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Rebuilding Afghanistan to Reduce Food Insecurity

Over the past thirty years, various governments have taken their turn at Afghani leadership; the Soviet Union from 1980 through 1992, Mujahedeen from 1992 through 1997, and Taliban from 1997 through 2001. Each solely fixated its attention on short-term government prosperity at the expense of the populace; none focused on improving the lives of its citizens (“Afghanistan- Timeline”). As a result, the influence of democracy has but only touched Afghanistan. While the United States has begun the process of Afghani democratization, over seventy percent of Afghans still are in poverty, which stems directly from food insecurity (Acerra). In order for Afghans to attain food security, a drastic international change in the United States’ policy in Afghanistan must occur. The United States needs to make a clear long-term commitment to assist Afghanistan that focuses on poverty reduction and conflict resolution. If the United States does not aid in reorienting Afghanistan’s societal structure to include support for the most vulnerable sects of the population, thousands of innocent lives will be lost to food uncertainty. An American assistance arrangement that concentrates on rebuilding trust with the Afghani citizens coupled with funding support from the World Bank would best guarantee long term sustainability of democracy because Afghans would want to maintain this kind of government even after American troops are withdrawn.

Women and children are the most ill-treated and vulnerable groups of the population in Afghanistan. Frequent regime change has had the strongest influence on pushing women and children further and further towards the edge of society. They have been unjustly discriminated against in the various unstable political environments for the past fifty years; children, specifically, were caught in the midst of destruction and used as a tool to fight against foreign invaders. A primary issue for women and children, food insecurity, comes from the absence of democracy in Afghanistan. Previous governments over the past fifty years have used food as a tool to control the Afghani population. While women and children have been neglected in Afghanistan for hundreds of years, major troubles began in 1953 when Prime Minister Mohammed Daud turned to the Soviet Union for economic assistance, which led to the devastating Soviet-Afghani conflict two decades later; a harsh civil war between the communists and anti-communists lasted for twelve years (BBC News). In 1988, the Soviet Union was forced to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan due to American involvement, which provided the Mujahedeen with a perfect opportunity, in 1993, to seize Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul and take control of the country (BBC News). However, the decentralized and chaotic nature of the Mujahedeen government precluded any long Mujahedeen power. In 1996, a more centralized and organized group of individuals, the Taliban, quickly took control of Afghanistan (BBC News). The Taliban’s reign marked the apex of abuses against Afghanistan’s most vulnerable faction of the population; the Taliban restricted the right to earn a living, vote, express opinions, receive an education, and gain access to basic healthcare for women and children (Clements 112).

After September 11, 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan in order to halt terrorist activities in that region. American and British airstrikes tried to pressure the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden; however, the United States was unsuccessful in capturing bin Laden until 2011 (BBC News). Still, palpable change was seen on December 7, 2001, when the Taliban government finally crumbled (BBC News). A few days later, Abdul Ahad Karzai was sworn in as the leader of the new “democratic” government (BBC News). In 2004, the Afghanistan Grand Assembly drafted a new Constitution for Afghanistan Rights that, in theory, guarantees the rights of all Afghani citizens, which marked progress for Afghanistan (BBC News). However, palliative efforts from the United States– including restoring

women's right to work and to go out in public unaccompanied by a male – did not completely eliminate all prior tribulations. While many Americans would argue that the United States has been involved in Afghanistan for over a decade and it is foolhardy to continue there, remaining in Afghanistan is vital to its progress. No other nation or entity has the ability or resources to restructure Afghanistan so that democratic and humanitarian principles can be maintained.

Today, the typical patriarchal Afghani family is in desperate condition. Its income is around sixty U.S. dollars a month, and rising food prices mean that money stretches shorter and shorter every thirty days (Mulrine). Afghani families cannot afford to keep up with rising food prices because nearly eighty percent of their income is dedicated to food (Mojumdar). Manizha Naderi, the director of the only counseling center in Kabul, says, “food insecurity, in particular, takes a heavy psychological toll [on many Afghani families],” (Mulrine). Food insecurity stems from the lack of stability in Afghanistan. Constant conflict greatly contributes to rampant hunger and poverty for many families because in times of war, the government is focused on keeping control instead of improving the lives of its citizens by refusing to promote welfare, healthcare, or education. On average, these families, which consist of a husband, wife, unmarried daughters, and sons and their wives and children are not educated and have no access to healthcare, which makes getting a high paying job and preventative care incredibly difficult (Monsutti). The staple Afghani diet is made up of flat bread, yogurt, onions, dried fruits, and nuts (Monsutti). Most of these foods are imported and can be purchased at local markets (Monsutti). Once a stable environment is met in Afghanistan, food security for families will improve. The catalyst for change starts with America working to reduce conflict and create a lasting government.

