

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Afghanistan, One Year After the Fall

A defaced ad for a beauty salon — a result of the imposition of Taliban restrictions on depictions of women, in Kabul, Afghanistan.

By Victor J. Blue

Mr. Blue is a photojournalist.

Aug. 14, 2022

Mullah Naqibullah, a slim, young Taliban fighter, tossed his shawl over his shoulder and adjusted his rifle. He made his way from under a spreading mulberry tree onto the patio of a small mud-brick mosque in Sangesar, a small village in southern Kandahar Province in Afghanistan, and went inside.

He stood inches from a microphone wrapped in colorful cloth to keep the dust at bay, and in a falsetto he called the faithful to prayer.



Mullah Naqibullah leading the evening prayer at a mosque in Kandahar Province.



Mullah Muhammad Omar had preached in this mosque and taught in a madrasa nearby.

It was here that in 1994 Mullah Muhammad Omar founded the Taliban movement. The group went on to capture Kabul in September 1996 and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which instituted a narrow definition of Islamic jurisprudence that barred women and girls from working and attending school. Omar's decision to provide a safe haven for Al Qaeda eventually brought down his government after the Sept. 11 attacks. But the Taliban never went away.



Taliban officials gathered at a wedding hall in Kabul in May to commemorate the 2016 death of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour.

I first went to Afghanistan in 2009 to document the war. By then, the United States was in the thick of a brutal conflict against the Taliban, who had mounted a formidable insurgency to win back control of the country.

Besides the war, the United States was trying to assist in formation of a government in Kabul while the U.S. military was attempting to build an Afghan Army in its own image.



Hesco barriers at an abandoned U.S. Special Forces base in Nerkh in Wardak Province.

But for Afghans, this was just another chapter of foreign intervention in the country's long history of struggle, which has included colonialism, tribalism, monarchism, Communism and strict Islamic law. The Americans didn't realize how fragile the systems they created were until it all came crashing down.



Taliban fighters in front of blast walls decorated by graffiti left behind by American forces.

I went to Afghanistan in July 2021 to document the U.S. withdrawal. When things began to collapse around me, I stayed. On the morning of Aug. 15, I stood outside the U.S. Embassy and photographed U.S. Chinook helicopters scrambling to evacuate staff members. By that afternoon, I was photographing Taliban fighters as they entered the city.

Before that day, Taliban fighters seemed like ghosts. I seldom saw them, but I always felt their presence. It was surreal to watch them rolling through the blast walls erected to keep them out and congregating under the graffiti left behind by American troops.

In May, I returned to see how Afghanistan had fared under Taliban rule. Nine months after their stunning victory and takeover, they are still struggling to shift to a governing, political force.



A money changer awaiting customers in Kabul.



A female vendor pushing her vegetable cart in Kandahar City.

I found a country that continues to lack a functioning economy. Crowds of women wait outside bakeries for handouts. Men who once held office jobs must now sell vegetables at the market or peddle used goods to be able to buy a little bit of food to take home. Merchants have seen their customers dwindle as prices soar.



The Taliban government banned opium production this spring.



Children play on the ruins of Russian military equipment in a park in Ghazni City.



Taliban fighters question drivers at a checkpoint in Kandahar Province.



Taliban fighters walk through a damaged district center in Nerkh.



Women visit a cemetery for Al Qaeda fighters in Kandahar City.

In the countryside, where the fiercest fighting took place, Taliban fighters now haunt the former military installations of the U.S. occupation. They marvel at the luxuries their adversaries enjoyed while they spent years sleeping in the mountains, hiding from U.S. drones.



A car decorated with a souvenir license plate at a mechanic's shop in Lashkargah in Helmand Province.



A Taliban fighter looks out over wrecked military vehicles in a former U.S. military base in Ghazni City.

The Taliban are all too aware of the fragility of their control. They championed a brutal style of rule. The same struggle can easily be waged against them.



Mohammad Usman Hamasi, a Taliban fighter, recited a poem about his experience in jihad at a hilltop Taliban base in Kabul.

Mohammad Usman Hamasi is a Taliban commander from the Chak district in nearby Wardak Province. During the war he trained as a suicide bomber but was arrested before he could complete his mission. “I did not have a wife and children at that time. I wanted 100 percent to carry out such an attack, but God did not want me to become a martyr,” he said.

