

Afghanistan's Blame Game

Why did the Islamic Republic collapse?

Haroun Rahimi, Ph.D.

August 2022



Author

Haroun Rahimi obtained his B.A. in Law from Herat University, his LLM in Global Business Law, and his Ph.D. from the University of Washington. Rahimi is an Assistant Professor of Law at the American University of Afghanistan. Rahimi's research focuses on economic laws, institutional reform, Islamic finance, and divergent conceptions of rule of law in Muslim and modern thoughts. Rahimi's research has appeared in reputable local and international journals. Rahimi has also collaborated as an independent consultant with a number of research firms and policy think tanks conducting policy research on institutional development and good governance in the South Asia context. At the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Rahimi has worked on Islamic finance as a poverty alleviation strategy, the legal history of Afghanistan, and the ways that legal transplantation is legitimized in Muslim countries. More recently, Rahimi was a visiting scholar at the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) in Rome. Currently, Rahimi is a Visiting Professor at the Bocconi University School of Law in Milan, Italy.

The author first workshopped the main ideas in this essay with a group of Afghan and international experts at a colloquium hosted by the United States Institute for Peace. The author expresses its gratitude to the USIP and experts who input enriched this piece.

Publisher:

Wiener Institut für Internationalen Dialog und Zusammenarbeit
– Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)
Möllwaldplatz 5/9, A-1040 Vienna,
www.vidc.org

Author: Haroun Rahimi

Editor: Ali Ahmad, Michael Fanizadeh (VIDC)

Cover Picture: Kabul 2022, © Aadil Ahmad

Published in accordance with §25 of the Media Law.

Copyright: Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), Möllwaldplatz 5/9, A-1040 Vienna.

Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation and south-north cultural exchange, as well as anti-racist campaigning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the editor/VIDC.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Where to start the story?	4
3. Who is participating in narrative creation and evaluation?.....	4
4. The first explanation: IRA’s internal weakness	4
5. The second explanation: the external factors.....	6
6. Third explanation: the Taliban’s strength.....	7
7. Was the collapse of the IRA avoidable?	8
7.1. Was it possible to preempt the Taliban’s insurgency?.....	8
7.2. Could IRA survive the U.S. withdrawal?	9
8. Conclusion	11

1. Introduction

The sudden fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) demands an explanation. One year since the collapse of the IRA, three main explanations compete for prominence. All acknowledge that the collapse was multicausal, but each explanation gives the main weight to a different cause. Each explanation spotlights a set of factors and hides others. Each explanation both informs and distracts. Each explanation exhibits continuity and change with its pre-collapse version. In this essay, I describe the broad contours of each explanation, how it has evolved since before the collapse of the IRA, and what each explanation may hide. I will conclude by offering my views on what may have caused the collapse.

Which narrative dominates is consequential. Each narrative has different implications for what lessons are there to be learned from the collapse of the IRA and whose voice should be listened to on Afghanistan moving forward. A critical examination of these narratives, their evolution, and their spread and reception in different spaces provide a safeguard against the type of blind spots and groupthink that made the collapse of the Republic a shock to most.

2. Where to start the story?

All three dominant narratives tend to suffer from recency bias as they tend to focus on the more proximate cause of the collapse of the IRA. However, a strong case could be made that the collapse of the IRA was the culmination of trends that were set in motion in the early years after the Taliban fell. How fatal one considers the recency bias depends on how reversible one thinks the sequence of events that was set in motion right after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was. If one believes that regardless of original mistakes, the Taliban ascendancy was avoidable, one would be justified to look at more proximate causes not only for how they might have contributed to the collapse but also for why they could not have prevented the collapse.

3. Who is participating in narrative creation and evaluation?

It is important to note who is participating in the creation and promotion of these narratives and who is not. Outside the country, the displaced Afghan elites of the IRA era (both government supporters and critics), and the foreign experts on Afghanistan (both those who supported the military campaign in Afghanistan and those who were critical of the campaign) participate in the narrative creation and evaluation. Inside the country, the Taliban-dominated, sponsored, and censored media is participating in narrative creation and evaluation as well. The independent voices from inside the country whose views may go against the Taliban's narrative have the least opportunity to participate due to a combination of the Taliban's oppression and the lack of access to the institutional platforms afforded to the displaced elites of the IRA era, Afghan diaspora, and foreign experts of Afghanistan outside the country. What the public discourse is missing in the absence of their voices and how their voices should be included are important questions worth pondering.

