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THE HOUSE BUILT ON SAND

WHY THE AFGHAN REPUBLIC FELL, AND WHAT ANY FUTURE
STATE MUST BUILD DIFFERENTLY.

AUTHOR: NAWEED KAWUSI



Executive Summary

After two decades of sustained international intervention, aid disbursements exceeding \$145 billion, and an internationally sponsored state-building project of extraordinary scale, the Afghan Republic collapsed in August 2021 with a speed that shocked governments, intelligence agencies, and scholarly observers alike. Within eleven days of the final US withdrawal announcement, the Taliban had taken every provincial capital. Within weeks, the entire state apparatus had ceased to function.

However, the collapse was neither sudden nor unforeseeable but rather the cumulative product of structural governance failures embedded from the founding moment of the post-2001 order: a constitutional architecture that concentrated power without building legitimacy, an aid system that substituted for the state rather than constructing it, a security sector built for foreign dependency rather than indigenous resilience or local contexts, and a political order that excluded the majority of Afghans from any meaningful stake in the republic's survival. So when the foreign funding and support was cut off, the house built on sand came crushing down around all of us.

This paper synthesises publicly available evidence, official reconstruction assessments, and peer-reviewed scholarship to produce a rigorous, evidence-based account of why the Afghan state failed, and of the specific mechanisms, financial, judicial, and military, through which that failure translated into collapse. Its central argument is that the collapse of the Afghan Republic was not a failure of implementation. It was a failure of design, compounded over two decades by strategic incoherence, institutional misalignment, and a persistent refusal to reckon honestly with what state-building actually requires.

Key Findings

- **Founding Architecture:** The Bonn settlement created a hyper-centralised presidential system without the coercive, fiscal, or legitimacy foundations that make centralisation viable, embedding structural fragility from the outset.
- **Fiscal Dependency:** Afghanistan never achieved fiscal sovereignty. By 2021, external assistance financed approximately 75 percent of total public expenditure, making the state structurally accountable to donors rather than to Afghan citizens.
- **Legitimacy Deficit:** The republic failed to integrate the social, religious, and customary structures through which Afghans actually experience governance, while the Taliban spent years building a functioning parallel system of courts and taxation in the vacuum this left behind.
- **Security Sector Failure:** The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were built for dependency, not autonomy. Their collapse was not primarily a military defeat but a cascade of negotiated surrenders that began in the districts months before Kabul fell.
- **Political Exclusion:** Flawed electoral processes, ethnic marginalisation, patronage-driven politics, and the durability gap in women's political participation deprived the state of the broad social contract necessary to survive existential crisis.
- **Elite Capture:** Corruption was not incidental but structural, epitomised by the 2010 Kabul Bank theft of nearly \$900 million with almost no accountability, a demonstration effect that shaped elite behaviour for the following decade.
- **Regional Interference and Insurgent Self-Sufficiency:** Pakistan's sustained support gave the insurgency sanctuary, but an estimated \$1.6 billion in annual independent revenue gave it the means to survive regardless of any single patron's support.
- **Strategic Incoherence:** The international coalition oscillated between counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, and democratic institution-building without coherent sequencing, generating contradictions that prevented sustained institutional momentum.

The Problem:

The fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 produced expressions of shock across Western capitals. The reality was that the structural conditions producing the collapse had been documented, measured, and reported for years. SIGAR had produced quarterly reports since 2008 cataloguing institutional dysfunction, aid waste, security sector fragility, and governance failure. The Asia Foundation had conducted annual nationwide surveys demonstrating the republic's declining legitimacy. Academic researchers had published detailed analyses of the structural contradictions embedded in the post-2001 order. None of it produced the course corrections the situation required.

The collapse was not a sudden rupture. It was the endpoint of a trajectory that had been visible for years to anyone willing to look at the evidence. Three foundational deficits define the answer to why it happened: the republic lacked political legitimacy, fiscal autonomy, and the capacity to project authority independently across its own territory. Understanding how those deficits were produced, why they were never adequately addressed, and the concrete mechanisms through which they eventually converted into a collapsed state, is the prerequisite for any reconstruction effort serious about not repeating the same mistakes.

A scope note on method: this paper sepaks about Afghanistan's own trajectory rather than from a systematic cross-national comparison. Other post-conflict state-building efforts facing comparable fiscal and security dependency, in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, offer relevant points of comparison for testing whether the mechanisms identified here generalise beyond the Afghan case. That comparative work is a natural next step for this research programme rather than something this paper attempts.

