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Afghanistan

Washington Is Shedding Crocodile Tears for Afghan Women

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War hawks constantly cite women's liberation in support of the US occupation of Afghanistan. That's transparent hypocrisy: during the Cold War, the US supported patriarchal fundamentalists against a party dedicated to advancing the cause of Afghan women.

The entire US political class is shedding warm tears for Afghan women's fate under renewed Taliban rule. These tears are consistent with a twenty-year-old discourse that presented the desire to liberate Afghan women from Taliban yoke as a key motivation of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, second only to the immediate goal of extirpating al-Qaeda in response to the 9/11 attacks.

This pretense is very hypocritical indeed. The insincerity is especially transparent in light of the Cold War, when the US supported patriarchal fundamentalists against a party dedicated to advancing the cause of Afghan women.

The claim of acting on behalf of Afghan women could have been used likewise, if not more convincingly, to justify the ten-year-long Soviet occupation of their poor country. After all, under the Soviet-sponsored government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), crucial measures were taken in trying to emancipate Afghan women from traditional patriarchal shackles. A 2003 report by the NATO advisory International Crisis Group (ICG) detailed these measures enforced by the PDPA regime and the harsh regression in women's condition that prevailed after its fall. [1] As summarized ten years later in a 2013 report by the same ICG:

Ousting Daud in a military coup, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) promised women equal rights, compulsory education and protection against forced, arranged and child marriage. Successive PDPA regimes also encouraged female employment. By the time the Taliban took over in the mid-1990s, 70 per cent of teachers, about half of all civil servants and 40 per cent of doctors in Afghanistan were women. [2]

To be sure, the ICG did criticize the PDPA regime and the Soviet occupation for their brutality and the heavy-handed imposition of measures such as ending segregation in schools, but there's no question that the PDPA years saw a major effort toward improving the condition of Afghan women in the areas (especially urban) under regime control. Meanwhile, the Islamic opposition to the PDPA regime, dominated by hardline fundamentalists, was heavily anti-women: the difference between the mujahidin of the 1980s and early 1990s and the Taliban is one of shades on the same end of the color spectrum — not a qualitative difference. As the 2013 ICG report noted:

The mujahidin used their control over camps in Pakistan to impose their idiosyncratic interpretation of the role of women on the refugee population, supported by General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, which shared their puritanical version of Islam.

In addition to the Pakistani military dictatorship, the mujahidin were supported by the oldest and closest US Muslim ally, the Saudi kingdom, likewise known for its appalling treatment of women. And yet it was this arc of forces that Washington chose to support in their fight against the PDPA regime and its Soviet backers.

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Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor from 1977 to 1981, made a lot of noise with the interview he gave to a French magazine in 1998, two years after the Taliban seized power in Kabul. After boasting that his administration had given the USSR "its Vietnam war" that "brought about the breakup of the Soviet empire," he was asked if he regretted "having supported Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists." Brzezinski cynically replied: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"

Brzezinski at least did not attempt to excuse the Taliban — unlike Zalmay Khalilzad, who, after having served in the State and Defense departments in the Reagan and Bush Sr administrations, became US ambassador to Iraq and then to Afghanistan under George W. Bush. He was later put in charge of US negotiation with the Taliban by Donald Trump and played that role until the completion of the US withdrawal last August. In 1996, Khalilzad argued the following in the *Washington Post*: "Based on recent conversations with Afghans, including the various Taliban factions, and Pakistanis, I am confident that they would welcome an American reengagement. The Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran — it is closer to the Saudi model."

Feminists will appreciate Khalilzad's high concern for women's rights, which is but a sample of Washington's long-standing double standard in bashing Iran's Islamic fundamentalism while excusing the Saudis' — even though, compared to the latter, the former looks like a beacon of democracy and women's emancipation. What prevented the reengagement that Khalilzad had recommended from taking place wasn't the fate of Afghan women in the least. It was solely the increase in Al-Qaeda's attacks on US targets, which led Bill Clinton to order a missile strike on Osama bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan in 1997. The rest of the story is well known: 9/11 and the twenty-year US involvement in that war-torn country, ending in the catastrophic outcome that the whole world has witnessed in August.

Whether the condition of women was overall more advanced under the US-sponsored Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004–2021) than it was under the PDPA regime is debatable. Unlike the latter, however, the US-sponsored regime had to accommodate the patriarchal tradition embodied by Washington's old Afghan allies, the mujahidin who had fought the PDPA and the Soviet occupation and maintained their dominance over the new regime (see the sections on women's and girls' rights in the successive annual Human Rights Watch reports on Afghanistan). [3]

Moreover, women in rural areas, where the vast majority of Afghans live, have borne the brunt of the US-led war and endured huge suffering as a result of it. [4] The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) has denounced this situation in strong terms. [5] And despite pleas for the inclusion of women in the peace process that Washington conducted with the Taliban under Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, women's participation remained marginal. [6] The claim that the US obtained promises of moderation from the Taliban has already proven to be a joke — which would have been risible had the situation not been so tragic.

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[1] International Crisis Group, 14 March 2003 "[Afghanistan: Women and Reconstruction](#)".

[2] ICG, 14 October 2013 "[Women and Conflict in Afghanistan](#)".

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[3] Such as HRW [“Afghanistan Events of 2017”](#).

[4] *The New Yorker*, 6 September 2021 [“The Other Afghan Women”](#).

[5] RAWA, 21 August 2021 [“RAWA Responds to the Taliban Takeover”](#).

[6] *Journal of International Affairs*, 11 September 2019 [“Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan”](#), *the interpreter*, 22 June 2021 [“Standing with Afghanistan: Inclusion and women’s rights in peace talks”](#).