



AFGHANISTAN

THE GREAT BLAME

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Kabul, view of the city from the top of so-called Swimming Pool Hill. The bouncing ball belongs to kids playing soccer nearby.

- ▶ Afghanistan became independent 100 years ago, in 1919, with the signing of the Rawalpindi Treaty, which put an end to Britain's attempts to control the country
- ▶ More than thirty years ago the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan after a decade of occupation
- ▶ A deal was reached in Qatar in February 2020, between the U.S. and the very actors – the Taliban – which the Coalition forces fought 19 years ago
- ▶ The country faces the same old problems: rampant opium production, widespread drug addiction, women being denied the most basic rights, a choking economy, corruption at all levels
- ▶ Not much has changed since that last Soviet soldiers left in 1989. And it is not yet clear whether, and how, anything will change at all in the near future



Mazar-i-Sharif, German military advisors with the Nato Resolute Support mission fly daily from Camp Marmal to Camp Shaheen, headquarter of the Afghan National Army training center, to advise on army recruit training.



Kabul, a restaurant housed in a decommissioned commercial airplane.



Herat, youngsters smoke a water pipe in the garden of the Arg hotel.

A new peace deal, yet the same old issues remain

More than a century has passed since the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi which, in 1919, sanctioned the independence of Afghanistan from Great Britain. More than thirty years ago the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan after a decade of occupation, and until today the country has known only conflict, terror and instability. For the past three decades the population has endured a long civil war, an oppressive Taliban regime, another conflict in 2001 and heard an endless number of announcements about reconstruction plans, troop surges, exit strategies, peace conferences and political deals which would finally bring peace to the exhausted Asian country.

The latest of such deals was reached in Qatar in February 2020, between the U.S. and the very actors – the Taliban – which the Coalition forces fought 19 years ago. And the agreement was almost immediately followed by a series of deadly strikes which involved U.S. and Afghan forces and Taliban fighters. Meanwhile, the country is facing the same old issues which have plagued it for the past 30 years.

The government is fighting a war with an army that it can't seem to build fast enough: almost more soldiers are killed every year than new recruits complete training. The enemy is an insurgency that has control over 60 per cent of the territory. And the insurgency is split between groups – several Taliban factions and Daesh – which fight for territory among themselves, and whose weapon of choice is a suicide attack.

Opium production is rampant, and so is drug addiction. Women rights are still a utopia. The economy is choking. Corruption is widespread at all political and society levels, and despite all the efforts to transplant democracy into the country – like an organ into a body without worrying too much about rejection – most of the times power belongs to those who own the largest militia. Not much has changed since that last Soviet soldiers left in 1989. And it is not yet clear whether, and how, anything will change at all in the near future.



Herat area, members of the Taliban belonging to the Mullah Niazi group in the territory they control, in the vicinity of the Mullah's stronghold.



Entrepreneur Abdulmannan Samadi, whose main business is gas and oil import from Uzbekistan, sitting in the guest room of his home in Hairatan, one of Afghanistan's major commercial ports, some 80 kms from Mazar-i-Sharif at the Uzbek border.



Mazar-i-Sharif, people in the court of the Rawza-i-Sharif mosque just before sunset.



Kandahar, activist Nabila Asadi is one of the best known young female activists in the country. Graduated as a hospital nurse, she hosts a controversial radio show and has received several death threats for being outspoken about female rights.



Herat area, members of the Taliban belonging to the Mullah Niazi group guard the Mullah's stronghold on a mountain at the end of a narrow and remote valley.



A farmer leads a donkey with a load of firewood along the ring road near Aybak.



Mazar-i-Sharif, Camp Shaheen, Afghan National Army training center. A group of army recruits conduct an urban warfare and counter-terrorism exercise.



Surveillance balloons hovering over Kandahar airport at sunset.



Spin Boldak. General Tadin Khan Achekzai with his sons and a bodyguard at his place. Achekzai inherited power after his brother Abdul Raziq's assassination in October 2018, and is today the strongman in Kandahar. He is based in a heavily fortified complex in Spin Boldak.



Kandahar, a woman begs for money in the middle of the road.



Mazar-i-Sharif, Camp Shaheen, Afghan National Army training center, an officer illustrates urban warfare tactics to a group of army recruits.



Maintenance workers along the ring road in the stretch going through the Tangi Tashkurghan canyon.



Kabul, youngsters on the top of so-called Swimming Pool Hill, a name that dates back to the Soviet presence years, when the public swimming pool, now abandoned, was built.



Herat area, members of the Taliban belonging to the Mullah Niazi group guard the Mullah's stronghold on a mountain at the end of a narrow and remote valley.



Kabul, music teacher and founder of the Afghan National Music School Ahmad Sarmast in the construction site of the concert hall he is having built at his school.



Construction works along the Kandahar-Spin Boldak road. Maintenance of the ring road, Afghanistan's main commercial artery, has always been problematic due to insurgent attacks against construction sites, equipment and workers.



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