

By Emran Feroz

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Almost half a century of fighting brought the country to its nadir, and there is no clear way out of the misery.

Last Wednesday, at least four people were killed and more than 25 injured by a [suicide bombing](#) in a mosque on the grounds of Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry in Kabul. The attack was the latest in a deadly series of bombings targeting mosques and schools ([particularly for girls](#)) in recent months, some of them claimed by ISKP, Afghanistan’s Islamic State branch. The week prior, dozens of students of the [Shiite Hazara minority](#) were murdered when ISKP terrorists attacked an educational center in the west of Kabul.

Yet terrorist bombings aren’t even at the top of Afghanistan’s list of problems today. The legacy of the American war, climate change, and economic collapse have combined to create a shattering humanitarian crisis that leaves nearly the whole country on the brink of famine—and international humanitarian aid is not sufficient.

Afghanistan, of course, has been wracked with bomb attacks for decades now. In May 2017, for instance, I was traveling through the Afghan province of Nangarhar in the country’s east. Locals often lamented how the region has been abused as a playground for weapons by the Americans and their allies. Only a month prior to my visit, the U.S. military had dropped its biggest non-nuclear bomb, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast, also known as the “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB), on Nangarhar’s Achin district. Officially, at least, the story was that an ISKP hideout had been struck, but almost everyone I met denied this. In its typical fashion, the U.S. military then closed off the whole area, thus making independent reporting near impossible.

To this day, we do not know much about the bomb's casualties.

What little coverage there was of the MOAB attack lasted only a couple of days. Many news outlets across the world covered the event as yet another incident in a never-ending list of bloody occurrences in a remote, poorly understood, and uninteresting country uniquely predisposed to violent conflict. It's a depressing irony that one is left today wondering how reports and international reactions would take shape in the aftermath of Russia using similar weapons in Ukraine.

As is typically the case with any story warranting headline coverage, the MOAB was just the tip of an iceberg that had attracted even less attention. Under the Obama and Trump administrations, Afghanistan was the world's most drone-bombed country. A medic and friend of mine from the northern province of Baghlan, one of the war's epicenters, once told me how he had witnessed many people, especially children, become both physically and mentally sick because of the bombs and constantly circling drones.

Though the drone war has mostly halted, weapon remnants still kill those already haunted for years by war and chaos. Last January, an explosive remnant in Nangarhar's Lal Pur district killed eight children near a school. Thousands of tons of weapon remnants have devastated Afghanistan over the course of more than four decades of war. Now they endanger both the country's people and its environment.

The previous months also grimly revealed what happens when war and climate change coincide. Recent floods in several provinces killed hundreds of people, and thousands were displaced. In what is becoming a classic sign of climate change, the floods followed years of droughts that badly damaged Afghan agriculture. In interviews with local media outlets, Afghans from Logar, Ghazni, and other affected provinces described how the natural disaster had left them destitute, bereft of property and family members who had been swept away. Unsurprisingly, such areas got very little of the billions of dollars of Western reconstruction money—though they have not escaped the consequences of the economic collapse that followed the cessation of that spending.

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U.S. seizure of Afghanistan's central bank reserves.

Climate change has hit Afghanistan harder than most countries. Since 1950, temperatures in parts of the country have [risen by 1.8 degrees Celsius](#) even as the national economy remained dependent on agriculture, and any kind of industrial development remained far out of sight. Like many other developing countries, Afghanistan has emitted virtually no carbon dioxide, but now has to face its grave consequences. It's no surprise that during the occupation, most of the reconstruction spending went to the U.S. military, American contractors, or the highly corrupt Afghan National Army, which melted away to nothing during an 11-day offensive that culminated in the Taliban's conquest of Kabul.

Last but not least, Afghanistan's current economic crisis was foreseeable too. The last 20 years of the U.S. occupation and the decades prior to invasion did not create a national economy with even a semblance of stability, but a protectorate with a rentier elite subsidized by foreign aid. When the U.S. withdrew one year ago, that aid vanished overnight. Since then, the Taliban's Emirate has been confronted by sanctions whose effects have largely been borne by average Afghans. Unemployment and inflation are very high, and nearly all Afghans [live in poverty](#). Humanitarian aid shipments have only barely staved off outright starvation; millions do not have enough to eat.

Perhaps the biggest economic problem is a shortage of foreign currency caused by the U.S. seizure of Afghanistan's central bank reserves. The recent floods and other natural disasters such as the earthquake in Afghanistan's southeast in June, which killed around 1,000 people, exposed the dire need for physical cash to assist in recovery efforts. But there is no sign that the money will be released. Recently, the U.S. decided to transfer half of these reserves, \$3.5 billion, to a bank in Switzerland to coordinate its future use. The other half is still off-limits.

The only group organizing relief with any kind of serious urgency comes not from the international community, but from Afghans themselves. The Afghan diaspora is one of the largest on Earth, and they have worked strenuously to help. Indeed, for decades they have regularly sent millions of dollars to their relatives, friends, and other people in need. But once again, there are problems: [Thanks to the sanctions](#), remittances are difficult to process and their amount has declined sharply.

Many Afghans consider the Western sanctions to be another collective punishment against them—a step that would eventually lead the country toward further isolation and, as other

cases of similar sanctions revealed in the past, paradoxically increase support for the Taliban. It's hard to blame them for coming to that conclusion.

One does not need to be an expert to understand that all of these issues are too much to handle alone. Afghanistan is still fighting for survival on many fronts. The war itself is claimed to be largely over, and strictly from the Taliban's perspective that claim may withstand scrutiny, but it is evident that new conflicts will arise or are already on their way. In a country haunted by economic crisis, climate change, and political instability, challenges may yet escalate. All generations within Afghanistan have now spent most parts of their lives in war, and younger ones have never known peace. I met both former Afghan soldiers and Taliban fighters who appeared disillusioned and thought that ultimately, picking up a gun is their only solution. Few can blame them, given the fact that war constituted for decades the country's biggest industry. Without a serious international relief effort, Afghanistan's future is bleak.

Emran Feroz is a journalist, author, and the founder of Drone Memorial, a virtual memorial for civilian drone strike victims.