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By James W. Carden / Globetrotter
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What Next After 20 Years of War in Afghanistan? Anatol Lieven on the U.S. Legacy and the Taliban's Rise

On Monday, August 30, at 3:29 p.m. Eastern Time, a C-17 transport plane took off from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, signaling the end of America's longest war. It was a war that took the lives of at least 48,000 Afghan civilians, 2,461 U.S. service members, 66,000 Afghan national military police, and 1,144 NATO allied service members. The Cost of War Project at Brown University estimates that the post-9/11 wars launched by the United States have resulted in nearly 1 million killed and more than 38 million people displaced, with the U.S. government having spent $6.4 trillion and rising.

For a learned perspective on what has been unfolding in Afghanistan, I turned to interview Dr. Anatol Lieven. Lieven is a senior research fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He was formerly a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar and in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. From 1985 to 1998, Lieven worked as a British journalist in South Asia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and covered the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya and the southern Caucasus.

James W. Carden: Let's begin with the people who launched the suicide attack on the airport on August 26. Who are the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province, or ISKP?

Anatol Lieven: They are a pretty motley bunch. The first thing to note is that they're not Arabs. ISKP was not founded by and their leadership is not made up of Arabs who've moved to Afghanistan from the Middle East. So they're not, in that sense, an offshoot of ISIS. Instead, they're one of these local movements which has taken the name of ISIS.

They're made up of three main elements. The first are Pakistani, mainly Pashtun militants belonging to the Pakistani Taliban who were driven over the border back into Afghanistan by the Pakistan Army when it launched its offensive to crush the rebellion in Pakistan in recent years. The second major element are international fighters in Afghanistan, often from the former Soviet Union: Chechens, Dagestanis, Uzbeks, together with some Arab fighters who fled from Iraq and Syria. The third element are defectors from the Afghan Taliban who defected for one reason or another, sometimes because they were angered by Taliban negotiations with the West or by Taliban promises not to support international jihad.

But the main thing you should know about ISKP is that they are committed to continuing international jihad. They've always made that absolutely clear, and indeed they have to, because their membership is made up of people who for obvious reasons are committed to continuing the terror campaigns in the former Soviet Union and in Pakistan.

ISKP is also ferociously sectarian and anti-Shia and in recent years launched a string of dreadful attacks on Shia hospitals, schools and markets in Afghanistan and in Pakistan as well. They're closely linked to sectarian terrorist groups in Pakistan, which have been widely alleged in turn to be supported by Saudi Arabia. So, they are a variety of hard men, if you like, who really want to use Afghanistan as a base for international jihad. There has been a very fierce rivalry between ISKP and the Afghan Taliban for power and major battles between them. And in fact when I was last in Afghanistan, I was told that there had been de facto cooperation between the Taliban, the Afghan government forces and the U.S. Air Force against ISIS.

So that's where ISIS is coming from in Afghanistan.

JWC: In 2011, you wrote a very well-received book on the region called *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, so I guess I'd like to understand more about the role that Pakistan has played in the American defeat, and their relationship with ISKP and their continuing role in supporting international terrorism.

AL: Well, the Pakistani role is extremely, extremely complicated. People keep asking me:

Why did Pakistan play a double game over Afghanistan? And my reply is they didn't play a double game. They played a single game, which was a Pakistani game. They pursued what they took to be Pakistan's national interests, which unfortunately conflicted with our own or what we thought were our own in Afghanistan. What Pakistan has done pretty consistently all these years has been to give shelter to the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban is made up of Afghans, chiefly of Pashtuns closely related to the Pashtuns of Pakistan, who make up about a fifth of the population and live in the border areas.
And they have been consistently sheltered by Pakistan. And the reason for that is twofold really. The first is that Pakistan wanted a force in Afghanistan that would be responsive to Pakistan's interests and wishes, and above all would never side with India against Pakistan as previous Afghan regimes had done. This was also based on the analysis, which I have to say has turned out to be accurate, that we would fail in Afghanistan—that the West would not stay the course and that we would leave sooner or later.

So that's the first reason. The second reason, and this has been totally obscured by most of the Western media. What people there [in Pakistan] kept saying to me is, "look, in the 1980s, an outside Western imperial force, the Soviet Union, occupied Afghanistan. And everybody from our own government to America, Saudi Arabia, everywhere, told us that it's our duty to support the Afghan resistance against this, in the name of Islam. So we supported them. Now we have another outside, white imperial force occupying Afghanistan. And you tell us that it's our duty to fight against the Afghan resistance and to support the puppet government in Kabul? Well, frankly, to hell with that, we will do what we always did. We will support our Afghan brothers in fighting against an alien, imperial occupation of their country."

