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USA/Afghanistan

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The war in Afghanistan is already the longest in US history. And now Trump is considering sending more troops.

The war in Afghanistan is already the longest in US history, spanning sixteen years at a price of at least \$1 trillion. As a private citizen, Donald Trump repeatedly condemned the US occupation of Afghanistan, but today, his administration is preparing to send several thousand additional troops. Meanwhile, conditions for Afghan civilians continue to deteriorate.

Two journalists who have spent years covering Afghanistan — Anand Gopal and May Jeong — spoke to Eric Ruder about the aims of the US war in Afghanistan. Gopal has reported from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle East war zones for various publications and is the author of the award-winning *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and War Through Afghan Eyes*. Jeong is a Kabul-based magazine writer and a visiting scholar at the New York University Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute.

Eric Ruder: [The May 31 bombing](#) in Kabul targeting the city's diplomatic sector is being reported as perhaps the most deadly bombing since the US occupation began in 2001. Can you talk about how we got to this point?

Anand Gopal: I don't know if it's the biggest mass-casualty incident, because there have certainly been many occasions when the Americans have killed more people in a single attack — up to 150 or 200 or more. However, it is one of the bigger bombs placed by the insurgents. The Taliban is probably behind this, though we don't know.

It's interesting to contemplate why they would do this. People are dying all the time in very large numbers outside of Kabul and in the countryside, and nobody really pays attention. So if the insurgency puts a bomb in a place like Kabul, it signals to the West, to the Americans, that the country is not secure.

The roots of the [daily chaos](#) that is Afghanistan today lie in the conflict between US-backed forces and an anti-state insurgency made up of the Taliban and allied groups. The various warlords, militias, and so forth backed by the United States probably amount to one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand armed men — and then you have perhaps fifty thousand Taliban and associated people on the other side.

The people who are predominantly dying in this war are the people who are caught between those two sides. They're dying because of roadside bombs, air strikes, American-backed militias abducting people — all of these things. Every year, the number of [civilian deaths](#) tends to be higher than the year before. Every year breaks a record, from 2001 onwards, and that trend is continuing.

The thing is that the elites — the ruling class in Afghanistan as well as the American elites — value lives in Kabul more than they value lives in the hinterlands, because of the symbolic value of Kabul. I think the Taliban recognizes that, so they try to kill people in Kabul.

May Jeong: I've been living in Kabul since January 2013. When I first moved there, people were talking about district centers potentially falling, and the implication was that this would be an apocalyptic event. And then district centers did start falling in 2014.

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I remember that one district center in Zabul fell, and the government responded by relocating the district center and saying it never fell. There are a lot of workarounds like that.

Of course, the conflict between Taliban and Afghan forces is really a proxy struggle because they are both being funded by other countries. The United States is behind Afghan government forces, and Pakistan supports the Taliban, but then there are other elements as well. For example, Russia is also arming the Taliban because it wants the Taliban to serve as a bulwark against ISIS. Iran is involved as well.

In 2015, Kunduz, which is the provincial capital of Kunduz province, fell to the Taliban, and Afghan forces retreated.

In 2016 and 2017, a lot of provincial capitals have fallen in all but name. Today we don't hear about spectacular attacks as we did in Kunduz because that was such an emblematic moment. Since then, the government has implemented a lot of stopgap measures.

A lot of Americans and Canadians have been deployed to defend Kandahar, for example, but the only reason the city hasn't fallen is because the police chief, Abdul Raziq, runs the urban capital as if it's a police state. It's very safe, as long as you don't come from the wrong tribe or find yourself in the wrong district.

In the neighboring province of Helmand, for example, the capital city of Lashkargah is really under siege. Of the thirteen districts in Helmand, a majority of them have now fallen to the Taliban. There are American soldiers and Special Forces who are commuting from Bagram Air Base about four hundred miles away by helicopter every day, fighting on the front lines and then returning home because they don't even have a base there.

The same thing is happening in Uruzgan, which is north of Helmand where in many of the outlying districts people run out of food or medical supplies, and they have to negotiate their way through areas that are contested.

If an area is securely with the government or with the Taliban, life is easier, but it's the contested territories that are problematic. And those contested territories are drawing closer to the urban centers, which is why we're hearing about them.

