

## "TARGET KABUL"

# Human insecurity in the Afghan capital

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Over the past quarter century, the Afghan capital city of Kabul has been centrally involved in wars conducted by Soviet, Mujahideen, Taliban and American forces. The reasons for targeting the city varied by group — though for all parties, Kabul's strategic and symbolic value as a transportation hub and seat of political power was central.

In an abstract sense, the city's urban character was a source of grievance for some groups, such as the Taliban, who drew support predominantly from the rural regions. The capital was the heart of education, the site of peaceful political opposition, the locus for freedom of expression — especially for women — and moreover, the container in which rapid societal progress was conceived and from where it was pushed into the provinces, in a process of city-driven cultural change.

More specifically, the urban lens can also help shed light on some of the hidden impacts of conflict generated by war. One of the key outcomes of the Soviet occupation, during which most military activities took place primarily in rural areas, was a massive influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to Kabul and other Afghan cities.<sup>1</sup> This influx overloaded the ability of the city

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to provide basic services to the newcomers, which exacerbated urban poverty and contributed significantly to the tipping of the balance between public appreciation of, and hostility toward, the communist ideology.

Conversely, the 1996 capture of Kabul by the Taliban was a "forceful imposition upon the city of distorted traditional, decentralized, rural values and lifestyles."<sup>2</sup> Kabul became the place where limits to residents' "right to the city"<sup>3</sup> were more widespread, more visible and more violent than probably anywhere else in the world. Urban cosmopolitanism was destroyed by an oppressive regime of prohibitions that minimized freedom of movement to the extent that most

women left their homes only in circumstances of immediate need for water or food. The Taliban also used forced migration from rural areas to the capital, most visibly in the case of the displacement of 200,000 mostly Tajik residents of the Shomali plain in early 1997 "to create a dense Pashtun-settled ring north of Kabul in order to make it clear once and for all that Kabul was a Pashtun city."<sup>4</sup> This initial measure of forced resettlement soon developed into full-scale scorched earth tactics as part of an ethnic cleansing campaign during the summer of 1999 involving the destruction of irrigation systems, farmland and shelter, which again forced thousands to flee, with 30,000 escaping south to Kabul.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the experience of absolute vulnerability among city dwellers was demonstrated during the US-led campaign to liberate Afghanistan from Taliban rule after the attacks of September 11, 2001. In an attempt to avoid civilian casualties, area bombardment was eschewed in favour of numerous precision attacks on urban infrastructure (radar sites, airfields, command posts, etc.) that could support Taliban resistance. However, most of these sites were surrounded