[**Ironies of a war of revenge**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642521/ironies-of-a-war-of-revenge)

[Zahid Hussain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/966/zahid-hussain)Published August 25, 2021

The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan’s Shadow.

AMONG the many ironies of the US war in Afghanistan was the instance when Hamid Karzai in December 2001 came very close to an agreement that provided for the Afghan Taliban to surrender and would have allowed Mullah Omar to “live in dignity”. Karzai, who was launched in Afghanistan by the CIA, was operating clandestinely in Kandahar and had just been nominated as interim president.

A deal with the Taliban leadership would have ended the war much quicker and could possibly even have brought reconcilable elements of the Taliban into the new power arrangement. But that never happened. As the negotiations reached the final stages, the US intervened and stopped Karzai from making any deal with the Taliban leadership. The Bush administration rejected any negotiated end of the situation. That led to America fighting its longest war.

In an ironical twist of fate 20 years later, the Taliban are [engaged in negotiations](https://www.dawn.com/news/1641495/taliban-open-talks-to-form-inclusive-govt) with Karzai from a position of power after triumphantly returning to Kabul. The Islamic movement is now seeking the former president’s support for the new rule. More interestingly, the main negotiator from the Taliban side is Anas Haqqani, one of the leaders of the notorious Haqqani network, the most feared of the insurgent factions, which is still on the US list of terrorist groups.

The younger brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy chief of the Taliban, he spent several years in a death cell before being [released two years ago](https://www.dawn.com/news/1517623) when Americans were desperately seeking an exit from the ‘forever war’. He was a member of the [Taliban team negotiating](https://www.dawn.com/news/1578613) with the Afghan government in Doha. That also saw the rise on the Taliban leadership ladder of the 26-year-old scion of the late Jalaluddin Haqqani.

The war was already lost when the US sat across the table with the same insurgents it had sought to annihilate.

A former mujahideen commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani had strong ties with the CIA and ISI during the anti-Soviet war in the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan had declared him a ‘freedom fighter’. Just before the invasion of Afghanistan, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the Taliban forces. Its links with Al Qaeda, and its influence on both sides of the Durand Line made the network the most formidable militant force. Given the influence of the Haqqanis in the region, the US wanted to weave the group out of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Jalaluddin rejected the US offer to cooperate.

But the CIA continued its efforts to prise the group away from the Taliban. In late 2002, US soldiers arrested Ibrahim Haqqani, a brother of Jalaluddin, in eastern Afghanistan on a tip-off by rival tribesmen, pre-empting the CIA’s efforts to establish contact with the Haqqani network.

There was some indication at the time that the Haqqanis had shown some willingness to negotiate with Afghan president Hamid Karzai’s new coalition government in 2002. However, the capture of a key member of the group ended the possibility of any reconciliation with the Haqqani group that would haunt the US forces for the next two decades. The group turned into its most fierce opponent.

Sirajuddin Haqqani effectively took over the command of the network as his father was sidelined because of prolonged illness. The younger Haqqani earned a reputation of being the fiercest insurgent commander. His radical worldview was shaped by his personal ties with Al Qaeda and international jihadist groups, in contrast to the other members of the Taliban leadership council who did not share Al Qaeda’s global agenda.

The Haqqanis turned North Waziristan into their base that became a major cause of tension between Washington and Islamabad. Former US top military commander Admiral Mullen once described the Haqqani network as the “veritable arm of the ISI”. The network was blamed for some of the most lethal attacks in Kabul targeting foreign missions. The Americans put a $10 million bounty on Sirajuddin’s head. In 2018, the network was put on the terrorist list.

But in yet another twist of fate, Sirajuddin, who was then appointed deputy emir of the Taliban, played an important role in the peace talks with the United States in Doha. Just before the February 2020 Doha agreement that paved the exit of the American forces from Afghanistan *The New York Times* published an [op-ed](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html) piece by Sirajuddin.

**Read:** [*Who are the Haqqanis, Afghanistan's most feared insurgents?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1385656)

Enlisted by the United States as one of the most wanted terrorists, the Taliban deputy chief appeared extremely rational in that well-crafted write-up in America’s most respected newspaper. He said all the right things that they wanted to hear. He seemed to favour giving women full rights including the right to work and access to education. He also wanted the US to contribute to Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

Still under a UN travel sanction Sirajuddin may not have surfaced in Kabul as yet, but the high profile of the Haqqani network in the new dispensation cannot be missed. Besides Anas, his uncle Khalilur Rehman Haqqani has also been very active in the negotiations with other Afghan leaders.

Successive US administrations rejected any negotiated political settlement with the insurgents and believed that the war could be won militarily until a few years ago when Washington engaged in structured peace talks with the Taliban leadership in Doha.

It was the time when America was at its weakest, losing control of large swaths of Afghanistan. The war was already lost when the US sat across the negotiating table with the same insurgent leaders who it had sought to annihilate. Some of the Taliban delegates were former inmates of the infamous Guantanamo prison.

The 2020 Doha agreement was described as a document of surrender by many observers. It was obvious that America was in a hurry to exit a war that it could never have won despite its military might. The American exit from Afghanistan has probably been more chaotic than its leaving Vietnam.

One wonders whether the war, which was driven by revenge, could have taken any other course. Yet the conflict has left Afghanistan in a far greater mess. The human cost of the war has been massive. But this is how imperial wars are fought. Zalmay Khalilzad’s remark after the signing of the Doha agreement is very profound: “We must remember the lessons of history, and the darkness of conflict.”

*The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan’s Shadow.*

[**zhussain100@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:zhussain100@yahoo.com)

**Twitter:** [**@hidhussain**](https://twitter.com/hidhussain)

*Published in Dawn, August 25th, 2021*