So I've been living in Afghanistan in an era when cities are falling, and cities falling has become normalized in a way that it wasn't when I first moved there.

Eric Ruder: Trump is now flirting with the idea of a [US troop surge](#) in Afghanistan, which sounds reminiscent of the surge that Obama campaigned on and carried out. By comparison, Trump's surge seems moderate where the number of troops appears to be a fraction of what Obama sent.

Anand Gopal: I think Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again, and expecting different results.

We had a surge in Afghanistan in 2009 from Obama, and it failed. The insurgency is still there where in fact, it's stronger now than it was before. The military folks and the proponents of the insurgency say it failed because US troops didn't stay there long enough, and if only they get to stay longer this time where I don't know, maybe they're thinking fifteen or twenty years where then things will change.

But I think that misunderstands fundamentally the nature of why there's an insurgency. It's not just a

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purely military question. The reason why people are fighting in Afghanistan is because they have real grievances regarding violence from US-backed warlords, dispossession, desperate economic circumstances " a whole host of things. And the armed insurgency is what gives expression to those grievances.

That's why even if you negotiate with the Taliban, and they're mollified somehow, there will be another group with a different name that is willing to fight " unless those fundamental political problems are dealt with.

The surge in 2009 didn't do any of those things. What it did was kill a lot of Taliban and create a lot of militias. I think the number of armed men in Afghanistan increased dramatically under Obama's watch, so there are militias in every village.

With so many people under arms fighting on behalf of the Afghan government, it's possible to create a semblance of security, but in reality, it just creates more grievances and fuels further conflict.

So I think we should expect the same thing from a potential Trump surge " fueling further conflict. Which, by the way, is what the United States has been doing since 2001. They have been supporting one side to the hilt and blocking any attempts at peace from the beginning until now.

May Jeong :It looks like Trump's surge is going to go ahead. People are calling it a mini-surge, which I think is a misnomer, because even if they send 5,000 troops, it doesn't really amount to a surge compared to the 140,000 that were there during the Obama years.

The Afghan elite, the urban residents, the media " these are all the same interest group, and they are typically the ones lobbying in Washington. While they obviously aren't monolithic in their outlook, many support the surge because they have benefited under the NATO occupation of Afghanistan. They want more than five thousand troops, and they would be fine with troops staying there forever.

There are about eight hundred US military bases around the world, and I think something like two have been closed in recent years " which is to say that when America establishes a base somewhere, it's not looking to close it. In the Philippines, the United States has a [military base](#) with a hundred-year lease. Likewise, after the Korean War, the United States said it would leave after five years, but it's [still there](#)

So the United States plans to maintain its military presence in Afghanistan for a long time, and this has traditionally benefited people in urban centers who speak English and have access to markets because of their language skills and connections. If you talk about people who have truly reaped the benefits of the war economy, I would venture to guess that it's about one hundred families who have really prospered.

Eric Ruder :So who's against more US troops?

May Jeong: I think the dominant sentiment in rural Afghanistan is feeling stuck in between hostile forces, so I sometimes wonder if the role of ideology and other beliefs is overstated. It seems that the most pressing consideration is simply how to get by.

It's not like people are standing with the Taliban on ideological grounds " or that they support the United States on principle because they believe in women's rights. It's really about getting by, and it goes back to my point about how the contested territories are the ones that beget more suffering.

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The dominant emotion expressed to me by the people I've talked to in my reporting is one of fatigue. At this point, people don't care which side wins so much as they want the war to be over.

For them, and for myself as well, the point I can't quite get over is that ending the war is essential for women's rights or community development, but for some reason, we seem to be obsessed with microlevel projects, without thinking about how the prerequisites for those happening don't even exist.

Large sums of money have been spent on countless gender initiatives in Afghanistan. And that's great if you're a woman who's been empowered by that, but if you're an empowered woman in an area that is being shelled, that doesn't really help your sense of personal security or sense of wellbeing.

Eric Ruder :So what does the United States want in Afghanistan? The American public is continually told that the United States is only there to fight terrorism and bring stability. Yet it seems that the US presence itself makes stability impossible. If that's the case, the only possible conclusion is that the United States is fine with instability, so long as it can continue to pursue its imperial interests, using Afghanistan as a platform for its military hardware.

