

In Kabul, Back to Hell

Returning to Kabul after a six-year absence, the author finds a filthy fortress-city in which the Taliban square off against armed security contractors on a nearly daily basis. In the background is a growing resentment toward the foreign presence.

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One of the things that most struck me upon returning to Kabul after six years was Dar-ul Aman, the city's main artery. If it weren't for the four paved lanes (asphalt is rare in Kabul) and the looming presence of the royal palace, you wouldn't be able to orient yourself. The palace is neoclassical structure built in the early 1920s during the reign of King Amanullah II. Though mostly in ruins, it's still protected by barbed wire and guarded by troops.

A refugee camp in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.





On the other hand, the rubble that for decades littered Dar-ul Aman has all but vanished. The change has nothing to do with organized urban planning or reconstruction. It's haphazard. Makeshift houses and small shops, some made from mud, abut villas whose architectural style is to say the least questionable. Some have Roman columns with blue and green colored exterior glass. Their sole goal seems to be the ostentatious display of wealth. These fanciful structures are the residences of drug warlords, who once made their homes in the Wazir Akbar Khan district. Now, they've spread their residences throughout the capital in a show of impunity. They have nothing to fear. They all but run the show. Their militias dress in police uniforms and are paid by the state.

Dar-ul Aman is fundamental because it cuts through the whole city. In the 1990s, it was reduced to rubble as various mujahideen groups fought for control of the capital. The street also housed the Soviet embassy during the time of the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The five-building complex, each of its structures five stories high,

was also largely destroyed in subsequent warfare. What was left served as makeshift housing for the city's dispossessed. These ruins eventually yielded the foundation for the newer and far smaller Russian embassy; the only diplomatic mission that isn't located in the heavily bunkered area reserved for foreign embassies and government buildings. That doesn't mean it's excluded from Taliban attacks.

The Taliban's spring offensive, which began in mid-April, mostly targeted the Wazir Akbar Khan quadrant, considered the city's most protected area. It is very much in the style of Baghdad's Green Zone, though far more vulnerable. Afghans require special permission to enter or cross through walled-in neighborhood. To get wherever they need to go, non-resident foreigners and those who lack authorized vehicles have to walk through a maze of corridors lined with five-meter-high concrete slabs topped by tumbleweed rolls of barbed wire. If you happen to be going in this direction on a windy day, the



dust rising from the ochre-colored landscape creates waves of barely breathable air. Mask-covered police control the traffic flow, raising and lowering heavy iron bars.

The only distinguishing markers in this circle of hell are the signs pointing you to the various embassies. Not to all of them, however, since some prefer to remain anonymous. A few are actually conspicuous. Take the Indian Embassy, with its glass dome and windows and metallic gray walls. Some scoff at the structure, saying neither the dome nor the windows are destined to last very long. Many were nearly blown out during the first attack in April. Kabul's Green Zone also houses the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters. But NATO troops no longer control the capital. Kabul is the first test for Afghan security forces in view of the withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014. It will only be partial withdrawal, however, since various domestic bases are ready preparing the troops that stay on in the war-torn country. The bulk of the remaining military force will be American, about 60,000 of the current 90,000-strong

force. So far, there has been no formal U.S.-Afghan agreement on the numbers or their location.

The real problem is that nobody in Kabul trusts the Afghan security forces, an apprehension confirmed by the effectiveness of Taliban attacks. Afghan troops have been accused of lack of professionalism and, worse still, of complicity with the enemy.

The endemic mistrust has led most embassies and foreign companies to use private security contractors that employ both Afghan and foreign employees. Security is a thriving business in war zones (they are dominant in Iraq), even if contractors don't represent a guarantee.

Foreigners eager to avoid tempting fate live within Wazir Akbar Khan quadrangle. Though restaurants are protected, that doesn't stop diners from arriving in bulletproof vehicles with accompanying protection details. People living and working in the neighborhood are inmates of a sort, but many reap lucrative rewards. The only available entertainment is a massage or a sauna at the Serena hotel, luxury accommodation whose cheapest

Ruins of the royal palace in Dar-ul Aman.



room run €300 euros a night. The hotel is almost always packed. The Star, a new hotel located closer to embassy row, has already been attacked by the Taliban (so has the Serena, for that matter).