4. The first explanation: IRA's internal weakness

The first explanation considers the internal weaknesses of the IRA as the main cause. This view is popular among the U.S. policymakers who supported the withdrawal and a group of Afghans who were not closely associated with the institutions of the IRA. Proponents of this view argue that the endemic corruption of the institutions of the IRA and the political infighting within the IRA camp gave the victory to the Taliban. The endemic corruption had eroded the public support for the IRA and reduced the capacity of the IRA's defensive forces, this explanation posits. Caused by personality clashes, ideological cleavages, and the ethnic fault lines within the IRA's camp, political infighting denied the IRA of a unified moral and political leadership needed to mobilize sympathetic Afghans in support of the IRA, this narrative suggests.

Since the collapse, the instrumental role of the Ukrainian President in galvanizing domestic and international support in the face of Russian aggression has strengthened the position of those who consider the failure of leadership to have been causal in the collapse of the IRA.¹

The first narrative probably has the most continuity with its pre-collapse version. In the buildup to the collapse of the IRA, the main elements of this narrative were advanced in the mainstream public discourse to explain the Taliban's favorable trends on the battlefield and the diplomatic space. However, even though this narrative existed in the public discourse it has raised in dominance since the collapse. While acknowledging the internal flaws of the IRA, before the collapse, in the mainstream public discourse, the explanation that focused on the role of external factors was still dominant.

By attempting to hold the internal actors accountable, this narrative may fail to interrogate how the logic of the U.S. invasion, which was an extension of the logic of war on terror, constrained the choices of those in leadership positions and shaped their incentives. Just to take one example, growing evidence suggests that the U.S. military and intelligence often rewarded the Afghan strongmen who made themselves useful in the war on terror (and later in the war with the Taliban) with projects and outright payments and protected them from accountability regardless of their past records, their ongoing treatment of the population, or credible accusation of corruption.² It could be reasonably argued that external factors had considerable influence on who had power under in IRA and why many could abuse the population and engage in corruption with impunity. This narrative also may risk downplaying the role Pakistan and Iran³ played in Taliban's success in Afghanistan.⁴

¹ Sharif Hassan, Afghans who felt abandoned by their own president find a hero in Ukraine's president (NYT: Feb. 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/28/world/ukraine-russia-war/afghans-who-felt-abandoned-by-their-own-president-find-a-hero-in-ukraines-president?smid=url-share>

² SIGAR recently wrote, "Afghanistan thus illustrated a key dilemma for U.S. advisors in stabilization and reconstruction missions: Is U.S. cooperation with brutal but militarily capable security forces worthwhile if it restores security to contested or enemy-controlled territory—or does such cooperation create more conflict in the long run by undermining good governance and rule of law?", *Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experiences in Afghanistan* p. XIV, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-22-23-LL.pdf>

³ Iran first supported the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan because of its opposition to the Taliban (Afghanistan under Taliban and Iran had almost went to war with each other after Taliban killed Iranian diplomats in the north) but when the U.S. daubed Iran as a part of "axis of evil", Iran found common cause with the Taliban trying to give the U.S. a bloody nose and to deny the U.S. a stronghold in the region from where it could attack Iran. President Karzai tried hard to convince Iran that Afghanistan would not be used against Iran but given that IRA had no control over the international troops present in its territory (nor did it control its own airspaces) those assurances were not credible. It could be argued that Ghani's assurances were even less convincing given his closeness with the U.S. (and as its first act, his administration had signed a bilateral security agreement with the U.S., an agreement that Karzai resisted).

⁴ For a deep analysis of the role of external funding and assistance to the Taliban's success See Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War 2001 – 2021* (2022).

5. The second explanation: the external factors

The second explanation considers the external factors to be central. This view is common among opponents of the withdrawal and the Afghans who were in charge when the Republic collapsed. Proponents of this view argue that the steady support of Pakistan for the Taliban and the diminishing political and material support of the U.S./NATO for the Republic explains the collapse of the Republic. Those who advance this explanation also point out that the regional support for the Taliban increased as U.S./NATO signaled their intention and took confirming actions to leave Afghanistan on terms that acknowledged the Taliban's political and military ascendancy. The basic premise of this explanation can be stated as follow: had it not been for steady Pakistani support of the Taliban (and later broader regional support precipitated by the process of U.S./NATO withdrawal) and the U.S./NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the IRA would not have collapsed.

