

# THE CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

## **Ali Aslan, International TV Presenter and Journalist**

So, much to talk about in these 80 minutes that we have. Mr. Al Zaabi, to kick us off, Afghanistan is a region of importance to the west, but also here in this region. Quite clearly, a number of countries are involved, have been involved in the dealings and the goings-on in Afghanistan. Could you perhaps, for a couple of minutes – and then, of course, we dive into more detail – in a couple of minutes, tell us where you see things in Afghanistan at the current moment?

## **Salem Mohammed Al Zaabi, Director of the Department of International Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, United Arab Emirates**

Thank you, Ali. I think you are right – Afghanistan is still a very important regional position. After what happened last August, we all realized that there is a big shift in the political and also the security situation in West Asia. The UAE has many relationships, whether they are commercial – and I am speaking from an official point of view – or security; we also have security concerns. However, we need to think that Afghanistan has already been in decades of instability, terrorism and poverty. So, most of us and the international community now need to assist Afghanistan to come back and find ways for their people because they deserve a better life.

## **Ali Aslan**

Thank you so much for your initial remarks from the view from the UAE, so to speak. We will, of course, come back to you in just a moment to go into more detail and ask what role the UAE can and ought to play in the region. But let me go to Jim Bittermann first. Jim, you are an American based in Paris for many decades. For the lack of Americans on this panel, I will not ask you to put on the Washington hat here, but of course America's role is extremely important. Give us a sense in the first couple of minutes.

## **Jim Bittermann, CNN Senior European Correspondent in Paris**

Well, just to contradict a little bit one of my fellow Americans, Stuart Eizenstat, who was just on the previous panel, and basically was saying that Afghanistan did not signal the end of isolationism in the United States. I think it is kind of a neo-isolationism that we are seeing right now with the United States. I think the withdrawal from Afghanistan basically is a signal that the US is not going to fight any further regional conflicts that do not make a big difference to

their strategic ambition, whatever the strategic policy is for the United States. Strategic interests are the things that are going to take the priority and it will be things like China and other things, but the idea that we are going to become involved in regional conflicts, it looks like – to me, anyway – that it is no longer the case.

### **Ali Aslan**

Absolutely, and America's role here has been more than pertinent throughout 20 years. This has been America's longest running war for two decades; and all the questions that come with it, of course – what does it mean for the future standing reputation, perhaps, of the US moving forward? I will come back to you in just a moment, but let me go to Renaud here, who is a very prestigious War Correspondent, Senior Reporter, who has been to Afghanistan more than a dozen times. You have written a book, *Return to Peshawar*; you have experienced the Mujahideen; you have experienced the Taliban; and now, you see a return of the Taliban, Renaud. For the first couple of minutes, how surprised are you that things are the way they are in Afghanistan at the current moment?

### **Renaud Girard, Senior reporter and war correspondent at *Le Figaro***

I believe this is an extremely significant moment in the history of international relations, as it represents the death – I would say the ignominious death – of American neoconservatism under conditions we did not foresee. No one in our generations believed that the Americans would repeat the Fall of Saigon in 1975; but that didn't hamper them. They repeated it, and unnecessarily, because it was very easy to maintain Bagram airbase and to keep talking to the Taliban, using both the carrot and the stick, and to set up a unitary or unity government in Afghanistan, and it is clearly not the case for the government announced by the Taliban.

What you have to understand is that this whole saga involves two wars in Afghanistan. The first Afghan war began on 7 October 2001 when missiles were fired on Kabul, and ended with the CIA's spectacular intervention via the Northern Alliance, with Kabul falling on 13 November 2001. This was a huge success. The Taliban retreated from every Afghan city and went into hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Images of this success – the liberation of Kabul, with rejoicing in the streets at the arrival of the Northern Alliance – were shown on every television channel. This led to the American "intoxication" at the Bonn Conference on 5 December 2001, during which they decided on a second, "nation building" intervention in which they promised to rebuild, democratize – yes, I really said "democratize" – and develop the economy of Afghanistan.

They did not have to do this. It brings to mind Jules Ferry's "civilizing" colonial mission. It is a wholly unbelievable plan. But they made this commitment, and Joe Biden agreed to the intervention. He even went to Kabul in a show of support for this grandiose plan to democratize and develop Afghanistan.