Founding Architecture and Fiscal Dependency

Bonn and the Structural Error

The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 produced a political settlement acceptable enough to launch an internationally backed state-building project. But political settlement and state formation are distinct processes. Bonn prioritised the former whilst assuming the latter would follow through institutional design alone. Rather than using the post-Taliban moment to decisively resolve rival power centres, Bonn incorporated them. Warlords, militia commanders, and factional leaders were given formal positions within the new order. This was understandable as political pragmatism. It was catastrophic as state-building strategy.

The 2004 Constitution compounded the error. It established one of the most centralised presidential systems in the region, concentrating appointment powers across all provincial governors, district governors, senior military commanders, and chief justices without meaningful parliamentary counterweight. The result was predictable: the presidency became extraordinarily valuable to capture, national politics became a permanent high-stakes contest over executive power, and each election became a systemic crisis. The 2014 election required months of US-brokered negotiation to resolve. The 2019 election produced two simultaneous inauguration ceremonies. A political system incapable of managing orderly transfers of power cannot survive sustained insurgent pressure.

The Fiscal Architecture of Dependency

The scale of Afghanistan's fiscal dependency is difficult to overstate. World Bank data indicate that international assistance financed between 70 and 90 percent of total Afghan government expenditure throughout the post-2001 period.⁴ Afghanistan's domestic revenue never exceeded 11.6 percent of GDP, well below the 15-20 percent threshold that comparable fragile states achieving consolidation typically reached within a decade.

The problem was not simply the quantity of external assistance but its structure. A significant portion bypassed Afghan state institutions entirely, flowing through international NGOs, private contractors, and parallel delivery mechanisms. This created systematic institutional hollowing: the more aid was delivered through parallel systems, the weaker Afghan state institutions became, the more donors preferred parallel systems, and the weaker institutions became as a result. SIGAR's reports document the distortion: ministries expanded on paper, formal indicators improved, planning documents multiplied, whilst the state's practical reach and citizen confidence declined in parallel. Corruption was the rational adaptation to this incentive environment, not a cultural anomaly. Afghanistan ranked at or near the bottom of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index throughout the intervention period⁸ because the post-2001 political economy systematically rewarded rent-seeking and punished the accumulation of autonomous institutional capacity.

The 2010 collapse of Kabul Bank supplies the clearest illustration of what this incentive structure actually produced. An independent investigation found that senior figures connected to the Karzai family and allied officials had extracted close to \$900 million, an amount equivalent to roughly 5 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, through fraudulent loans, shell companies, and fictitious employees, with hundreds of millions physically smuggled out of the country, in one documented case packed into airline food trays.

The bank's founder and chief executive each received five-year sentences. Almost none of the missing money was ever recovered, and no senior political figure faced prosecution. The case did not produce institutional reckoning. It produced a demonstration effect, showing every subsequent official exactly how much could be taken, and how little would happen in consequence.

The corruption this environment produced was never confined to Afghan actors. The Pentagon's Task Force for Business and Stability Operations spent nearly \$43 million constructing a single compressed natural gas station in Sheberghan, a facility SIGAR found should have cost no more than \$500,000 based on the price of equivalent stations built just across the border in Pakistan.² The Department of Defense was unable, or unwilling, to account for the difference. This was not an isolated case. SIGAR's own reporting repeatedly identified American contractors, no-bid awards, and poorly supervised task forces as a parallel channel through which reconstruction money disappeared, separate from and additional to the corruption of Afghan officials. The two problems were connected in a further respect: much of the Kabul Bank money that vanished did not simply disappear inside Afghanistan. It moved into Dubai real estate and international bank accounts, absorbed by financial systems in donor-aligned jurisdictions that asked remarkably few questions about where it had come from. An aid architecture that rewarded rent-seeking rewarded it on both ends of the transaction, and the international financial system that received the proceeds bears its own share of that failure.

The Legitimacy Deficit and Political Exclusion

What Legitimacy Requires and Why It Was Absent

Political legitimacy, the widespread citizen belief that the exercise of state power is valid and worthy of compliance, was never adequately cultivated by the Afghan Republic. The Asia Foundation's annual surveys documented the trajectory with precision: support for the direction of the country declined consistently from the late 2000s onward, satisfaction with government performance tracked downward, and fear of speaking freely about political matters increased. By the final surveys before the collapse, 73 percent of Afghans still preferred a strong national government but had largely ceased to believe the republic was capable of becoming one.

