



AFGHANISTAN

**RECONSTRUCTION: NEW ZEALAND
IN AFGHANISTAN 2001-2021**

Reconstruction: New Zealand in Afghanistan 2001-2021

This booklet will examine the idea of nationhood and how this informed Western approaches to reconstruction in Afghanistan. In particular, it will examine the mission and activities of the New Zealand Defence Force's Provincial Reconstruction Team as they worked to improve security in Bamyan Province through military and civilian development initiatives, and how local factors affected the PRT's ability to successfully complete these initiatives.

This booklet will discuss the following topics:

- To Make a Nation: Afghan history and national identity
- The War on Terror
- New Zealand, Conflict and ISAF
- NZDF Provincial Reconstruction Team
- An Unsteady Situation
- Transition and Turmoil
- Operation Kōkako: New Zealand returns to Afghanistan
- Afghanistan: Lessons and Legacies



Left: *The Char-Chatta Bazaar in Kabul* as painted by Abdul Ghafoor Breshna, a prominent Afghan artist. **Right:** Breshna's depiction of the coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani, "father of the Afghan nation."

To Make a Nation: Afghan history and identity

Afghanistan is a land steeped in history, culture, and conflict. Its position astride the strategically important trade routes and roads that pass through the valleys of the Hindu Kush has made it the target of neighbouring empires and great powers. As a consequence, there have been few periods in history when an independent Afghan state has been able to rise and define its borders.

Afghanistan as we know it today was born from the efforts of Ahmad Shah Durrani, who proclaimed Afghan sovereignty after the death of his overlord, the legendary Iranian warrior-emperor Nader Shah. The Durrani Empire led raids into India and forced the once-powerful Mughal Empire (in what is now India and Pakistan) to recognise him as rightful ruler of Afghanistan. Today, Ahmad Shah Durrani is considered the "father of the Afghan nation."

But what is a nation? Today, we tend to use the terms 'nation', 'country' and 'state' interchangeably. As geo-political terms, they have different and often overlapping meanings. In theory, a *country* is a politically significant territory distinct from other territories, a *state* is the political body in charge of a country, and a *nation* is the collective identity of people who share common tradition, ethnicity, language and/or territory. The country of Afghanistan has been recognised since the formation of the Durrani Empire and its borders have appeared on maps for at least two centuries. The state of Afghanistan has taken many forms: first a monarchy, then a Marxist-Leninist one-party state, a republic, a religious Emirate, then most recently another republic (until the return of the Emirate with the Taliban in 2021).

The country and state of Afghanistan, however, is home to many ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages and practicing different schools of Islamic religion. Traditional rivalries and feuds between (and within) these groups continue to inflame divisions across Afghanistan. Going by this definition, there has never been an Afghan nation within the state of Afghanistan, and indeed throughout history to the

present day it has been difficult for central authorities to command the loyalty of everyone within its borders.

Attempts to unite the Afghan peoples have often been under the banner of one particular ethnicity, tradition or religion. Khushal Khan Kattak (1613-1689), a tribal chief (and famed poet), endeavoured to rally the Pashtun peoples toward independence from Iran. The Marxist-Leninist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan tried to rapidly Westernise the country in the 1970s and 80s, sparking a bloody civil war as a result of their disregard for popular social customs and religion. And most recently, the Taliban sought to impose a fundamentalist Islamic identity and Pashtun traditions over their Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban

The Taliban have been a major political, military and religious force in Afghanistan from 1994 to the present day. After Afghanistan's communist republic was overthrown, a group of religious students (*tālibān* being the Pashto word for "students") led by Mullah Mohammed Omar believed that their country had fallen into corruption and immorality. This movement quickly militarised with aid from Pakistan and, a mere two months after their formation, armed Taliban insurgents captured the city of Kandahar. By September 1996 the Taliban had conquered large portions of Afghanistan and established the Emirate of Afghanistan.

Supporting Links

Dalrymple, W. *Return of a King: the Battle for Afghanistan*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

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Images:

The Char-Chatta Bazaar of Kabul, Abdul Ghafoor Breshna, 1932. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Char-Chatta_Bazaar_of_Kabul.jpg, Public domain, via Wikipedia Commons.

The Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 (detail), Abdul Ghafoor Breshna, circa 1943. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coronation_of_Ahmad_Shah_Durrani_in_1747_by_Breshna.jpg, Public domain, via Wikipedia Commons.

The War on Terror

On 7 October 2001, the United States of America began a bombing campaign against the Emirate of Afghanistan, which was controlled by the Taliban. Eleven days later, British and American special forces were inserted into the country. Operation *Enduring Freedom* had begun, and with it the first stages of what would become a twenty-year battle between an American-led alliance called the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF, sometimes also referred to as the Coalition) and the Taliban.



US AH-1W "Super Cobra" attack helicopters take off on a mission into Afghanistan

But why Afghanistan? International law requires states to meet one of three criteria before they can go to war: either they are defending themselves, defending an ally, or the United Nations has voted to approve a war. The US had just been hit by a devastating terrorist attack of September 11 2001 (commonly referred to as 9/11), and they believed that the Taliban were sheltering the Al-Qaeda masterminds behind it. As such, they justified an invasion of Afghanistan as a vital part of self-defence and retaliation against threats of future Al-Qaeda attacks.

Within two months, the US alliance had toppled the Taliban government and driven Al-Qaeda across the border to Pakistan. They had been supported in this campaign by the Afghan Northern Alliance, which had been battling the Taliban for the past five years. With the Northern Alliance now forming a national government, many at the time believed that this marked the end of the Taliban as an effective organisation.



US Soldiers wait for helicopter transportation

Supporting Links

Image:

AH-1W "Super Cobra" helicopters launch from the flight deck of USS Peleliu, Lance Corporal Matthew J. Decker, 13 October, 2001. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:011013-M-9933D-009_Cobra_Helicopter_Operations.jpg, Public domain, via Wikipedia Commons.

Inbound Choppers in Afghanistan, Specialist Mary L. Gonzalez, 10 November, 2008.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Inbound_Choppers_in_Afghanistan_2008.jpg,
Public domain, via Wikipedia Commons.

New Zealand, Conflict, and ISAF

New Zealand's historical alliances and enduring close ties with ISAF nations made it likely from the outset that NZDF personnel would be sent to support the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

On 21 September 2001, Prime Minister Helen Clark announced that New Zealand intended to send troops to Afghanistan. As New Zealand is a parliamentary democracy, this decision was sent to a vote on 3 October in which all political parties were able to argue for or against the motion to offer

...New Zealand Special Air Service troops and other assistance as part of the response of the United States and international coalition to the terrorist attacks that were carried out on 11 September 2001 in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania...

This motion was passed 112-7. At the time, a poll estimated that 67% of New Zealanders supported military action in Afghanistan.

In September 2001 the NZDF already had around 800 personnel deployed on operations worldwide, so limiting our initial contribution to SAS soldiers would allow us to maintain these other missions with regular force troops. Furthermore, the SAS were trained to conduct long-term operations in the field, and had a reputation as highly skilled, effective soldiers. If, as the US stated, the objective was to hunt down Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, sending the SAS was the logical choice for New Zealand to make.

The first New Zealand special forces officially entered Afghanistan on 9 December 2001, and were expected to be deployed for 12 months. Further SAS contingents were sent in 2004 and 2005 (for six months each), and then from 2009 until 2012. Lance Corporal Willie Apiata won the Victoria Cross for bravery in 2004 after risking his life to rescue a wounded comrade. He became New Zealand's first Victoria Cross recipient since 1943.

Opposition to war

New Zealand's involvement in Afghanistan was not without opposition. During Parliament's debate on 3 October, Green Party leader Keith Locke cautioned against New Zealand soldiers being used as part of an impulsive "major assault on Afghanistan" without exploring other ways of tracking down and capturing the masterminds behind 9/11. Afghanistan was already an unstable country, ravaged by constant conflict since the Saur Revolution of 1978, and a military intervention would inevitably bring more misery and destruction. Later, in 2009, questions were raised in Parliament about whether it was still appropriate for New Zealanders to be deployed to Afghanistan if Al-Qaeda had been driven elsewhere. Furthermore, some MPs were concerned that our mission was helping to support an Afghan government that did not share our view of morality and justice.

