, Germany, to form a new government for the new Afghanistan. The Taliban were excluded in advance. The information gap in Bonn turned out to be very large, many people did not even believe that Karzai was in southern Afghanistan and, together with American Special Forces and CIA, was trying to talk his way through Taliban land.

Within a day, Karzai was speaking to the international press again, but this time with a very different story. He told the AP news agency that his goal was to "arrest Mullah Omar" because he was wanted by the U.S. and because he had helped Osama bin Laden.

He also stated that the Taliban could never be part of a new government. What had happened here? Rumsfeld had intervened, he had called the Special Forces again and made it clear to Karzai that the Taliban were the 'common enemy'.

This time Karzai took the bull by the horns and again addressed the press in a way that pleased his friends in Washington.

## GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

On the day he had effectively made the surrender narrative disappear, Rumsfeld sent new troops to Afghanistan. Fighting on was in keeping with the Bush administration's view of the terrorist threat. Even though Bin Laden's loose-knit Al-Qaeda nexus consisted of some 500-1.000 young men, in the U.S. after 09/11 the enemy was made into a big monster.

Rumsfeld and his team also pushed the Taliban under this big term "Global War on Terror. A nuanced view was missing Robert Grenier, the CIA's station chief in Pakistan in the post-09/11 period, could not convince Washington that the reality on the ground was very different. 'Washington made one word of it: Al-Qaeda/Taliban. Grenier's analysis did not reach Washington's politicians, let alone the general public.

In December 2001 the Americans began hunting down the Taliban. On the day after the surrender, they were already hunting Karzai's negotiator, who had made the deal on his and Mullah Omar's behalf. In 2002 the American Congress sent new troops. Some 5,200. In 2003 they doubled that to 10,400, and the next year also, to 15,200. And again in 2005. During these years, the Americans also sounded the alarm to NATO - they, too, had to send troops. And so it happened. European countries, joined in around 2006. But who were these American and NATO troops going to shoot at? Who was the enemy?

'Where is the Taliban!' the nervous Special Forces shouted at the local governors whom they saw as the new allies. The governors knew about the surrender, and about all the Taliban sitting at home, but they abused the ignorant American soldiers to strengthen their own position as leaders. Soon they were using American military power to settle old feuds and eliminating anyone who stood in the way of their self-enrichment. This behavior was also practiced in the 1970's by followers of president Daoud Khan and later by the communists, always in fear of Islamists, so history was repeating itself.

With this, the military intervention quickly took on the character of a war without an enemy. Driven mainly by the feeling that 09/11 had to be avenged, Afghans were arrested for even the slightest suspicion of connections to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

And so the fighting increased, often initiated by Western troops. There were deaths and injuries on both sides. Aggrieved Afghans organized and struck back. Revenge attacks followed. Suicide bombings, roadside bombs and group attacks were often motivated by rivalry and not by ideologically motivated extremists, something the West - and especially the Americans - refuse to acknowledge. Each year the number of attacks increased and more people joined the opposition, but they were not unequivocally Taliban. The enemy the West saw in Afghanistan simply did not (yet) exist.

It wasn't until 2005 and 2006 that former Taliban gathered again. Many wanted revenge for what had been done to them after 2001. However, they were very weak then and would remain so for years to come. CIA boss Grenier confirmed this. 'Before 2005 and the resurgence of the Taliban, we could still have sought a political solution,' he said.

Instead International coalition forces increased the number of soldiers in the face of Taliban regaining their strength. Between 2009 and 2011, the ISAF command had 140,000 soldiers, 100,000 of which were from the U.S. In 2012, the U.S. announced ending its operations in the country by December 2014, and started pulling back its soldiers. On December 28th 2014, NATO officially ended ISAF operations and gave all security responsibilities to the Afghan government. On the same day, it was announced that a NATO-led Resolute Support Mission started, in continuation of the Operation Enduring Freedom. In the following years Afghan Forces under the central government could not succeed in keeping the country secure, and the retreat plan also failed. Taliban attacks, in the meantime, carried on and the security situation took an immediate and dramatic turn for the worse and it became a lot more dangerous for everyone in Afghanistan.

Ever since 2012 all the Taliban had to do was be patient and one of the first things I was told in 2009 was "the west has the watches, Taliban has the time" so waiting two more years should not be a problem for them from that point.