The republic's failure to construct a coherent institutional relationship with religious authority was a specific and consequential dimension of this deficit. Afghanistan is a deeply Islamic society in which religious authority is woven into community governance, dispute resolution, and political legitimacy.

The post-2001 republic affirmed Afghanistan as an Islamic republic constitutionally but never matched that language with a serious institutional architecture. It occupied an ambiguous middle position: sufficiently Islamic in formal language to claim cultural continuity, but insufficiently embedded in the institutional politics of religious legitimacy to command authority through religious channels. Historical precedent demonstrates this was not inevitable. Abdur Rahman Khan's nineteenth-century consolidation achieved precisely the integration the republic avoided, co-opting the ulema as institutional partners of the state and securing religious endorsement of central authority.¹¹ The post-2001 republic had access to this lesson. It chose not to apply it.

What filled the vacuum the republic left was not simply an absence of governance. In the districts where state authority was weakest, the Taliban had spent years building a functioning alternative: mobile courts applying a consistent, if harsh, body of law; tax collection on trade, agriculture, and the opium economy that was often more predictable than the government's own; and dispute resolution that, however rough, rural Afghans frequently experienced as faster and less corrupt than the formal judiciary.¹² This was not merely propaganda. It was a parallel state, built patiently while the republic's own institutions were treated as a foreign-funded project to be managed rather than a system to be trusted. By 2021, many Afghans in contested areas had already spent years living, in practice, under Taliban authority. Kabul's fall did not introduce a new system so much as formalise one that had already displaced the republic in large parts of the country.

International programmes that created parallel local governance structures compounded the problem. When donor-created bodies delivered resources and mediated disputes outside the formal chain of state authority, citizens learned to navigate programmes rather than institutions. The state appeared administratively present whilst remaining politically absent.

Electoral Failure and the Absent Social Contract

Afghan elections were characterised throughout the intervention period by pervasive fraud, administrative dysfunction, ethnic polarisation, and declining participation.¹³ Each contested election produced not a legitimate government but a negotiated outcome brokered by international actors, simultaneously confirming the republic's dependence on external validation and demonstrating its incapacity to resolve political competition through its own institutions.

Ethnic communities were represented in the formal structures of government, but representation without accountability is not inclusion. Pashtun communities in the south and east largely experienced the republic as a Kabul-centred project that did not represent their interests. Hazara communities, despite having strong

reasons to fear Taliban rule, saw their support for the republic eroded by its repeated failures to deliver justice and equitable governance. The absence of a genuine social contract produced the outcome visible in August 2021: when the moment of crisis arrived, ordinary citizens and security personnel alike perceived limited rational incentive to risk their lives defending a state that had given them limited reason to believe in it.

The legitimacy deficit had a further dimension that formal representation statistics obscure: women's exclusion from the substantive exercise of power. Constitutional quotas guaranteed women a share of parliamentary seats, and women held cabinet, judicial, and diplomatic posts unavailable under the Taliban. But quota-holding is not the same as access to the informal networks, patronage relationships, and security-sector authority through which the republic's real decisions were made. Women's political participation remained heavily dependent on continued international pressure and funding rather than durable domestic institutional guarantees, a dependency that mirrored the state's own fiscal dependency and left it similarly.

A Security Sector Built to Fail

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces represented the largest single investment of the reconstruction effort. By 2021, the United States alone had spent approximately \$88 billion on Afghan security sector development.¹⁴ The forces were large by regional standards. They were also, as SIGAR's 2022 assessment documented in forensic detail, structurally incapable of functioning without the external support on which they had been built to depend.¹⁵

The dependency was not accidental. It resulted from design choices made over two decades: building air assets that required contractor maintenance, developing command and control systems that required foreign advisors, establishing logistics chains that could not function without external coordination, and prioritising numerical size over institutional depth. These choices made sense for producing short-term operational capacity in support of foreign military objectives. They were incompatible with building an indigenous force capable of operating independently.

Pervasive corruption compounded the structural problem. The ghost soldier phenomenon, systematic inflation of personnel rosters to collect pay for non-existent soldiers, was documented repeatedly by SIGAR.¹⁶ Promotions were based on patronage rather than performance. The result was a force whose real operational strength was a fraction of its nominal strength, whose cohesion depended on foreign advisors rather than internal command structures, and whose personnel had limited incentive to fight for a government they did not trust.

