

To improve security, the Afghanistan government needs to focus on urbanisation



*Despite improved education, highways, and myriad other rural development projects, Afghanistan continues to face grave security issues. **Rustam Ali Seerat** argues that a government drive towards urbanisation may be the solution instead of trying to control sparsely populated territories.*

On October 7, 2001, in response to the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush announced the beginning of airstrikes targeting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Many pessimists believe that the US intervention in Afghanistan has done less good for the country. Barry Posen famous for his [Theory of Great Power Restraint](#) advises the US to have a [full withdraw from Afghanistan](#) and leave it into the hands of its neighbours plus Russia and India. The scenario he proposes was happening in the 1990s, and that ended up with 9/11. He laments that the progressive anti-Taliban Afghans either have not fought hard enough to win the war against insurgency whilst simultaneously failing to win domestic support.

In Afghanistan no one is safe, and for the last forty years they never have been. War is the new norm for Afghanistan citizens. The bombings happening in Kabul are less significant compared to the rain of shells over the city during the 1990s civil wars and yet it is likely that the bombings and suicide attacks will continue for the unforeseeable future. Bombings, confrontational fights and terrorism, feed the pessimism about the uncertain future of Afghanistan. However, pessimists often fail to see the immense changes that have occurred post 2001.

According to the Afghan Ministry of education more than [9.2 million](#) children are enrolled in schools of which 39% are girls. During the Taliban the numbers of girls enrolled in schools approximated to zero. A skeleton government is now established in a country which fifteen years ago simply did not exist. Highways now connect major cities, that prior to [2001 had very few](#). These achievements could be protected if the US-backed Afghan government modify some of its past mistakes.

However, the Afghan government and its NATO supporters have committed two strategic blunders. First, they have tried to extend the government control over territories, and this has been the major factor in failing to defeat the extremism. Afghanistan is a vast mountainous country, its population is too small to create the pool for numerous military recruitments and its economy is too small to support a numerous army proportional to its territory.

The government allocates thirty to forty policemen for each local districts, Afghanistan has 365 districts. In the vast hostile environment sending a group of thirty members of the Afghan Army to provide security for a local district is a grave mistake. It puts the Afghan National Army (ANA) in disadvantageous positions, they need to secure the area and stay static. Contrary to them the Taliban do not need to control the land, they act based on [hit-and-run](#) tactics. The Taliban can send over a hundred of their members to the same district to overrun the Afghan soldiers who are separated by vast mountainous regions from their centres. Moreover, the collapse of the pro-USSR governments in 1980s could be credited to the unbalanced rural-urban populations. The communist government lost its control over rural Afghanistan before it lost the cities. In the 1980s the Mujahidin swept the rural areas swiftly, its vast population helped them to recruit fighters in a matter of few months.



Medics from the former coalition travelling to remote villages in the Nawa district of Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. Image credit: Nathan W. Hutchison, US Army, [Public domain](#).

The strategy of controlling the population rather than territory has been used earlier in the country. Abdur Rahman, whom the British called the Iron *Amir* mercilessly attacked the Hazara villages, and according to the historian [Asker Mousavi](#) the *Amir* eliminated a total of 60% of the Hazaras during the early 1890s. He also gave up the southern and eastern borderlands to the British India as a result of Durand Line Agreement. He asserted his control over populations and gave up the territory and far land borders, he proved to be successful in establishing his monarchy. The Afghan government does not need to imitate Abdur Rahman in his cruelty but his strategy could work.

The Afghan government should focus on controlling the populations rather than territory. For that it needs to enhance urbanizations and relocate the majority of the population from villages to cities, as in the cities controlling militancy would be easier. So for Afghan government has been reluctant of urbanization, because the more people live in the cities, [the more they demand government](#) services, however it misses the point that urbanization can strengthen the control of government over the people which in return it will weaken the insurgency.

In post-2001 the majority of developmental projects have been implemented in the rural areas under the scheme of [National Solidarity Program](#) (NSP) which was designed by the current president during the previous administration. Unfortunately, developing rural areas has had the unintended effect of easing the Taliban's movement in and around districts. Currently, at the same rural areas, on the same roads which were built by the government and its international allies, the Taliban ride their bikes and drive their Toyota cars.

Economic incentives cannot buy political loyalties in rural Afghanistan. The reason is that Afghans are religious people. For them developmental aids are seen as corrupting their souls. Giving them money will not buy their political loyalties. In the Afghan-French novelist Atiq Rahimi's words "an Afghan man nourishes his soul more than his body".

Therefore, the government should evacuate its army from the turbulent rural areas instead transfer them around the cities and knot security belts around the major cities. The current number of ANA personals only can afford to secure the cities and the highways connecting them. It also needs to give up its rural development project, and instead start urban development. It should provide social services to the extent that it could attract villagers and help them migrate into the cities. The urbanization would have the dual positive effects of facilitating better governmental control over population and enhancing inter-ethnic dialogues.

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About the Author



Rustam Ali Seerat is a research scholar (International Relations) at South Asian University, New Delhi. He has written for the *Foreign Policy*, the *Diplomat Magazine*, *South Asia Monitor*, *Global Voices*, and the *ICS blog*.