So what has to be understood is that the Pakistan government, including some within its own ranks and in parts of the army, were presiding over a population—at least in northern Pakistan—which was tremendously supportive of the Afghan Taliban. And when [Pervez] Musharraf, the then-military dictator, in 2003-2004 made a very limited attempt under American pressure to crack down, not on the Afghan Taliban as such, but on international fighters, such as the Arabs, Chechens and others affiliated with the Taliban in the Pakistani border areas, this set off a rebellion which lasted for 15 years.

And it still goes on in the form of ISIS in Afghanistan, and has cost more

than 60,000 Pakistani civilian lives, 5,000 military dead, thousands of police, five generals, and so on. Benazir Bhutto, a two-time prime minister of Pakistan, was assassinated in 2007, as a result of that. And this illustrates the degree of support for the Afghan Taliban that you also have in sections of society. But then it gets even more complicated because eventually, and after considerable hesitation, the Pakistan Army cracked down very hard indeed on the Pakistan rebels who call themselves the Pakistan Taliban while continuing to shelter the Afghan Taliban.

And one of the reasons why you now have this bitter division between ISIS in Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban is that the Afghan Taliban sided with Pakistan against the Pakistani Taliban. And while they didn't exactly fight them, they did a great deal to keep certain areas of Pakistan quiet and prevent them from joining the Islamist revolt.

So Pakistan is basically very happy that the Taliban have won in Afghanistan, but expects them to go on fighting hard against ISIS because ISIS are mortal enemies of the present Pakistani state. And all I can say is if that sounds complicated, it *is* complicated.
I think part of the problem with American and indeed British policy in that part of the world is that if you're not prepared to study and deal with extreme complexity and with continual changes of allegiance—if you're not prepared to cope with that—well, then you should not be operating in Afghanistan because it's a complicated place.

JWC: Is there a difference between the Taliban of 2001 and the Taliban of 2021?

AL: I think with regard to their international behavior, we can believe their guarantees, for two reasons. The first is that they're not fools. And they've said this to me themselves—not the top leadership, obviously, but low-level Taliban have told me, "we're not idiots; we know what happened to us as a result of 9/11. We were running Afghanistan, we conquered most of the country, we'd set up our state and then 9/11 kind of ruined it all for us. We're not going to do that again, don't worry."
But the second and more important point is that they've made this promise, not just to America and the West; they've also made it to Russia, to China, to Pakistan, to Iran. And all of these countries have a deep stake in opposing international terrorism.

International Sunni Islamic terrorism threatens all of those countries in different ways. The

Taliban cannot afford to alienate their entire neighborhood. If they do that, their regime really will not last and they will be totally isolated and not just economically. Remember, they have no access to the sea. But also, you will then have a return to the 1990s in which Russia and Iran will support opposition movements within Pakistan, and within Afghanistan, against them. So I think you can trust them on that.

You can also trust them on cracking down on the heroin trade, which they've also promised to do, because they've done that before: In 2000 and 2001, they did it with the hope of getting international recognition.
So on those issues, you can trust them. Domestically, however, it's a much more open question, because there you have really hardline ideologues who are determined to reintroduce the kind of Islamic Emirate that existed before September 11.

JWC: Let's turn to the American government's role in the defeat. In a recent piece for the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, you wrote that American generals like H.R. McMaster, who served as President Donald Trump's first national security adviser: "systematically misinformed multiple administrations, Congress, and the American people about the real state of the Afghan forces that they had created… The most important question Americans need to ask in the wake of the fall of Kabul is… what it is about the U.S. system that allowed these lies to pass with too little challenge."

I'd like your own thoughts on that. How do you think they got away with lying, as you say, systematically for two decades?
AL: Well, this isn't just a matter of my opinion. Indeed, this is thoroughly documented in the reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and as revealed in the Afghanistan Papers, in the Washington Post. So all of this is now a matter of record. I think it's really two things. First, I suppose we might have some sympathy with the military in that militaries don't like to lose and they don't necessarily want to go to war in the first place. And I suppose to be charitable to them, one might say that they were lying to themselves as well as to the rest of us, which is possible.
I think it is also critical to understand military promotion structures as well. This was a campaign carried out in a profoundly, almost dilettantish way by people whose whole instinct was to get back to Washington, to crawl up another rung of the military promotion ladder, and to do that you have to be working on huge weapons programs directed at

China or Russia, which are totally irrelevant for Iraq or Afghanistan, but are very relevant indeed to the American military-industrial complex and Congress.

Afghanistan was treated with a profound lack of real interest and professionalism.

One must in no way excuse the American and British publics, the media and Congress, because as one of my colleagues pointed out, if you look at the main American news channels, in the whole of 2020, between them, they mentioned Afghanistan an average of five times on their lead news programs that year. So if the public and the media and Congress are not going to look seriously into what's going on, then the generals will get away with telling people what they think will cover their own backs.

This article was produced by Globetrotter in partnership with the American Committee for U.S.-Russia Accord; the interview with Anatol Lieven has been edited for clarity and length.

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