There's no peace to be had Kabul, which is among the most protected areas. At the same time, the capital is among the least afflicted areas of the country. Clashes and bombings are a daily even in southern regions. Kabul managed to avoid that, largely because of a devastating winter that shut down most military activities, and also terrorism.

But the burning of Korans at Bagram, a military base located about 50 kilometers from Kabul, and the massacre in Kandahar (where a rogue American army sergeant, enraged by the death of a colleague, went on a shooting spree that left 17 civilians dead) soon met with a fierce response in the capital. The release of video showing American troops urinating on Taliban corpses and later publication of images showing of U.S. troops "posing" with dead insurgents only made matters worse. After the release of the latest photos in April, the Taliban released a statement citing "brutal and inhuman act by the American invading forces" and vowed revenge.

Opposition to the presence of foreign troops has grown

increasingly explicit and now comes from people of diverse backgrounds. But many still believe that despite claims to the contrary, the U.S. has no intention of withdrawing.

"After more than 10 years of war it has become clear that the U.S. did not come to Afghanistan to fight terrorism but to impose its interests," says noted journalist Nasir Fayaz, a longtime journalist for Afghanistan's private Ariana Television Network. "Afghanistan is important for its geopolitical position, which can control the whole region. Those who say they want bring peace and then deal with the Taliban will never achieve a lasting peace." For Fayaz, promises of withdrawal are "based on cost concerns, but in the long term, given the economic crisis, continuing the war is to everyone's advantage." If the war continues, he says, drug proceeds will be used to purchase weapons.

Despite a decrease in production over the last two years because of a poppy-killing fungus that destroyed half of the 2010 crop, the manufacture and sale of opium remains a fundamental component in the Afghan gross domestic product.

Until start of the Afghan occupation, the country had



no labs for processing opium into heroin, but that has changed. Worse still, the poorest quality opium is consumed in the country itself. Addicts know where to go to purchase heroin, mostly beneath the bridges of the city's dry riverbed. It's a bleak situation.

This abject reality begs the question of where aid from donor countries goes. The answer is that Afghanistan is second only to Somalia as the most corrupt country on the planet. The gap between rich and poor is abysmal, with appalling juxtapositions creating a surreal atmosphere. For example, a golf course was recently built near a refugee camp that houses the dispossessed of Helmand province.

Social services are virtually non-existent. Electricity shortages and outages are the norm. Water comes from street pumps. Health care is a fiction. Every day, 50 Afghan women die in childbirth. Former activist and former parliamentarian Malalai Joya keeps a running diary of violence against women and the atrocities committed by warlords and drugs chieftains. She was kicked out of the Loya Jirga, the Afghan parliament, for denouncing the abuse. Now, the 34-year-old Joya can't go home and sleeps in a different place each night. Nonetheless, she still travels in an effort to bring Afghan suffering to light,

especially violence directed against women.

Joya also opposes the foreign troops presence. She counters those who warn of civil war by saying they're spewing "propaganda to sell American weapons," adding: "Only people struggling on their own behalf can win liberation and earn democracy, but to achieve that we need a level of education that's lacking."

Hygiene is not an Afghan priority, something that's evident in reams of animal flesh butchers sell along dust-filled roads. More damning are the open sewers that spill noxious streams onto city streets. Sewage workers are in great high demand, and those who have the job spend whole days shoveling stinky mud from the city's countless ditches. They work hard, perhaps fearing the coming of summer heat,

which will make the smell even more unbearable.

Open sewers and stinking piles of garbage are choreographed into the oldest areas of Kabul, where hillside mud houses are prevalent. Here, people have nothing except their own dignity. Swarms of children, who belong to many destitute families, often approach visitors and take their hands without asking for a thing. The poorest of the poor are often the least aggressive. Many are the widows who have lost their husbands to 30 years of near-constant warfare. Many seek justice. Many would even be willing to accept a foreign presence if only the troops accepted their religion. Incidents such as the Koran burning in Baghram damage such sentiment.

The Americans came to eliminate terrorism, says journalist Fayaz, "but they killed Osama bin Laden only to consider entertaining talks with Mullah Omar [the Taliban ideologue]."

All that's certain after a decade of war is that the United States has failed miserably. It ousted the Taliban from power only to begin to negotiate their return, alongside with President Hamid Karzai, himself a hostage to local warlords. How will the Afghans respond? While some fear a new civil war, most argue instead argue that the population is weary of war, and want peace at any price. ●