Anand Gopal : I think the ideal end state for US foreign policymakers would be a client regime that generally manages American interests without having a major US military presence. They would like to ideally keep a few bases there. Iran is next door and China is nearby, so having bases is important.

Before, there were grand plans about energy pipelines crisscrossing central Asia, but I don't think any of that is realistic. Really, it's about having a client regime in place, military bases, and a place that's good for American business. That's the ideal. But they're unable to accomplish even that, and that's a pretty barebones minimum.

If you compare US interests in Afghanistan to the Middle East, they're starkly different. US interests in the Middle East are at a much higher order than Afghanistan.

But the United States has found it difficult to secure even this critical set of interests because by its very presence, the United States is the primary source of instability in the country. So the very client regime that they hope to have in place, the rump state they are propping up, is actually what's fueling the insurgency against the warlords and militias that the United States is aligned with.

In a way, I think that Afghanistan is the epitome of the [neoliberal state](#). There's almost no state there; everything is outsourced in the country to private actors, especially security. This is not a recipe for stability.

So you have a case where they have a political/ strategic drive to have a minimal state, and the reality on the ground is that this creates real grievances and causes people to fight back. So they're kept there for this reason.

May Jeong :So you think the bomb was sending a message to Americans, not Afghans?

Anand Gopal: In my view, the Taliban recognizes that there are only two parties in Afghanistan that matter — the US and Pakistan.

So everything they're doing is directed in one way or another toward that because whatever message

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They're trying to send a message to Afghans that they don't need to be sent by a bomb because they're in Afghan villages, they're embedded in the Afghan community and in Afghan society. The message they're sending is to the real power brokers in society.

May Jeong : My take on the bomb was that one aspect of it is about sending a message to Afghans, saying: your government can't protect you. But if that's true, it gets back to Eric's question namely, how does this kind of attack connect to the movement's larger goal? What is that larger goal, and how do these attacks link up to whatever it is that they want?

Eric Ruder : Are they seeking state power? Is it something else?

Anand Gopal : It's a divided and factionalized movement, and there are different wings within it. But generally, yes, I think they're trying to take power. I think there are people who realize this aim is impossible at the moment, and so there are debates about what's practical now and in the longer run.

Eric Ruder : You were saying the two main actors that the insurgents are addressing are the United States and Pakistan. Can you talk about the Pakistani dimension to what's happening in the region?

Anand Gopal : Pakistan supports the Taliban and supports the insurgency, while taking [massive amounts](#) of military aid from the United States.

But the Taliban is deeply divided on Pakistan because it recognizes that it can't be an independent force as long as it's under Pakistan's thumb. So there are a lot of attempts by factions within the Taliban to get out of Pakistani influence, to get other regional powers to support them, such as Iran, Russia, and China.

But Pakistan is a malign actor in Afghanistan. It's seeking to have representation in the Afghan government in a way, and it sees the Taliban, or factions of the Taliban, as the best chance to that end.

May Jeong: If the United States pulls its funding out, we know what will happen next. After the [Soviet-backed regime](#) lost its funding, that led to civil war, which led to all the other things. So will that happen if America pulls out? In other words, even if it makes sense in the long term to pull out, how do you address the short-term consequences?

Anand Gopal : Yes, if America cuts its funding, the state would collapse tomorrow. So first of all, we should say that pulling out troops isn't the main issue. They have enough proxies that you could pull out the troops, but if you cut the funding, it's very different.

But the thing I would say is that you can argue for wanting to pull out, together with a negotiated settlement for peace, but America is the biggest force blocking a peace settlement in Afghanistan today.

May Jeong : In what way?

Anand Gopal : In every way. It has repeatedly arrested people who have tried to switch sides. It's backing one side and demanding that the other side surrender its weapons and give up unconditionally, which is not a peace negotiation.

Let me turn the question around: the United States has extraordinary leverage on its client regime to force it to come

to the negotiating table because it controls the purse strings. If the United States turns off funding tomorrow, the government collapses, right? So the United States could do that if it wanted to. They just don't want to, they don't care.

May Jeong : But their logic right now is that we just need certain wins before the time is right to push for peace negotiations.

Anand Gopal :But that's entirely bogus. That's what they've been saying for fifteen years. If they wanted to organize a peace tomorrow, they could do it.

