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Afghanistan's Tragedy

The Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) has watched with dismay events unfolding in Afghanistan since the abrupt evacuation of US troops, the Taliban's quick takeover of power, and the devastating scenes at Kabul airport and elsewhere. The US has acted in a unilateral and self-serving manner, oblivious to the rights and needs of the Afghan people, especially its women and girls. This most recent debacle did not begin in mid-August 2021; it began with the Trump administration's decision to negotiate with the Taliban leadership in Doha, starting in November 2018. Former US president Trump had promised to end America's "endless wars" – an admirable objective, given that none of those wars should ever have been undertaken – but the "peace talks" were an exercise in futility and the execution of the withdrawal in August was astonishingly mismanaged. What the abrupt withdrawal revealed was poor planning, lack of coordination with European allies, a disdain for the Afghan leadership, and a willful refusal to consult with Afghanistan's neighboring states on a peaceful, stable, and secure course of action.

We are aware that the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 – supported by NATO allies – was in retaliation for the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda fighters, who had been implicated in the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. The invasion had nothing to do with "saving Afghan women and girls", which only later was used as a fig leaf to soften the image of a powerful Western state attacking and occupying an underdeveloped peripheral state. We are aware that many Afghan women, especially those who had received education and work experience in the 1970s and 1980s, despised the Taliban, and many welcomed its political demise. After all, the Taliban had come rampaging into Afghanistan in 1992 from the refugee camps in Pakistan, initially to clean up the appalling conditions under the Western-supported Mujahideen, only to institute a draconian and gendered reign of terror. Their record included the torture and execution of the former president, Dr. Najibullah, in 1996, and the denial of schooling, employment, and public space for women and girls.

But the US invasion and overlong occupation were self-defeating. The US was concerned with its national interests only. True, some progress for women and girls was made in the large cities, but the US never engaged in the large-scale economic, social, and infrastructural development that would have created a more sustainable form of governance and social order, not to mention winning hearts and minds. Instead, US troop surges, drone warfare, and other assaults killed far too many civilians, while the vast majority of the much vaunted "one trillion dollars over the past 20 years" came back to the US in the form of salaries, healthcare, and pensions for soldiers; payments to contractors; and allocations to corporations for weaponry. About \$83 billion went toward building up Afghan security forces; just 2 percent, and perhaps less, "reached the Afghan people in the form of basic infrastructure or poverty-reducing



services.”¹ All this time, the Taliban were mobilizing throughout the country, aided and abetted by US ally Pakistan – while US leaders routinely deceived the American public about their actions and the outlays. The costs of this misguided war were the deaths and displacement of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians and soldiers, as well as loss of life and limb by American soldiers.

Twenty years after the misguided post-9/11 retaliation, the US government has abandoned Afghanistan in the most abject manner and wasted taxpayer money. Even apart from the display of US hegemonic decline, there must be an accounting for the years of mendacity, corruption, mismanagement, and war crimes. We also call on the US government to create an international trust fund for Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development, supervised by the United Nations, which would tie the release of funds to specific and measurable improvements in female health, schooling, and employment.

¹ Jeffrey Sachs, “Blood in the Sand” (Aug 17, 2021), <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/afghanistan-latest-debacle-of-us-foreign-policy-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2021-08>. For a detailed analysis of spending, see Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Jan. 30, 2021), esp. pp. 26-40, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>. A Feb. 2020 Congressional hearing on the Afghanistan Papers, an exposé of waste, lies, and ignorance by the *Washington Post*, is available at https://fas.org/irp/congress/2020_hr/afghan-papers.pdf and includes a devastating testimony by the SIGAR’s John Sopko.