

## II. National Construction in Afghanistan

# Kabul's Policies vs. Corruption, Terror, and Internal Violence Are Paying Off

by Pino Arlacchi

*The following article is reprinted, with the author's permission, from the Italian daily, Il Fatto Quotidiano. EIR has translated it from the Italian and added subheads.*

Nov. 26—As if on an obligatory deadline of fate, here I am again in Afghanistan. Thirteen years since my last visit and a quarter of a century since my first.

And here I am, in Kabul, again confronting the Taliban once again victorious, fresh from an unprecedented triumph against the greatest military power on the planet. Winning certainly, but not fulfilled, because they are now forced to govern under the crushing burden of giving a future to a devastated country.

In August two years ago, Biden's last troops fled Kabul without restraint after 22 years of occupation and extreme misrule of the country. Abandoning to their fate 40 million human beings they had pledged to prosper, educate, democratize, and integrate into the Western sphere.

The Americans left Afghanistan not only worse off than when they had invaded, but they fled by shutting off the spigots of international assistance on which more than half the population was living.

The U.S. withdrawal was a catastrophe. The country's GDP contracted by 20%, the economy shrank and living standards plunged. Afghanistan was already one of the poorest countries in the world, but during 2021–2022 it really came to the threshold of absolute famine, to death by starvation. That threshold was not crossed, thanks to the incredible survivability of this



Schiller Institute/Stephan Ossenkopp

*The author (center) in discussion with other Ibn Sina Conference participants, including prominent Afghan businessman Fareed Ahmed Alokozay (far left), and Daud Azimi (on Alokozay's left), co-founder and co-leader of the Ibn Sina Research and Development Center. Kabul, Afghanistan, Nov. 8, 2023.*

people grown like a medicinal plant within a long history of wars and disasters of all kinds. A plant nurtured by an utterly unique national pride, capable of making Afghans endure levels of suffering and hardship that elsewhere have crushed ethnicities, states, and nations. And which has enabled them to defeat in the field all the great powers that have tried to put them under. Afghanistan has been the grave of empires.

### Women in Afghanistan

This sense of national dignity has affected everyone who has dealt with Afghans. It is their strategic asset, the positive implication of which can be seen in Kabul today. In the streets, in the people, in the markets, in public places, and in private meetings, I have seen in full deployment a resourcefulness, an energy, and a desire for the future that is capable of creating a new Afghanistan in just a few years.

This force is overwhelming, and it is the Afghan women who interpret it best. I saw women everywhere. The streets, the stores, the markets of Kabul are overflowing with women selling, buying, arguing with each other and with men, walking determinedly down the street, without the shyness of yesteryear. Veiled, yes, as in other Islamic countries, but without burkas. I saw only two burkas in my days there, and many participants at the international conference I attended were women.

The conference was organized by the German Schiller Institute, and its Afghan projection named after the great physician and philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sina). I conversed on the fringes of the proceedings with many women, and took selfies with female leaders of drug rehabilitation centers and social initiative groups of the most diverse variety.

I met Taliban leaders with female counselors and assistants, who spoke in good English and had no qualms about disapproving of laws against higher female education enacted by their own government.



Jawad Nikzad

*The women's seating section in the meeting hall of the Intercontinental Hotel at the Ibn Sina Conference, Kabul, Nov. 6, 2023.*

This is one of the things that impressed me most—positively, in the sense that I was able to see how the anti-women regulations are deplored by almost the entire Afghan population, males and Taliban rulers included. And negatively, because I learned that these are edicts borne out of the government and imposed on everyone by a cabal of four ultra-influential religious holy men based in Kandahar (the Vatican of the Afghan Sunnis) that no one—not even the most prestigious military leaders placed at the top of the Emirate—feels like challenging. For the time being.

But how long can this moment last? It would be too simple to infer that if the blockade against women's rights stands in Kandahar it will be the very vibrations of Afghan civil society that will get it out of the way. Sort of like Italy did with abortion and divorce within a few years.

I found many of my interlocutors—Taliban and non-Taliban—confident of an abolition of the measures against secondary



Ibn Sina R&D Center

*A combined workshop on Industry and Labor, and Credit and Banking. Ibn Sina Conference, Kabul, Nov. 7, 2023.*

female education within one or at most two years. I am not so optimistic. The growth of Afghan civil society is not a stand-alone, but depends on the dynamics of political society. There will be nothing automatic, therefore. The fundamental rights game remains in the hands of Kabul's rulers, as does the country's future.

### **Taliban Governance and Macroeconomic Progress**

From my interviews, I could see positive developments in three areas: internal security, the fight against corruption, and the elimination of opium crops. In these areas, the government is moving forward with clear ideas and tangible results that have gone beyond expectations. Internal security is unprecedented, and is the basis of the consensus enjoyed by the Taliban. Even before the victory, they had already put back into operation, in areas under their control, a network of highly effective and uncorrupted Islamic courts capable of ensuring safe transportation and movement of citizens, including those of women previously at risk of rape and violence.

After the withdrawal of NATO forces, the Taliban declared a general amnesty for former political and military adversaries while avoiding mass purges. The previous administrative structure has remained as it was, but purged of corruption, and its employees are paid regularly. In Kabul and other cities, barriers that separated neighborhoods controlled by warlords have been dismantled, and it is now possible to move freely everywhere.

In terms of counterterrorism, the near destruction of the Afghan version of ISIS and what was left of Al Qaeda has raised the Taliban's profile with neighboring countries and with the Americans themselves, increasing the chances of their diplomatic recognition. In the domain of anti-corruption, the cleansing of the public apparatus was radical, leading to a sharp increase in tax revenues and the impact of public spending that alleviated the collapse of foreign revenues.

Anti-corruption has enabled the Taliban to build a budget based on domestic resources alone for the first time, and state revenues have reached an unprecedented \$100 million per month. The Emirate's budget is about \$8 billion, and it may seem small in comparison to that of previous executives based on foreign aid, but during



FAO/Hashim Azizi

*A field of wheat grown from certified seeds being harvested near Barmazid village, Balkh province, Afghanistan, May 30, 2022.*

my 2010 stay as a European Parliament rapporteur on the Afghanistan strategy, I had calculated that only 10% of the international funds allocated to the country reached the Afghan population.

But the event that most surprised the international public was the repetition this year of the ban on opium poppy cultivation established by the first Taliban government under United Nations pressure and enforced in 2001, with the related near-zeroing of production of the drug destined for the rich markets of Europe and Russia. I have returned for this reason, at the invitation of the new Taliban, who intend to make use of my experience in this matter.

Apart from the narcotics issue, policies against corruption, terrorism, and internal violence are paying off. Over the course of this year, inflation has gone to zero, the currency has greatly appreciated, employment and GDP have grown, and exports have reached an all-time high of \$1.7 billion. According to the latest UNAMA (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) report, the Taliban have managed to maintain broad macroeconomic progress and are banking on a growth strategy centered on self-reliance.

The country's terrifying poverty is also decreasing. According to World Food Program data, the proportion of the population in food emergency (hunger) has more than halved from October 2022 to October 2023, from 6 million to 2.8 million. Food insecurity affects 15.3 million Afghans today, compared to 18.9 a year ago.