At the start of the War on Terror, “the Bush administration deployed 8,000 troops to Afghanistan in 2002, with orders to hunt Taliban and al Qaeda members and not to engage in peacekeeping or reconstruction” (Rohde 47-48). Bush's decision made the United States' job as terrorism exterminator extremely difficult. If America's sole aim in stabilizing Afghanistan is to physically eliminate terrorists, the United States will likely remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. *New York Times* journalist and expert on international affairs, David Rohde, interviewed former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who argues, “all other reform efforts would fail in Afghanistan if adequate security was not established” (Rohde 46). The United States has failed to stabilize Afghanistan effectively even a decade after its first deployment of troops because security, namely food security, has not been fully ensured. America entered Afghanistan promising stability and equality and never followed through. As a result, many Afghans are deeply disappointed with the United States for failing to meet its initial promises of reconstructing the country (Rohde 34). Consequentially, “winning the hearts and minds” of the citizens of Afghanistan is becoming progressively more difficult. According to Stephen Zunes, political science professor at the University of San Francisco, the United States claims to promote human rights while simultaneously pursuing dominating policies such as involving itself in Libya, which upsets many Middle Eastern countries (Zunes). This stereotype of the United States must change in order for the United States to improve Afghanistan, or else few Afghans will support the United States. For the United States to maintain its legitimacy in upholding human rights, it must make a clear long-term commitment to the establishment of security in Afghanistan.

The counter-insurgency mission former Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan Stanley A. McChrystal began in 2009 outlined the efforts American troops need to make to “win” in Afghanistan and focuses on both building popular support guided by democratic principles in addition to eradicating terrorists (Boone). The counter-insurgency, or COIN, mission must be altered to focus on guaranteeing security for all Afghani civilians. COIN troops would need to work both on rebuilding the Afghani government so that it is able to satisfy the needs of its people and creating job opportunities in agricultural fields for Afghans. Security cannot be achieved overnight but can most likely be attained over several years. This security is vital to making sure the Taliban does not regain power. Were Afghanistan to revert back to Taliban rule, many facets of the Afghani population would again lose fundamental rights, and

poverty would be more prevalent. Moreover, once basic security has been established, food security will easily follow, as more resources are available to be allocated towards growth, production, and distribution of food.

High poverty rates, stemming from food insecurity, reduce a nation's ability to improve all sectors of life, ranging from national security to the economy. An American journalist visiting Afghanistan in the late 1990s- during Taliban rule commented, "beggar women and children would wait outside the windows of restaurants, crowding against the glass and drumming on it desperately" (The Taliban's War on Women). Poor Afghans realized that since the government refused to address their adversity, the only way they would get food was to accept donations. They would wait for days in front of shops praying and begging that someone would spare a scrap of bread. Over 250,000 children died each year under the Taliban from malnutrition alone (Mahmood). Women and children have no alternative to charity because they were not legally allowed to work or earn an income of their own. Children who either lost their parents or whose parents could not afford to keep them any longer were forced into underfunded, impoverished orphanages (Mackenzie). Children imprisoned in these miserable establishments were often "beaten, starved and abused by the militia"(Mackenzie). The Taliban saw young children as replaceable instruments through which they could maintain their strict dominance, so they were withholding a basic human right to food to maintain power.

Today, seventy percent of Afghans live in extreme poverty; American efforts to reduce poverty in Afghanistan have been incredibly weak, and little evidence of progress outside of building schools and hospitals can be cited (Accera). Moving from a terrorist-exterminating focus prevalent under the Bush administration to one that focuses on agriculture would improve food quality to fight high malnutrition rates and decrease food prices but would also create a climate for food security. One solution to these problems is to provide subsidies for farmers to produce a crop that was prevalent before the Soviet invasion, cotton (Accera). Cotton is a major cash crop that would create substantial revenue for farmers as it has been proven to grow well in Afghanistan. Former senior manager of one of the USAID agriculture projects, Charles Grader, argues that in order for cotton to be an economically beneficial product, "USAID or the Afghan government would have to provide a subsidy to the farmers, in much the same way the U.S. government aids domestic cotton producers" (Accera). Subsidies would give farmers a competitive incentive to grow cotton rather than opium, one of the only crops currently grown in Afghanistan. Other products that would be lucrative in Afghanistan include pomegranates, almonds, pistachios, and raisins (Accera). Resources would be made cheaper and more available for Afghani citizens if Afghanistan did not have to rely on imports to feed its citizens. Additionally, the Afghani government needs to inspect all of its farmers' and shop owners' food supplies to make sure that the Afghans are eating safe food. Even if agricultural production increases, if food is not safe, many Afghans, especially women and children, will remain in a destitute position for years.