The Americans could very easily have rested on their laurels after the first Afghan war, when they destroyed all the internationalist Arab elements in Afghanistan and all the Al-Qaeda cells operating in the country. They took this option of "nation building" – military intervention in Afghanistan – and they gave the task of rebuilding the country to NATO soldiers. This was the unbelievable strategic mistake that the Americans made: tasking soldiers with setting up

provincial reconstruction teams, without understanding that the average Afghan farmer may not enjoy having foreign, armed men on his land and in his home. The writing was on the wall from that moment onwards.

### **Ali Aslan**

Right, many important points that you have raised, Renaud, as someone who knows Afghanistan very well and perhaps the American mistake of trying to engage in nation-building and what that means for the future. You have correctly pointed out that this started with the war on terror post-9/11, which we have just commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This brings me to you, Marc, because you wrote a book on the war on terror, where Afghanistan is prominently featured. Twenty years after the fatal attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the Americans go in; twenty years later, the hastened withdrawal, as Renaud put it, with Vietnam-like photos, and here we are. Your opinions?

### **Marc Hecker, Director of Research and Communications, Institut Français des Relations Internationales and Editor-in-Chief of *Politique Etrangère***

You are right, Ali, what we witnessed this summer was not just the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. It was the end of a strategic cycle that started 20 years ago with 9/11, and ended in a failure, a dramatic failure. So, I agree with Renaud Girard's comment – it is a very important event that we attended this summer.

The objectives of this war on terror were defined by George W. Bush in 2001 and there were three goals. The first one was to eradicate Al-Qaeda. It was not achieved. Al-Qaeda still exists; it is in Afghanistan with Al-Qaeda Central and the regional branch called Al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent.

The second objective was to get rid of all terrorist groups of global reach. This is a pretty blurred expression and the fact is that, 20 years ago, ISIS did not exist. Today, we not only have Al-Qaeda, but we also have ISIS, which obviously is a terrorist group of global reach.

Then the third objective was to neutralize or to eradicate the actors – whether groups or states – that hosted international terrorist groups. Obviously here, we are speaking about the Taliban and not only were the Taliban not defeated, but they are now in power in Kabul. So, that is a major failure for the US; but also for US allies, who were very much involved in Afghanistan, and France was part of the game.

### **Ali Aslan**

Yes, so the war on terror that the US and the West, in the form of NATO, have conducted for the previous two decades, now with the swift return of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda most probably, you can argue whether it was a success or not. I think that we will go into more detail, but Tatiana, let me come to you here because, before we talk about the United States here – and rightly so, of course, because this has been America's longest running war – but, before the Americans, the Russians were there, and I am sure they have a thing or two to say about the current situation. They can draw from personal experiences.

**Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, Head of Russia-NIS Center of Ifri**

The Russian's stance towards the Taliban has an element of duality. On one hand, memories of the ten-year Soviet era war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) weigh extremely heavily – the war left a strong impression on both Russian elites and society at large. Then, in the Post-Soviet era, under the first period of Taliban rule, Afghanistan was the only country in the world to recognize Chechen independence. To this day, the Taliban are officially classed as a banned terrorist organization in Russia. On the other hand, despite this negative legacy, Russia began negotiations with the Taliban several years ago. Since 2016, Russia has been one of their largest sources of financing and arms sales. The Taliban were welcomed in Moscow and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, stated his support for their actions in the fight against the Islamic State. The same duality can likewise be seen with regard to the American's retreat from Afghanistan. On one hand, it is viewed as a type of geopolitical opportunity that leaves Russia more room for maneuver, and which makes it look like a credible security provider. And at the same time, there are fears in Moscow that these security risks could create a new situation.

Absolutely. If I had to summarize the Russian attitude to Afghanistan and the Taliban, I would say there is a certain duality. Mr. Vitaly Naumkin mentioned that the Taliban are on Russia's list of banned terrorist organizations, which gives rise to statements by official Russian news agencies such as: "The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, has stated his support for the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation) for its help in the fight against the Islamic State."

This duality can be seen again in the attitude towards the Taliban, as memories of the ten-year war in Afghanistan weigh extremely heavily. The war left a strong impression on both Russian elites and society at large. In September, Vladimir Putin said that Russia would not intervene militarily in Afghanistan. In his own words: "We have done this before, and we have learned the lessons." And, at the same time, Russia has been speaking to the Taliban since 2014.