The February 2020 Doha Agreement delivered the decisive signal. By excluding the Afghan government from negotiations over its own fate, it transmitted an unambiguous message to every actor whose cooperation the republic required: international commitment was conditional, time-limited, and ultimately subordinate to external strategic interests.¹⁷ For commanders calculating whether to fight or negotiate surrender, for governors assessing whether to hold or flee, the Doha Agreement resolved the uncertainty that had previously made continued support for the government a rational choice.

The mechanism by which that signal translated into actual collapse deserves to be stated plainly, because it was not primarily a military defeat. Beginning in May 2021, district after district passed to the Taliban not through combat but through negotiated capitulation: local elders and tribal intermediaries brokered surrenders, government officials and unit commanders were offered money and safe passage, and each handover became propaganda that made the next one easier to arrange.¹⁸ By early August, the pattern had reached the provincial level. The governor of Ghazni negotiated the surrender of the entire province and its capital before fleeing toward Kabul; comparable negotiated handovers unfolded within days of each other in Kunduz, Herat, and elsewhere. This was the proximate mechanism of an eleven-day collapse: not a republic overrun by superior Taliban firepower, but one whose own officials and commanders concluded, individually and in sequence, that resistance no longer served their interests, exactly the calculation the structural failures described throughout this brief made increasingly rational over two decades.

The Legitimacy Deficit and Political Exclusion

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence provided sustained strategic support to Taliban networks throughout the post-2001 period: sanctuary in Quetta and Peshawar, logistical and financial facilitation, political protection, and intelligence support.¹⁹ This was not a secret. It was documented repeatedly by US military commanders, intelligence assessments, and academic researchers, and was the subject of repeated diplomatic representations that were never effectively acted upon. Pakistan's strategic calculus was coherent from its own perspective: a weak or Taliban-governed Afghanistan served Pakistani strategic interests better than a strong Afghan state with close ties to India. The consequence for the Afghan Republic was that the insurgency it was fighting never had to win militarily. It simply had to survive, sustained by external support the Afghan government and its international backers were never willing to confront decisively.

Pakistani sanctuary explains why the insurgency could survive. It does not fully explain why the insurgency could fund itself indefinitely without depending on any single patron's continued goodwill. By the Taliban's own final pre-takeover fiscal year, independent estimates placed the movement's annual revenue at roughly \$1.6 billion, drawn from opium taxation, mineral extraction, customs collection in areas under its control, and donations from sympathetic networks across the Gulf, a diversified revenue base that made the insurgency financially self-sustaining regardless of what any single state chose to provide.²⁰ An insurgency that can fund itself does not need to win. It only needs the state opposing it to eventually run out of external support, which is precisely what happened.

That interference dynamic did not end with the republic's collapse; it has simply changed form. Russia became the first state to formally recognise the Taliban government, in July 2025, and in May 2026 signed a military-technical cooperation agreement with Kabul, the deepest security relationship any state has established with the Taliban since 2021.²¹ China, the UAE, Uzbekistan, Türkiye, and Pakistan have all upgraded relations to ambassadorial level without extending formal recognition, while no Western government has moved beyond limited technical engagement.²² The pattern the Republic-era evidence describes, external powers treating Afghanistan primarily as an arena for their own strategic competition rather than as a state whose institutional integrity matters in its own right, has outlasted the government it helped undermine.

The international coalition compounded this by operating across twenty years without a coherent, sustained strategic framework. The initial counter-terrorism objective was substantially achieved within the first year of intervention. What followed was two decades of oscillation between counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, and democratic institution-building without a clear theory of how these objectives related to each other or which took priority when they conflicted. The Obama surge was explicitly time-limited, a contradiction for a state-building project requiring sustained commitment. The Doha Agreement made the Taliban's return a matter of when rather than whether. Twenty years of engagement never resolved the fundamental question of what it was trying to build or whether it was willing to make the commitment that building it required.

Conclusion

The Afghan state's collapse in August 2021 was not the product of a single catastrophic decision, a uniquely corrupt leadership, or an unforeseeable turn of events. It was the predictable outcome of two decades of accumulated structural choices: a constitutional architecture that concentrated power without building legitimacy, a fiscal system that substituted external dependency for the domestic revenue relationships that make states accountable to their citizens, a security sector designed for foreign operational objectives rather than indigenous resilience, a political order that excluded the majority of Afghans from meaningful participation, and an international strategy that oscillated without coherence and committed without conviction.