In response to a Congressional inquiry, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) concluded that the withdrawal of U.S./NATO forces was the direct cause of the collapse of IRA's security forces.⁵ SIGAR also listed the internal weaknesses of the IRA (the focus of the first explanation) and the strength of the Taliban military campaign (the focus of the third explanation) as important factors but judged the withdrawal of U.S./NATO forces to have been the most important cause of the collapse of security forces.⁶

The external narrative was the dominant narrative in the mainstream public discourse within IRA before the collapse. However, given the hopes for the continued support of the western camp within the international community, both the state actors and media had a more restrained tone when it came to laying the blame on the U.S. and European allies. The tone of both IRA's leadership and the media towards Pakistan, on the other hand, was increasingly critical.

It is not hard to see why this narrative dominated before the collapse. It created a common cause between the IRA leadership, who wished to downplay the role of internal factors, and the civil society (including media), who believed the external actors are most capable, if not most willing, to save the IRA. Next, it confirmed the views of many ordinary Afghans who believe (to this day) that external forces have the most influence over who rises to power in Afghanistan. This belief is ingrained in the Afghan psyche by the historical experiences of the country (amplified by oversimplifying conspiracy theories).

Since the collapse, the external narrative has lost its relative prominence, at least among certain groups of Afghans, as the first explanation rose in prominence (with the benefit of hindsight), and the third explanation broke into public discourse with the sponsorship of the country's new rulers, Taliban, and the need for explaining the collapse of the IRA.

⁵ SIGAR, Collapse of the SIGAR 2222 IP Evaluation Report Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>

⁶ *ibid.*

While highlighting external factors, this narrative ignores the real limits that the U.S. and other international supporters of the IRA had in shaping the behaviors of the IRA's leadership—in the face of conflicting incentive structure created by the logic of foreign sponsorship of the state. Looking to advance their personal or group interests, the political leadership of the IRA frequently refused to favor choices advocated for by the IRA's international sponsors—safe in the belief that the foreign sponsors could not really stop supporting the dependent IRA because it would mean victory for the Taliban. This is even though some of these internationally favored policy choices were widely popular with the populace as well (e.g., curbing corruption and ending impunity).

The English-speaking technocratic class within IRA leadership also shaped the views of foreign representatives in Afghanistan by offering their analysis in the shared technical and analytical language that foreigners found compelling. In short, those in the position of power in the IRA did have a reasonable amount of autonomy (the extent of which can be debated), and they did shape and inform the foreigners' views about Afghanistan as well.

Regarding Pakistan, there is a risk in both overstating and understating the influence of Pakistan. Pakistan did support the Taliban, but the Pakistani support faded in comparison to the international support for the IRA. In terms of bilateral relations, IRA lacked a consistent policy towards Pakistan oscillating between rapprochement and hostility. While Pakistan has done enough to earn the resentment of Afghans (both Talibs and non-Talibs), the leadership of the IRA also stoked those anti-Pakistan sentiments hoping to discredit Taliban for their association with the Pakistan but also keeping the Pashtun nationalism issue alive to reciprocate Pakistan's interferences in Afghanistan. All of this was done with a lack of awareness of IRA's internal weaknesses and its lack of real leverage against Pakistan.

6. Third explanation: the Taliban's strength

The last explanation accords the most causal weight to the Taliban. This view is popular among the Taliban and some countries in the region. Proponents of this view credit the Taliban's political and military prowess, their dedication to their cause (and for the Taliban, the righteousness of their cause), and their popular base in the country for their eventual victory.

This view was the least present in the mainstream public discourse before the collapse. A reasonable assessment of the Taliban's strength—beyond describing their robust external support and their skills at manipulating the IRA's foreign allies during the negotiation—was virtually taboo. A serious attempt to understand the reason for the Taliban's favorable trends by looking at the Taliban's internal strength and the appeal of the group's message was deemed a betrayal of the values of IRA and national interests and was dismissed as psyops (the latter accusation was compelling because Taliban had a forceful propaganda campaign). Since the collapse, this narrative has found its way to the mainstream public discourse with the strong sponsorship of the country's new rulers, the Taliban, and the need to explain the fact of the collapse. Inside the country, this narrative has raised to prominence accommodating the first explanation and excluding the second explanation.

The third explanation may hide the most. First, it ignores the critical role of Pakistani and Irani support in the resurgence of the Taliban (at the very least in the earlier phases of the insurgency as later the group developed internal sources of revenues and diversified the sources of its external support). Second, it ignores the fact that where Taliban forces were met with well-organized resistance, they could not overpower the IRA's defense forces. Taliban built momentum by overtaking under-resourced and isolated checkpoints chocking the cities into submission. A strong case can be made that what finally won the Taliban the war was shifting alliances of local leaders (both inside and outside the government) as a complex set of factors convinced war-weary and alienated local leaders and their communities that the fall of the IRA may be unavoidable. Third, it doesn't account for the fact that based on the best data we have most Afghans did not support the Taliban's insurgency nor do they necessarily support the Taliban's vision for the country (it doesn't necessarily mean they supported the IRA either).⁷ The latter point is best illustrated by the fact that what most Afghans appreciate post-collapse of the IRA is the reduction in violence, particularly in the countryside, however, the Taliban were the main instigator of that violence.