Supporting Links

“Chapter 2 - The deployment of the NZSAS to Afghanistan: political and constitutional dimensions.” *Inquiry into Operation Burham*, New Zealand Government. 20 August, 2020. <https://operationburnham.inquiry.govt.nz/inquiry-report/chapter-2>

“Urgent Debates — SAS—Deployment to Afghanistan.” *Hansard*, Vol. 656, p.5597. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/hansard-debates/rhr/document/49HansD_20090818_00000720/urgent-debates-sas-deployment-to-afghanistan

NZDF Provincial Reconstruction Team



Left: NZPRT personnel in Bamyan, 2009. **Right:** the ISAF insignia

The NZDF's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was New Zealand's largest and most visible contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The PRT was formed in July 2003 as a 12-month mission involving approximately 100 NZDF personnel. Prior to this, New Zealand's main contribution to ISAF involved the deployment of SAS special forces for a period of 12 months.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams began as a US initiative in late 2002. The primary mission of PRTs throughout the Afghanistan intervention was to enhance local security by extending the authority of the Afghan government – i.e. to unify an ethnically and religiously fractured state by developing a strong, centralised Afghan military and police force. It was hoped in turn that this would create a sense of nationhood and convince locals to support the Afghan government instead of the Taliban and other militant groups. Over the course of the intervention, the US delegated PRT responsibilities to a number of allied nations, New Zealand included.

New Zealand's PRT was named *Task Force CRIB*. Their area of responsibility became Bamyan Province. Bamyan is a breathtaking landscape of snow-capped mountains and colourful valleys, and has been a crossroad for the various regimes, religions and ethnic groups that have stamped their mark on Afghan history. By 1995, Bamyan had fallen under Taliban control. Their rule saw the destruction of the world-famous Buddhas of Bamyan, and acts of genocide against the Hazara inhabitants of the region (the Hazara are the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, behind the Pashtun and the Tajik).

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Bamyan became one of the safest provinces in Afghanistan, which allowed PRTs to concentrate on their local programmes rather than anti-insurgency campaigns. Over the course of the next decade, Task Force CRIB trained local forces in procedure, doctrine and human rights law, with an eye to improving local knowledge and humane practices within the region. The PRT was “more of a security and reconstruction force than a combat unit, albeit that it undertook security patrols which, on occasion, did lead to combat”.

Beyond its security mandate, Task Force CRIB also took the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the local community. NZDF personnel helped to rebuild Bamyán University, the area's only tertiary educational institution, and by 2013 there were 2700 students attending classes. There were only around 12 schools in the entire province during Taliban rule, but with the help of NZ and US military personnel this number reached 353 schools including 73 high schools.



Bamyán Province's location in Afghanistan

Health services also received a substantial boost, with the establishment of new clinics, expansion of Bamyán Provincial Hospital and staff training programmes.

Over the course of our first decade, the New Zealand government spent around \$80 million on development programmes in Afghanistan. This funding was broken down as follows:

- 5% to Health
- 15% to Education
- 21% to Governance, Justice, Rule & Law
- 22% to Humanitarian Assistance and Reconstruction
- 37% to Sustainable Economic Development

These figures demonstrate the broad reach of Task Force CRIB's mission and the ways in which the New Zealand Defence Force was able to have a positive impact on Bamyán communities.

A survey of Afghans conducted in 2012 showed that the inhabitants of Bamyán province were, on average, more positive about their personal and community outlook than the average Afghan. They had better roads, water supplies and schools than in 2001, and more trained professionals across the education and health sectors.

Supporting Links

New Zealand's Achievements from 10 Years of Development Assistance in Bamyán, Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade Aid Programme, 21 March, 2013.

Images:

Bamyan Provincial Overview, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey. <https://nps.edu/web/ccs/bamyan>

Images:

New Zealand Soldiers in Afghanistan, 1st Lieutenant Lory Stevens, 22 July, 2009. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NZ_Soldiers_Afghanistan_2009.jpg, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Seal of the International Security Assistance Force, NATO, circa 2003. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Seal_of_the_International_Security_Assistance_Force.svg, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Location map for Bamyan Province in Afghanistan, Joshbaumgartner, 6 September, 2007. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan_Bamyan_Province_location.PNG, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

An Unsteady Situation

Despite New Zealand's best intentions, the reality of our deployment was complex and there were significant obstacles to achieving lasting peace. Bamyán's Hazaras had been rescued from Taliban persecution and now held prominent positions in local government, but this marginalised other tribes in the northeast, some of whom felt that they were not receiving fair treatment from Hazara officials. This situation was compounded by local job losses and a resurgent Taliban presence in neighbouring provinces.