A structural account of this kind invites an obvious rejoinder: didn't individual choices matter? President Ghani's departure from Kabul on 15 August, the specific negotiating conduct of Afghan officials in the republic's final weeks, and the decisions of individual commanders were each, in isolation, choices made by people, not by structures. This paper's position is not that agency was irrelevant, but that the range of choices available to Afghan leaders and officials by the summer of 2021 had already been narrowed to the point of near-inevitability by twenty years of the structural conditions described above. A president presiding over a fiscally sovereign state, a security force built for independent operation, and institutions commanding genuine legitimacy would have faced a materially different set of options than the one in fact inherited in 2021. Individual conduct explains the manner of the collapse; it does not explain why the range of available responses had narrowed so completely.

Nor was the collapse itself, once it began, a mysterious event. It proceeded through concrete, documented mechanisms: officials and commanders individually negotiating their own surrender once the structural incentives to resist had disappeared; an insurgency that had built its own courts, tax base, and independent financing long before it needed to fire a shot in Kabul; and an elite political economy in which the Kabul Bank theft had already shown, a decade earlier, that capture on the largest scale carried negligible consequence. The structural and the mechanistic accounts are not competing explanations. The mechanisms are what two decades of structural failure looked like in practice, once the moment came to act on them.

The broader analytical proposition the Afghan case supports is this: state failure is not primarily about the weakness of states. It is about the structural incentive systems that hollow states from within, systems that decouple elite power from citizen welfare, that reward rent-seeking over institutional capacity, that substitute the performance of sovereignty for its substance.

Conclusion II

The Afghan Republic exemplified each of these dynamics with unusual clarity and at extraordinary scale.

The honest reckoning the evidence demands implicates Afghan political elites who captured the aid system for personal enrichment, the international community for designing an assistance architecture that made such capture predictable and then continuing to fund it for two decades, regional actors whose strategic interference made the insurgency permanently viable, and strategic frameworks that prioritised short-term political optics over the long-horizon commitment genuine state formation requires.

Understanding these dynamics with precision is not merely an academic exercise. It is the analytical foundation upon which any future engagement with Afghanistan must be built.

Recommendations

Priority Area	Recommended Action
Constitutional Reform	Redesign governance architecture to reduce presidential overcentralisation, establish meaningful parliamentary oversight, and create accountable subnational governance structures with genuine fiscal and administrative autonomy.
Fiscal Sovereignty	Restructure international assistance to prioritise domestic revenue capacity. Link all disbursement to measurable progress in tax administration, customs reform, and domestic revenue generation. Target: domestic revenue above 15% of GDP within ten years.
Legitimacy Architecture	Establish formal institutional channels connecting central authority to religious, customary, and community governance structures. Constitute a National Ulema Council with formal advisory status and legally recognise provincial customary governance councils with defined jurisdictions.
Security Sector Redesign	Rebuild security institutions around indigenous operational capacity, local protection mandates, and political embedding rather than foreign operational requirements. DDR must be accompanied by constitutional power-sharing provisions that give former armed actors a genuine stake in the central state.
Electoral Architecture	Commission an independent review of electoral system design with a mandate to produce a framework capable of managing political competition without requiring international brokerage to resolve every contested outcome.
Anti-Corruption Enforcement	Establish binding asset-recovery and prosecution mechanisms with international enforcement teeth, so that large-scale capture carries genuine consequence rather than the demonstrated impunity of the Kabul Bank precedent.
Regional Engagement	Pursue a structured regional stability framework that directly addresses Pakistan's strategic incentives and accounts for Afghanistan's deepening security relationship with Russia, establishes verifiable commitments on cross-border sanctuary and logistical support, and creates multilateral accountability mechanisms for regional interference.
Donor Coordination	Establish a unified donor coordination mechanism with binding commitments on programming timelines, conditionality frameworks, and the elimination of parallel delivery systems that bypass Afghan state institutions.
Long-Horizon Commitment	Structure international engagement as a minimum twenty-five-year framework with five-year milestone reviews, funding commitments insulated from donor electoral cycles, and explicit phased sequencing of objectives.

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**The House crumbles on its foundations
explains what happened to
Afghanistan's republic. That is what
needs to be remembered.**

Contact

Email: communications@kabulinstitute.org

Website: www.kabulinstitute.org

Socials: @KabulInstitute