7. Was the collapse of the IRA avoidable?

To answer this question, one must entertain counterfactuals and use hindsight. However, it is still a worthwhile question to answer not only for our understanding of Afghanistan's history but also for what it means for the future of military engagement in Afghanistan and beyond. Here, I present some initial thoughts.

7.1. Was it possible to preempt the Taliban's insurgency?

It is a truism that it is easier to prevent a conflict than to resolve it. The literature on peacebuilding suggests that the longer a conflict goes on the harder it becomes to achieve a peaceful resolution.⁸ With that insight in mind, was the Taliban insurgency avoidable? Many became interested in this question when the Taliban insurgency grow into a serious threat believing that had not been for a series of early mistakes the Taliban insurgency could have been avoided. Had the U.S. not lumped the Taliban and Al-Qaeda together seeking to wipe out both, had the U.S. and its Afghan partners not sought to punish the Taliban who might have been willing to join the new system or return to ordinary life, and had the post-2001 political order included the defeated Taliban and other Islamists, it is possible to imagine that the Taliban insurgency would not have had the chance of success that it has.⁹

⁷ The Asia Foundation, A Survey of the Afghan People (2019) reported that 85.11% of those surveyed said they had no sympathy for at all, when they were asked to think about why Taliban were fighting in the preceding year, <https://t.co/03e0NYr4dW>

⁸ For analysis of factors affecting alliance formation and duration of civil war in the Afghan context see Fotini Christia, Alliance Formation in Civil Wars (2012).

⁹ With hindsight, Lakhdar Brahimi, then the UN Representative to the UN Talks on Afghanistan, in an interview which first appeared in Journal of International Affairs Vol. 58, No. 1 (2004), argued exclusion of Taliban was the "original sin" of the post-2001 system. "You also need to have.... a more consistent, substantive, long-term, national

However, the logic of the war on terror which defined the world in terms of the binary of good and evil made it impossible for the U.S. not to make those mistakes—it is noteworthy that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan only took place when the exegesis of war on terror had become thoroughly discredited. Juxtaposing the rhetoric of spreading democracy and human rights against the beliefs in the western capital (backed by complicit literature) that political Islam is incompatible with those goals made it impossible for the U.S. to accommodate the Islamists or religiously conservatives in Afghanistan. Finally, the Afghan allies of the U.S. had no incentive to share power with the defeated Taliban because the Taliban’s military defeat had been so total and the public sentiment so against the Taliban at the time that the Taliban’s resurgence seemed unimaginable. Moreover, the new Afghan allies wanted to be good partners in the war on terror because it was politically beneficial and financially lucrative.

7.2. Could IRA survive the U.S. withdrawal?

We need to fully appreciate how dependent the IRA was on its international backers. The entire system was built around the U.S. and international presence in the country. The U.S. had positioned itself as the final arbiter of political questions in the country: from the selection of the country’s first leader in Bonn, Germany, to the final election of Ashraf Ghani, U.S. backing determined the victor in the dispute over who should rule the country. By making Afghanistan the top recipient of international assistance even though the country had no system of oversight, nor it had institutions that could manage the funds appropriately, the U.S. had created a rentier state in Afghanistan whose entire political economy was based not on natural resources like oil but foreign assistance.¹⁰ The U.S. as the final authority on how much foreign assistance was given, to whom, and for what purpose, had positioned itself as the final authority on the allocation of resources and the nature and direction of the economy. Finally, the U.S. had financed and oversaw the creation of Afghan security forces, in the image of U.S. forces albeit a poor-quality knockoff, that could fight effectively only if it could benefit from the foreign contractors or the U.S. army’s support.¹¹

By placing itself as the final arbiter of Afghan politics, economy, and security, the U.S. intervention crowded out civic virtues, bottom-up economic entrepreneurship, and local modes of resistance against the Taliban. In a cruel irony, the Taliban could only take over the entire country (what they could not achieve in the 1990s) because the U.S. intervention had created a system that was totally dependent on

reconciliation process. For example, all the Taliban should have been in Bonn. *I call it the original sin.* The absence of the Taliban was a big, big hole in the process. But it was not possible to have, *because of September 11, because of the behavior of the factions....*” (emphasize added)

¹⁰ Kate Clark, The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: New special report considers the reasons for inequality, poverty and a failing democracy (2020), <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-reasons-for-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/>

¹¹ See Jonathan Schroden, Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces, 14(8) CTC Sentinel (2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces/>

the U.S. support—displacing local forms of livelihood, governance, and resistance—and then the U.S. chose to withdraw its support without any transition plan in place.