In 2009, the New Zealand government decided to extend our mission in Afghanistan until at least 2010. However, Parliament was warned about rising insurgent activity in Bamyán, and troops faced a higher threat from improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In response, more New Zealand troops were deployed to northeast Bamyán as a deterrent against the Taliban, and the SAS returned to Afghanistan to identify and eliminate threats to NZPRT.

New Zealand had suffered no deaths on campaign up until this point, but as our armed forces took a more active role they took on greater risks. From 2010-2012 ten NZSAS and NZ PRT soldiers lost their lives (eight in combat). For the New Zealand public, which had been spared the yearly body counts accrued by allied nations, these deaths brought awareness of the changing nature of our deployment.

Supporting Links

"Chapter 2 - The deployment of the NZSAS to Afghanistan: political and constitutional dimensions." *Inquiry into Operation Burnham*, New Zealand Government. 20 August, 2020. <https://operationburnham.inquiry.govt.nz/inquiry-report/chapter-2>



An Afghan soldier watches smoke rise from a nearby explosion, 2012

Transition and Turmoil

By 2010 the Afghan government only held firm control over 29 out of 121 key districts. ISAF's constituent nations were losing public support for their mission as losses mounted with no victory in sight, and countries like the United States were withdrawing most of their combat soldiers. The idea was that ISAF nations would train the Afghan army and police to defend its own territory instead of relying on international soldiers and firepower. The Afghan army would be provided with US weapons, vehicles and equipment, and theoretically given the capability to hold Afghanistan with its own soldiers.

New Zealand also intended to withdraw its soldiers from Afghanistan. In April 2013 the final PRT deployment, CRIB 21, finished operations and returned to New Zealand. From this point onward, only a handful of NZDF personnel would remain in the country.

The training that Task Force CRIB and the SAS had provided to local police and soldiers would now be needed to protect Afghanistan without our help. By mid-2021, six New Zealand soldiers remained in Afghanistan to train local forces. In all, more than 3500 New Zealanders had been deployed to Afghanistan over the course of twenty years.

It is easy to draw parallels between this situation and the last years of the Republic of Vietnam (often known as South Vietnam). Like the Afghan government, South Vietnam had been fighting a determined, creative enemy intent on overthrowing its authority. Corruption, military coups and heavy-handed methods of suppressing

guerrillas undermined the South Vietnamese government's authority, and rural populations remained ambiguous in their loyalty. South Vietnam's most powerful ally, the United States of America, had taken significant losses in an attempt to prop up the collapsing South Vietnamese position, but the high body count combined with massacres and war crimes perpetrated by US forces had eroded public support for the war. The US adopted a policy of Vietnamisation, in which warfighting duties would be handed over to the South Vietnamese army and the US's role reduced to training and supply. In the words of US President Richard Nixon, this policy would,

enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam.

Six years later, South Vietnam had ceased to exist.

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"New Zealand troops to leave Afghanistan after 20-year deployment." Al Jazeera, 17 February, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/17/last-new-zealand-troops-to-leave-afghanistan-in-may>

Images:

An Afghan National Civil Order Police officer watches the smoke rise from a fuel truck explosion in Mirakikhel village, Wardak province, Specialist Austin Berner, 25 June, 2012. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Operation,_Uqab_Panj_120625-A-BZ540-087.jpg, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Operation Kōkako: New Zealand returns to Afghanistan

In February 2020, US President Donald Trump signed the Doha Agreement, which pledged a withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in return for a Taliban promise to keep Al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan. As part of the negotiating process, the Afghan government agreed to release 5000 captured Taliban fighters in return for 1000 captured government soldiers.