We can go into the details of the why and how. This year, according to Taliban sources, Russia has been involved in three initial support measures providing financial assistance and arms sales to the Taliban. It is taking the highly pragmatic stance of talking to all the forces, etc. There is also a key point to understand here. For the Russians, today, the main enemy is the Islamic State. So it sees the Taliban as something like allies in this fight. It has opted for the lesser of two evils.

We see the same duality with regard to the American's withdrawal from Afghanistan. On one hand, it is seen as a type of geopolitical opportunity. The initial reactions of the Russian media, its TV news programs, etc., reveal a type of satisfaction: "The Americans have done no better than we did, and this leaves us with some room to maneuver, today, to do better. This will make us attractive to other countries as a credible security supplier." At the same time, you have the security and intelligence forces that are extremely worried, given the security risks this could entail.

**Ali Aslan**

Very interesting. A bit of a mixed, if not schizophrenic, feeling in Moscow about the events in Afghanistan. On the one hand, perhaps a dose of glee, if not *Schadenfreude*, about the failure of the West and NATO in particular; on the other hand, of course, security concerns very much on their own. When it comes to security concerns, M. K. Narayanan, we are not far from India, of course. Afghanistan is very much in the geopolitical proximity of your country and with the pertinent and crucial role that Pakistan, your neighbor, is playing in Afghanistan, I am sure Afghanistan, a country that you know well, has been very much on the radar. What is the view in New Delhi these days?

**Mayankote Kelath Narayanan, Executive Chairman of CyQureX Systems Pvt. Ltd., former Senior Advisor and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India**

Apart from the view of New Delhi, I think there is a view of all Indians. First and foremost, looking around at the panel here, I am the only one who sees this as a South Asian tragedy. Most of the others are – I am sorry to use the word – are outsiders. The Russians came in at one stage but they went back without results. The Americans came, hoped to create democracy, and they have gone back. Who are left to pick up the pieces? The nations of South Asia.

Afghanistan is part and parcel of South Asia. What happens in South Asia is therefore a matter of great concern for each and every South Asian country. As the largest country in South Asia – and, more so, a civilization with links with Afghanistan that goes back many thousands of years – for us, the Afghanistan tragedy is felt in every single home in India, apart from the governments in power.

Because, for most of us and particularly my generation, the Pathan was the friendliest soul in the Indian neighborhood. He was a very generous individual who looked [inaudible]. So, the tragedies that have fallen on Afghanistan over the years have been a matter of great, deep concern for most Indians.

The first and foremost lesson that we need to learn – and this is a lesson I heard from a number of other speakers when they talk of the Middle East and other places – is to please take into account the opinions of the nation or the region and not impose solutions on them. If you do impose a solution, do not do what happened with the Americans recently – they just left. You must have an organized retreat. You cannot leave a country in a shambles. So, we have a national tragedy, for certain. We have a greater South Asian tragedy and I think that is the issue that we need to address, because we have to now link up and find out what we do next.

I just want to add one more point. The last two days, we have heard about the problems in the rest of the world – or many parts of the world, at least. I think nothing symbolizes this more than the shambolic nature of what Afghanistan is today. There is clearly what I would call a crisis of confidence in how to manage problems and difficulties. Whether the Taliban that has taken power in Afghanistan will be able to govern Afghanistan or not is still a matter of discussion. I, for one, do not believe that the Taliban is capable of governing Afghanistan because Afghanistan is not one country. Afghanistan is a construct of several Pashtun tribes.



They have never had a central authority. They have never been a single focal point and if President Bush – with whom I have dealt with extensively and I greatly revere – thought that he could impose democracy in Afghanistan, whether it is the CIA or the State Department, I think it was the biggest folly that anybody could have thought of. So, I think we need to remedy this kind of thing.

How we will move forward is the issue. What is the result of foreign intervention? Two decades of foreign intervention and none of the objectives are met. I can at least understand if something was left behind. When Hamid Karzai was there, at least we had something like a democratic administration somewhere in place.

The primary objective is the war on terror. Destruction of the terror networks like Al-Qaeda has clearly not happened. Al-Qaeda is stronger today than what it was, and I speak with knowledge. Then we have a lot of newer outfits that have just come into existence: Daesh, the Islamist State, the ISIS-K. So, this has been a great tragedy that has been visited on the people of South Asia. I will leave it at that.

### **Ali Aslan**

Thank you. There are many more points to be raised throughout this discussion, and your country's perspective and your experience are extremely pertinent to this discussion. Thank you so much, Mr. Narayanan.