Afghans were used to defending their communities on their own but the U.S. military project for the country systematically dismantled those local militias, starting with the ex-Mujahedeen who had fought the Taliban, replacing them with national security forces that depended on foreign support to function. Later, in the face of growing existential threat of Taliban, the IRA leaders, half-heartedly, pushed to recreate those local forces of resistance but those efforts failed partly because the civic virtues and the sense of local ownerships of the war efforts and the political system had died in most of the country.¹² As a result, many communities who were against the Taliban had no way of resisting the Taliban takeover.

Afghans had also developed methods of economic survival. They were certainly poor before but there were not as much at risk of starvation as they are now after twenty years of military intervention. This may be counterintuitive but the massive injection of foreign assistance in the country fueled an unprecedented level of urbanization and population growth undergirded by a mostly urban economy that was built on the premise of massive foreign assistance in the country—the kind of assistance that would only be justified in in tantum with a foreign military presence.

Finally, the option to leverage the might of U.S. military and foreign assistance against domestic political rivals allowed those who controlled the highly centralized IRA to rule with few domestic constraints reducing the need for compromise and real power-sharing. Ghani took full advantage of this feature of the IRA at the national level, but the same dynamic was at in local conflicts in places where U.S. had a strong military presence.¹³

Even though it may be counterintuitive, I argue had the U.S. committed fewer troops and given less foreign assistance to Afghanistan over the past two decades, Afghanistan might have been in better shape today. The trends in the early years of U.S. intervention, when the U.S. had a much lighter footprint in the country, were much more positive. Correlation is not causation, but it is an observation that can't be easily dismissed. In trying to do too much of something that no foreign force could do in another country, the U.S. possibly made everything worse for Afghans. It is not to say that it was the intention of American policymakers. Many of these dynamics flow from the logic of foreign intervention in a multilayered conflict like Afghanistan. After all, as the proverb goes “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”.

¹² See a description of Ghani's last ditch to mobilize Mujahedeen against the Taliban in the face of decreasing U.S. support in the Howard Altman's interview with Afghanistan's last chief of army. Howard Altman, The Afghan Army's Last Commander On How His Country Really Fell, The Drive (The War Zone, June 9, 2022), <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/the-last-general-afghanistans-top-commander-on-how-his-country-really-fell>

¹³ Anand Gopal argues that areas with less U.S. military presence were more stable because local leaders had to negotiate their differences and come to a compromise since one side could not use the U.S. military forces against its rivals. See Anand Gopal, No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes (2014).

8. Conclusion

This article critically assessed and interrogated the dominant narratives of the fall of the IRA. While all narratives contain real insights, they all distract and hide other equally important facts. It is almost a truism that the truth falls somewhere in between these complete narratives. However, simplicity ensures a narrative saliency and each of these narratives simplifies the story in a particular way that serves a particular set of interests and makes us susceptible to a particular set of actions. In this way, these narratives are equally about the future as they are about the past. We must continue to critically interrogate these narratives. The goal is not objectivity since on matters as complex as the collapse of the IRA objectivity is not an option. The goal is to inform the public (and the expert community) about what each of these narratives illustrates and what it hides.

I believe the IRA collapsed because it was built around the presence of foreign forces in the country. It could not survive the U.S. withdrawal because it would have to transform itself, those in charge had no incentive or legitimacy to lead such a transformation, and the time ran out as the Taliban insurgency grew stronger for a combination of internal and external factors.

The lesson moving forward is that the only sustainable solution to the crisis of Afghanistan can come from within the country. It is up to the Taliban to either facilitate broad participation in negotiating the basic structure of a political system that most Afghans would find acceptable, making them want to dedicate their lives to improving it, or condemn the country to another round of conflict that would end their rule and cause immense Afghan sufferings in the process. So far, Taliban seems to be on the path to the second destination.

Economically, the lesson moving forward is that humanitarian aid, while necessary in the short term, cannot solve the country's economic ills. The massive injection of international aid is likely to cause more harm than good. Instead of solely focusing on humanitarian assistance, the international community should entertain sanction relief—excluding the arm embargo and sanctions against individual Taliban leaders—giving the Afghan economy the best chance of going through the painful but unavoidable process of adjusting to a reality where Afghanistan is not the top recipient of international assistance.