

What Have We done? Reflections on War and Withdrawal in Afghanistan

Friday, 23 June 2023 10:45 (1h 30m)

This panel examines the withdrawal of NATO forces from a 20-year war that apparently no one won. It considers the impact of the promises made in relation to security, gender equality, state-building, and humanitarianism. The panel reflects from different perspectives on the question of whether the hindsight now afforded by the chaotic withdrawal and Taliban take-over casts new light on established dogmas in relation to Afghanistan. Are the current humanitarian crisis, state-collapse with Taliban rule and increased refugee flows confirming the findings of studies conducted during the 20 year war, or does the current post-withdrawal situation offer novel insights for IR - especially in the subfields of war and security studies, humanitarian and gender politics - into how the past twenty years have unfolded? This panel addresses these questions from different angles, analysing the everyday and structural gendered and racial violence, manifest in 'feminist' militarism, civil-military cooperation, state-building and stabilisation efforts and refugee resettlement. It ultimately returns to the question 'What have we done', can anything/anyone be 'redeemed' and what does this fraught legacy mean for the future of Afghanistan as well as future wars elsewhere?

Below we list the 5 papers and corresponding paper presenters:

The (Im)Possibilities of Feminist Militarism? The Case of Afghanistan

Dr Hannah Partis-Jennings, University of Loughborough, UK

Feminists have long critiqued the framing of war in Afghanistan as salvation for Afghan women and have pointed to the problematic co-optation of gender within the international statebuilding project in the country more broadly. The hasty abandonment of Afghanistan in 2021, further demonstrates the problematics around 'feminist' militarism. This paper argues that the war and international withdrawal shed particular light on critiques of 'feminism' in foreign policy, including questions of sustainability, instrumentalism, racialised imaginaries, and the structural depoliticization of feminist ideas. However, equally, the particularities of everyday resistance demonstrated by Afghan women and their allies, were generated, even facilitated, within the compromised space of war, and bound up with the international project and notions of the liberal peace. The feminist space and work that did manage to flourish in Afghanistan since 2001, the paper suggests, was very specifically undercut by the messy withdrawal of international troops and funding, and that betrayal continues to be a source of suffering and crisis in Afghanistan, negating even the compromised possibilities of 'feminist' militarism.

Keywords: Feminist; Militarism; Afghanistan; withdrawal; statebuilding

Fuelled by Moral Injury? Afghan Veterans' Activism to Evacuate their 'Afghan Brothers'

Dr Sara de Jong, University of York

In this paper I analyse the advocacy efforts by Afghanistan veterans on behalf of Afghan interpreters and other locally employed staff, who supported them in their missions. With local staff's association with Western forces exposing them to targeted threats, they have sought protection through evacuation and resettlement. Afghan veterans have become what some would see as unlikely advocates for refugees' rights, with their investment in rescuing their former local colleagues offering a route to 'redemption' in the context of a 'failed war'.

The main source for the analysis offered here are semi-structured interviews (2017-2022) with veterans from the UK, Canada, US, Germany and the Netherlands, who engaged in lobbying efforts and founded advocacy organisations for Afghan interpreters. This paper brings together literature around 'moral injury' (e.g. Molendijk 2021) with scholarship on veteran activism (e.g. Schrader 2019) to develop the argument that veteran activism on this issue is firstly fuelled by moral injury and secondly a strategy to cope with their broader sense of moral injury generated by the failed war in Afghanistan. However, it also concludes that veterans' activism simultaneously deepens their moral injury as it increases awareness of the structural injustices around the treatment of local staff.

Keywords: Afghanistan; veterans; activism; Afghan refugees; moral injury

Can Militaries “Do Good”? The Complications of Civil-Military projects

Dr Gunhild Hoogensen Gjorv, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

This paper reflects upon the narratives and practices of the Norwegian military and humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan during the 2001-2014 US-led, NATO supported intervention. In particular the paper will focus on a specific civil-military project that was intended to educate anesthesia doctors and technicians at Afghan hospitals. This project was caught in between priorities of the Norwegian government and deployed, military medical personnel who wanted to make a difference on the ground. This was problematic in light of the political intention (the “Norwegian model”) to enforce a clear divide between military and civilian efforts, polarising assumptions about militaries and aid and their capacities to work with and for Afghan people and authorities. The project was to a degree caught within the power dynamics between foreign actors (both militaries and aid agencies) and local communities and authorities. In evaluating this project (which could not be completed until the Afghan doctor could get out of Afghanistan), positions of virtuousness by Norwegian actors in relation to local actors frequently reflected racialised, cultural and gendered biases by both military and aid actors, that hindered the potential success of a project with good intentions.

Keywords: Afghanistan; civil-military relations; gender politics; international security

Failures of Statebuilding: Understanding the Collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Dr Jasmine Bhatia, Birkbeck University of London and Dr Florian Weigand, LSE

Why do statebuilding efforts fail, even when supported by powerful international coalitions? The rapid collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan shocked many contemporary observers and exposed severe weaknesses in the international community’s ambitious twenty-year statebuilding programme. This paper focuses on two questions: 1) What accounts for the rapid collapse of the Islamic Republic and the lack of resilience in Afghanistan’s state institutions? 2) What are the implications for mainstream assumptions about statebuilding theory and practice in chronically-insecure states? Drawing from an elite bargains framework and several interviews with senior officials, we argue that, while the Republic had significant structural weaknesses that threatened the regime’s long term survival, the rapid collapse of the country was accelerated by several contingent factors related to elite decision-making from international and Afghan elites. More optimal outcomes were possible had different decisions been taken in the lead-up to the collapse. We reflect on implications for statebuilding and intervention going forward.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Peace Process, Statebuilding, Intervention, Taliban, Insurgency

Women, Peace and Security - Afghanistan’s Women since August 2021

Dr Neelam Raina, Middlesex University London

This paper will use an overarching narrative built within the Women, peace and security agenda and how this operates and appears for women and girls in Afghanistan. It will journey through the UNSCR1325 and the various National Action Plans that were set up by various nations that crumbled very quickly. With the quick return to exclusion from the peace talks, exclusions experienced through evacuation and resettlement policy and a complete disregard for built in cross cutting inequalities that - the experience of intersecting exclusions and what these mean to the everyday experience of being an Afghan woman shall be discussed within this paper.

The complete collapse of the humanitarian aid programmes and related policy, with gender ‘mainstreamed’ for the last two decades within them, and what this indicates for the future of any such policy needs critical reexamination. This paper shall raise questions about the current status of gender related policy within conflict and fragile settings and the commitment to these going forward. What is clear from Afghanistan’s recent experience allows us to question the depth and applicability of these approaches and how quickly they become hollow and meaningless in the face of crisis.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Peace and Security, Exclusion, Inequality, Policy.

Membership

Track Classification: War Studies Working Group