Mr. Hamasi told me he is frustrated by the leadership’s refusal to allow girls in school. “In fact, many mujahedeen are unhappy with the schools being closed,” he said. “I am here,” he explained, as he talked about his hope for the movement, “so that my sister or daughter can go to school and be educated in the framework of Islam, Shariah and hijab.”



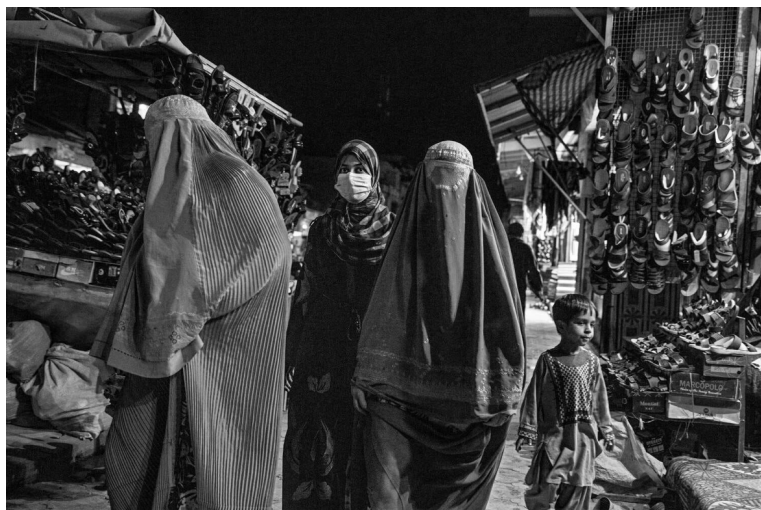
In southern Kandahar Province, Haji Malim Feda Mohammed is a mentor to the Taliban and one of their longest-serving commanders. Left out of the new circles of power, he has soured on the movement since its victory. “Since the emirate has come, I haven’t even drunk a glass of tea with them,” he said.

It is Afghan women who have been most victimized by the Taliban’s return to power. Despite the Taliban’s pledge to protect their rights, they have seen progress recede.



A billboard announcing Taliban female dress codes looms over an intersection in Kandahar City.

Ogai Amil, an educator, journalist and civil society activist, watched the country fall back to the Taliban from her small apartment. She hoped things would be different this time around. “People were thinking that maybe the Taliban had changed and their takeover would be easier, governance would get better, security could get better and the country would get peaceful,” she told me. By May, women were instructed to cover their faces in public and avoid leaving home.



Afghan women have bristled under the increasing curtailment of freedoms.



Ogai Amil, a women's advocate and former journalist in Kabul. “Instead of dying every day, it's better to die one day and, until then, raise our voices,” she said.

She told me that over the past year she has come to engage informally with many Taliban officials. “I tell them, ‘I am not your enemy, but I want you to stop all these restrictions,’” she said. “These are our human rights, which are given to us by God. Don’t take them from us.”



Basma, left, and Bahara Ahmadi, who have not been able to attend school since the Taliban takeover, have battled hopelessness and depression. Basma mostly slept the first two months. “I thought, ‘Why am I alive?’” she said.

Initially, the Taliban assured Afghans that girls of all ages would attend public schools when they reopened last September. But they have since gone back on that promise.

I met two sisters, Basma and Bahara Ahmadi, at their family home in a hillside neighborhood on the edge of Kabul. The uncertainty of the Taliban’s restrictions has shaken them.

Since they can no longer go to high school, they spend their days poring over English lessons in the same room that houses the loom where their family weaves carpets to make ends meet. They hope the ability to speak perfect English will be their ticket to scholarships that will allow them to study outside the country.



Children swim in what is left of the Arghandab River in Kandahar Province.

The rapid collapse of the government that the West built was a milestone in an ongoing, centuries-long struggle for self-determination thwarted by outside intervention. After more than a decade of reporting, I have come to understand that, as anathema as the Taliban are to many, for some they are an iteration of this process and not an aberration from it. Having lived under many regimes, many Afghans wonder how long this one will last.

It's impossible to know what the future will hold for the country, but the next chapter must be written by Afghans themselves.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: Afghanistan, One Year After the Fall