As evidence of that, when the [presidential elections](#) took place in 2014, the Northern Alliance, which is allied with the United States, was threatening a coup because they opposed the election results. Then Secretary of State John Kerry went there and stopped the coup cold. He called them together and headed it off. Because this isn't a sovereign state, these aren't independent actors.

May Jeong :What about when they say that we can't have a negotiated settlement right now because we just haven't amassed enough political capital yet? The logic is that if the United States negotiated peace now, they would have to agree to more power-sharing with the other side than they'd like to, so it's better to keep fighting.

Eric Ruder: Yes, that's the central issue. They keep saying that, but they're continuing to hold out for a victory that they can't achieve. This leaves the US stuck in a place it can't get out of.

Getting out is the equivalent of defeat, and since no one's actually beaten them yet, they can continue on. But the United States can't defeat the forces they're up against, because every victory engenders more resistance. That's why some wars, like the US war in Vietnam, drag on for more than a decade and kill a couple million people, until the United States is compelled, one way or another, to acknowledge that it actually lost.

May Jeong: US National Security Advisor [H. R. McMaster](#) is a fascinating character because he makes Trump palatable in a way. And whatever you feel about him, he served as a high-level officer in Afghanistan, which is more than you can say about most other people in the Trump administration. And he's pushing for a surge of three thousand to five thousand troops. Why?

Anand Gopal: McMaster thinks that what the United States did in Iraq worked, except that then the United States withdrew its troops *too quickly*. So their actual logic is that the troops just need to stay longer in Iraq and Afghanistan.

May Jeong: But if you follow that logic, why bother with five thousand?

Anand Gopal: I think it does follow logically. Because if you thought the troop surge was working in 2010 and 2011, then Obama came along and decided to pull the troops out in 2014 we just didn't have enough time. The problem, according to this line of argument, is that we sent the Taliban the wrong message, which was that you can just wait us out.

Eric Ruder: May, are you saying that you think if they were following their own logic, they'd be putting in fifty thousand troops instead of five thousand?

May Jeong: Yes, they should send ten thousand instead of five thousand, right?

Eric Ruder: That's why I asked the earlier question about what the US goals are. I think they know that they're not going to achieve stability that stability is more than they can really hope for. And if that's true, then they don't want to overcommit.

If you overcommit, you're putting in more troops and money, and raising expectations that you're going to get results, while burning through tons of political capital in the process. So why not just continue at a much lower troop level that won't achieve stability, but keeps the United States in the game?

Anand Gopal: Right, and you can create the feeling that you've done something. You've put in five thousand soldiers, and that's fine. I think they would like something more than that, but they're not willing to do what would be needed, because the cost of trying that is much greater for them. So they're happy to just let the status quo continue.

Eric Ruder: What has changed or stayed the same since Trump took office?

May Jeong: The Trump administration's policy review is ongoing. They had a deadline of April 30, and then another deadline before Trump's big international trip at the end of May, and now they're saying that there will be a decision by July.

That's pretty telling. It probably means that there's a lot of discord within the administration about which path to take.

Eric Ruder: One possible explanation for the continued delays is that they don't want to be seen as continuing Obama's policy, given how Trump savaged everything about Obama's foreign policy, but there really aren't any changes they can propose, because in the end, the Obama administration was pursuing a policy that the Trump administration largely agrees with.

May Jeong: That could be. Generally speaking, there aren't sharp differences over foreign policy in the American two-party system. I can't really tell what distinguishes the Obama-era policy and a Trumpian approach to dealing with Afghanistan.

The way that people talk about Trump and Afghanistan is very peculiar. A lot of Afghan elites were ecstatic when Trump won, for the obvious reason that they thought there would be a reinvigorated US intervention there. But there's also a sense that Trump is bringing in a lot of people who understand Afghanistan, so this will be good for them.

But having America care about you is not necessarily a good thing.

Afghanistan is currently in a situation that would be considered an optimal state *as far as the US is concerned*. Sending five thousand troops doesn't cost very much, and then they can let the war continue, while they appear to be trying their best. And Afghanistan can continue as a client state firmly within the US orbit. That's convenient for the two groups who have power the Afghan elites and the Washington establishment.

[Jacobin](#)

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