On 1 May 2021, the Taliban launched a nationwide offensive to re-conquer Afghanistan. By the end of July, fast-moving Taliban forces had captured some provincial capitals and cut off many government-held areas. Weapons and equipment intended to defend Afghanistan from the Taliban were simply surrendered to them instead. Western commentators expected that the Afghan National Army would be able to hold out for at least another ninety days, but a renewed Taliban attack on 6 August took a mere 9 days to overrun almost all significant resistance. On 15 August the Taliban entered the Afghan capital Kabul, effectively ending government resistance.

The Taliban had been notorious for their harsh and vengeful rule, so thousands of people flooded to Hamid Karzai International Airport hoping to flee the country. Some of these were international embassy staff, some were Afghans and their families who had helped ISAF, while others were ordinary Afghans who did not wish to live under Taliban rule. Former ISAF members launched a vast airlift operation to fly civilians ex-employees to safety, not knowing whether the Taliban would overrun the airport. New Zealand joined this effort with Operation Kōkako.



Afghan refugees aboard a US C-17 Globemaster during the evacuation from Kabul.

Around 80 NZDF personnel were sent to Kabul to rescue Afghan interpreters who had helped New Zealand, and their families. The main team flew aboard a Royal New Zealand Air Force C-130H Hercules, while others deployed to a second base to provide support. Evacuees were given a code word that would allow New Zealand soldiers to recognise them. Controversially, around 400 Afghans and their families were not evacuated and the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Affairs stopped processing Afghan visa applications after the mercy flights had concluded. In October 2021 a special representative was sent to Afghanistan to help facilitate further evacuations.

Supporting Links

NZDF personnel deploy to assist with evacuations from Afghanistan, New Zealand Defence Force, 19 August, 2021. <https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/nzdf/news/nzdf-personnel-deploy-to-assist-with-evacuations-from-afghanistan/>

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C-17 carrying passengers out of Afghanistan (detail), unknown US Air Force employee, 15 August 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:C-17_carrying_passengers_out_of_Afghanistan.jpg, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Afghanistan: lessons and legacies

How did twenty years of support, training and peacemaking collapse so quickly? There were a number of factors that affected the government of Afghanistan's ability to unite its people and resist the Taliban's ever-increasing power.

Almost half of the Afghan National Army's soldiers were Pashtun, which made it difficult for Afghan tribes of other ethnicities to accept the ANA's presence in their communities. Conversely, the lack of a cohesive national Afghan identity meant that many ANA soldiers were not motivated to risk their lives defending these unfamiliar communities against determined, experienced Taliban fighters. Furthermore, rampant corruption meant that many of these soldiers were underpaid and undersupplied, and rampant drug abuse left some incapable of fighting altogether. In many cases, the Taliban offered ANA soldiers money to simply lay down their weapons and walk away unharmed.

Afghanistan's military had also relied on ISAF air power to disrupt Taliban. US military aircraft were provided to the Afghan air force, but Afghanistan lacked the money, expertise and fuel to support their operations. To make matters worse, the Taliban deliberately identified and assassinated Afghan pilots, since it would take a long time to train any replacements. This left the state without effective air cover.

On the other side, the Taliban had reached out to groups they'd alienated during their previous rule. By 2010, they had begun initiatives to recruit among Uzbek and Tajik communities, a move that would have allowed them to operate more effectively in northern Afghanistan. Years of collateral damage from ISAF operations and airstrikes had turned some neutral communities against the state and its benefactors, which made recruitment easier for the Taliban in these places.

Alternatively, villages with no stake in the conflict preferred not to support either side in the hope that the war would pass them by, which complicated ISAF efforts to recruit local militias to hold these areas. Even if the Taliban couldn't recruit their own fighters from these villages, persuading them to stand aside was enough to weaken the Afghan state. Local warlords also absorbed some of those recruits still willing to fight against the Taliban.

In essence, the absence of a strong Afghan identity that could command the duty and loyalty of its citizens undermined the ANA's willingness to provide meaningful and effective resistance against the resurgent Taliban onslaught. But this phenomenon is a double-edged sword. As of September 2021, some areas of Bamyān Province were still resisting Taliban control. The same challenges, divisions and obstacles that toppled the Afghan state will now have to be overcome by the Taliban.

Supporting Links:

Giustozzi, A. "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns." *The Afghanistan Papers*, no.5 (2010)

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