Aside from poverty alone, many Afghani women face hardships in society today because of their gender. Despite human-rights-related progress made by the United States and various international organizations to aid women in their fight for equality in Afghanistan, these efforts are not sufficient. The Constitution drafted in 2004, which guarantees women's rights, has been largely ignored by the Karzai regime. In 2009, President Karzai "signed a law specifically for the country's minority Shia community, permitting rape within marriage and giving husbands authority to forbid their wives from leaving the home" ("The Nation"). Karzai's actions prove that while the United States is trying to promote democracy in Afghanistan, much work needs to be done. Women need opportunities to thrive. The United States, with the help of other international organizations such as NATO and the UN, needs to find ways to reach out and work with the people of Afghanistan so they will support democracy. Democracy in Afghanistan will, in the long term, provide women and children especially, with the means to improve their current state of deficiency. Further, countries that have democracies also have welfare programs. If Afghanistan were to

adopt welfare programs comparable to those in the United States, even twenty years from now, the number of people who do not have access to food would surely reduce. Now is the key time to begin this process.

Women make up roughly half the Afghani population, yet most do not work because of societal pressures. Women should be given opportunities to work so women can alter this mindset. Although the plan was never carried out, various agricultural experts proposed that USAID should employ women from dozens of villages and provide the resources and training for them to raise chickens to produce about forty-five million eggs each year, which would not only give women easier access to nutritious foods because they are producing them, but it would also provide a stable income for many women (Chandrasekaran). Additionally, employing women in jobs like this would decrease Afghanistan's economic reliance on Pakistan and Iran as well as help wean Afghanistan from its dependence on the United States, giving Afghanistan a chance to become independent and better able to advance its society (Chandrasekaran). Once Afghanistan is both independent and built on a foundation of democratic principles, it will be able to sustain the needs of its people.

It has been proven in many other instances that when women contribute to policy-making, the major needs of the population are met (Jones). First Lady Michelle Obama has worked to improve American children's health and reduce obesity rates for children with her "Let's Move" campaign. Suffragettes and feminists of the early 1900s did not work exclusively for women's rights; they also lobbied and protested to help save children from horrible work conditions. A United Nations Security Council study proves that "women who are included [in government] commonly advocate for interests that coincide perfectly with those of civil society" (Jones). The United States needs to provide women with the resources to help Afghanistan climb out of its undeveloped world status. By establishing a true democracy in Afghanistan, women have the power to improve all sectors of Afghanistan, especially food security. Considering food makes up the majority of what the average Afghan's income goes towards, women involved in government would likely want to find ways to reduce poverty and make access to food cheaper and more available.

Aside from involving women in government, a key step in building a lasting foundation for a democratic Afghanistan is involving the population in all levels of government through transparency in public institutions. South Africa's practice of imbizo, where all levels of government participate in reconstruction and development efforts directly with the people, makes the people more aware of what the government is doing, more inclined to participate in reconstruction, and more motivated to support the government's policies ("History"). Were the United States to regularly find ways to engage with the both the government and population of Afghanistan, the number of people who support American efforts would likely increase substantially. The United States needs to convey to the people of Afghanistan that its efforts to improve their access to food require their help and motivation. The United States must function as an external stimulus to bring Afghans together to improve the country, starting with getting access to the most vital necessity for all citizens, food. South Africa was successful because of its ability to pull together the population as a whole. The United States needs to model its efforts with how South Africa was able to mobilize its own people. While this will be difficult, the long-term payoff outweighs any initial hardships.

The 2001 overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan was a landmark event that began the country's transition away from an authoritative influence to an optimistic one. Sufficient progress for the most vulnerable demographics, however, is in its incipient stages. The narrow-minded militaristic approach to "winning" in Afghanistan by simply eradicating terrorists and abandoning civilians is not enough. Stability in Afghanistan cannot be achieved unless the United States is willing to support efforts to rebuild the country through an improved COIN mission that concentrates its efforts on establishing food

security for all segments of the population and rebuilding Afghanistan. In other words, the US has been constructing a bridge in Afghanistan for ten years. This bridge signifies a relationship between the two countries. If left unfinished, the Afghani people will never be able to cross into a state of economic and political viability. Additional funding for this should come from the World Bank for specific agricultural projects. Without equality across all facets of the population, Afghanistan will remain vulnerable to the same forces that brought it to its current state of decrepitude. An improved COIN mission would “drive a wedge between insurgents and the population by affording the people protection, securing them from coercion, and providing proper governance and services” (Danly). If the United States obligates itself to a longer-term commitment in Afghanistan instead of merely reducing military presence in the immediate future, the United States would be able not only to assuage the rising fear of Taliban takeover, but also improve American credibility in Afghanistan that is critical to ensuring Afghani security. Continued support and involvement in Afghanistan is necessary to ensure human rights are maintained on the premise of democratic ideology.

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