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# Respecting Afghanistan's Sovereignty

*Assem Akram*

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Respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty is a *sine qua non* condition to restoring the country to normalcy. The fact that a country expects and demands that its sovereignty be respected should not be misconstrued as a refusal to engage the outside world — as a sign that the country is drifting towards some type of chauvinistic nationalism.

Sovereignty matters to the Afghans because it is tied to the legitimacy of the government that seeks to lead them. In principle, sovereignty should matter to the international actors involved in Afghanistan as well because a legitimized government is the first step towards viability — perhaps even democracy — and definitely a step closer towards the exit door. Respecting sovereignty is a two-way street and the prerequisite to harmonious international relations. We have all witnessed how a weak government lacking legitimacy, unaware of its sovereign rights/duties and unable to have them respected, is the best recipe to turn a country into a haven for international terrorism.

## IN DEFENSE OF SOVEREIGNTY

Historically, Afghan leaders fought hard and used all their diplomatic skills to preserve their country's sovereignty in the face of the advancing European expansionist empires. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of European colonialism, King Amanullah successfully fought the third Anglo-Afghan war (1919), infuriated the Europeans over the Piperno case (1925), and refused to rely on Bolshevik troops to restore his power (1929). In 1959, the Afghan government led by then-Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud declared *persona non-grata* a French diplomat who had torn apart the poster of a pro-Algerian independence movie (*Jamilah*). In 1977, Daoud, who at the time had abolished the monarchy and had become President of Afghanistan, confronted Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev over the latter's criticism of his domestic and foreign policies.

Vigilant as they were on issues of sovereignty, both Amanullah and Daoud nonetheless were ardent advocates of greater international collaboration to advance Afghanistan's development. Their actions illustrate that a leader can assert sovereignty while at the same time engage the rest of the world.

## THE THEFT OF SOVEREIGNTY

It has become *cliché* to say that Afghanistan has experienced three decades of incessant



*Dr. Assem Akram holds a PhD in History from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Dr. Akram is the author of two historical books on Afghanistan and two works of fiction. He currently teaches at American University's School of International Service.*

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war. While this statement helps people understand the suffering of the Afghan population, it fails to truly depict the damage done to Afghanistan as a state — that is, as an organizational apparatus capable of running a country.

Thirty years of failed political experiments by the Communists, the *mujahidin*, the Taliban, and today's anything-goes ill-defined system have severely damaged the fabric of Afghan society. The only rule that applies is that of survival. The “commoners” live to survive another day, while the “fortunate ones” — those with the right connections — are concerned only with how to amass wealth quickly (often through questionable means) and/or obtain positions of “prestige” for vanity's sake.

Most of Afghanistan's current leaders — those in power in Kabul and their opponents, such as the Taliban and its strategic allies — reached political maturity in exile. They, like the leaders of other Afghan factions who preceded them, have sought money and weapons from outside to advance their political and oftentimes military agenda inside. They have bought allegiances with foreign money and have killed rivals with bullets provided by outside players. They have acted with total disregard for Afghanistan's sovereignty.

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Similarly, the countries and groups involved in the current conflict have acted with callous disregard for Afghanistan's sovereignty. Foreign armies crisscross the country free of any legal or statutory constraints. They are able to imprison, kill, and even torture with impunity. The Kabul government is too feeble and dependent to demand the respect of its sovereign rights, assuming that it is aware of them. On the opposite side, the Taliban and their associated networks (e.g., the Haqqani or Hekmatyar groups) are being funded by foreign extremist supporters linked to al-Qa'ida. For them, Afghanistan is just one battleground in the global jihad wherein they can take revenge on the West while attempting to reinstate an illusory Caliphate.

#### *RESTORING SOVEREIGNTY AND BOLSTERING LEGITIMACY*

The legitimacy of the government in Kabul would be greatly enhanced were its leaders to demonstrate that they understand what is at stake and demand the respect of their country's sovereignty. It is also crucial that the members of the international community involved in Afghanistan, whose proclaimed goal is to stabilize and normalize the situation in that country, understand the sensitivity of the matter and pledge to respect it.

Drawing upon the examples of leaders such as Amanullah and Daoud, Afghan leaders could and should seek to prove to their people and to the world that they are their own men — not just instruments in the hands of foreign interests — and that they will not compromise sovereignty and the interests of the nation for the sake of petty gains and/or ideologically/ethnically-driven purposes.

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To bolster the Afghan government's legitimacy, international actors involved in that country's affairs should adopt a more hands-off approach and be smarter in the way they exert their influence. The most visible aspect of that influence, which does not permit the slightest appearance of legitimacy to the current government in Kabul, is the presence of foreign military forces and their unregulated action. This needs to be seriously reconsidered in order to be less intrusive and be substituted without delay by Afghan national security forces, no matter how untrained and unprepared they might be. In the current situation, quality does not matter as much as quantity and the priceless value of its symbolism.

Arguably, there is only one source of legitimacy for international interventionism: the United Nations. As imperfect an institution as it is and as sheepish as it can sometimes be, it still has credibility in a country such as Afghanistan.

The United Nations should fully play its role and be the one who actively seeks to bring peace, stability, and reconstruction to Afghanistan. Instead of having the United States, and its military instrument NATO, taking over the direction of the international community's multi-faceted intervention in Afghanistan through the United Nations, it should be the other way around. The UN should seek to be the institution that confers legitimacy on any military action for the sake of regional and international stability. NATO taking over ISAF has blurred the line between ISAF and non-UN mandated coalition forces. This is detrimental to the whole enterprise: The United Nations is the only institution that can be regarded as "neutral" and therefore not an occupying force at the service of a lone foreign power and its surrogate allies. Consequently, UN-mandated forces would be less likely to generate extreme reactions and boost the ranks of violent armed opposition groups.

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There is a symbiotic relationship between a country's sovereignty and the legitimacy of its government. When the government is dependant on a single source for its survival, it becomes enslaved by that source, loses legitimacy, and is consequently less able to defend the country's sovereignty. In the case of Afghanistan, which relies mainly upon multilateral and international institutions for its day-to-day functioning, a balance can nonetheless be struck whereby the central government is not merely a "puppet" in the hands of a single handler. In fact, such a balance had existed prior to the Communist takeover of 1978.

Sovereignty, multilateral partnerships, and positive neutrality are the keys to restoring the delicate balance that will allow Afghanistan to return to normalcy and become a player and a partner, rather than a pawn, in the regional and international systems.