Just put yourself in the shoes of the Afghan people, would you commit to a failing and corrupt regime when you know their support is leaving in two years? Would you commit to a regime who at that point in time, even with foreign military support do not effectively control the entire country and no national rule of law exists?

## PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

First initiatives were made to conduct negotiations between Taliban and Afghan administrations. Attempts in 2011, 2012 and 2013 failed. In 2015, peace negotiation attempts in coordination with China and Pakistan, also bore no results. This was primarily because the news of Taliban chief Mullah Omar's death was leaked in public. (Mullah Omar is said to have died from tuberculosis at a Karachi hospital in 2013.)

At the beginning of 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced they were ready for negotiations with the Taliban, unconditionally. He also promised to recognize Taliban as a legitimate political party and release its prisoners.

The Taliban said its counterpart for peace negotiations was not the Afghan administration, but the U.S., and declined the offer.

On Feb. 25, 2019, the U.S. and Taliban delegates met in Doha, Qatar, for peace talks for the first time.

By entertaining these talks the US effectively overruled the legal Afghan government (again) rendering the Afghan government powerless both national and international. If the US and Taliban can discuss the Afghan future without the current government being at the table why should anyone listen to and believe in the government in Afghanistan?

US special Afghanistan envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, announced last September 2019 that the US and the Taliban had reached a deal, which awaited Trump's approval. Following a terror attack in Kabul around the same days, which resulted in the death of a US soldier, Trump cancelled the talks.

Negotiations between the US and Taliban restarted in December 2019, which ended with the decision of an active cease-fire under the context of "reduction in violence." Following the 7-day process starting on February 22nd 2020, a peace deal was signed on February 29th 2020.

Part of that deal was the total withdrawal of US and allied troops from Afghanistan within 14 months of signing the deal (effectively May 2021).

## RISE BACK TO POWER

The final push started in May 2021, that month the Taliban captured 15 districts from the Afghan government. In June, the Taliban captured 69 districts from the Afghan government and entered the cities of Kunduz and Puli Khumri. On June 16th, Taliban militants executed 22 surrendering Afghan Army commandoes in the town of Dawlat Abad. By the end of June, all Resolute Support Mission's member countries had withdrawn their troops, except for the UK, Turkey, and the US. In July, the Taliban captured 64 districts from the Afghan government and entered the second and third largest cities of Afghanistan, Kandahar and Herat respectively. August 15th, the Taliban entered the outskirts of Kabul from multiple directions, It was later reported that President Ghani had left the country for Tajikistan. On August 16th, Taliban spokesman, Mohammad Naeem, told in an interview with Al Jazeera that war is over in Afghanistan.



He also said that the Taliban have achieved what they wanted; they will not allow Afghanistan's territory to be used against anyone, nor do they want to harm anyone else.

## AFTERMATH

After the fall of Kabul, former Northern Alliance members and anti-Taliban figures formed a military alliance called the Panjshir resistance, under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud (son of legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud) and former Vice President Amrullah Saleh. Basing themselves in the Panjshir Valley, the traditional base of operations for the Northern Alliance.

On August 17th 2021, Afghan Vice President, Amrullah Saleh declared himself caretaker President of Afghanistan in Panjshir Valley. The Taliban responded by sending a large fighting force north in order to attack the resistance forces. Could this be the start for yet another long and bloody Afghan civil war?

What will be the response of Pakistan and Iran? What will become the role of China and Russia? Will the USA and Europe turn a blind eye to this humanitarian crisis in the making? It looks like we are heading for a time where only one thing seems certain: The Afghan people have a long way to go before they can live in peace and prosperity like they deserve!

Following his career as a professional volleyball player **Marcel Hagens** started working in risk management and insurance and has accumulated 25+ years of experience in international complex b2b and personal insurance. In 2009 he started an insurance consultancy company specialized in terrorism, K&R and war related consultancy and insurance solutions. Based in the Netherlands he spent a lot of time internationally with **over 365 days working in active warzones like Afghanistan for his clients.**

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[www.risk-prevention-systems.com](http://www.risk-prevention-systems.com)

[enquiry@risk-prevention-systems.com](mailto:enquiry@risk-prevention-systems.com)

+49 234 9041836-30

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