

Despite these limitations, *Decolonizing Afghanistan* makes a valuable contribution by re-centring Afghanistan within broader debates on empire, knowledge and power. It challenges scholars of Asian studies, international relations and development to interrogate the epistemological assumptions underpinning their work. The volume will be of particular interest to researchers and graduate students engaged in decolonial approaches, critical security studies and the politics of intervention, and it represents an important step toward rethinking Afghanistan beyond imperial epistemic frames.

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AMIN SAIKAL, *How to Lose a War: The Story of America's Intervention in Afghanistan*. 320 pages, 1 map, \$30.00. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-0-3002-7766-1 (eBook)

In *How to Lose a War*, Amin Saikal, Emeritus Professor at Australian National University and a long-standing scholar of international relations in Afghanistan and the wider region, examines the US-led intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Drawing from a background in international relations and security studies, Saikal approaches his analytical assessment of the war through a lens that privileges elite political decision-making, regional diplomacy and the evolution of US and coalition strategy. Saikal's central argument is that defeat was not inevitable but resulted from political factors. What began as a narrow counterterrorism mission gradually expanded into an ambitious project of state-building and democratisation, while Afghan governance remained shaped by elite competition and weak institutional legitimacy. At the same time, regional dynamics, especially Pakistan's role, undermined prospects for a durable settlement.

One of the book's main strengths is its sustained focus on how failure unfolded through a sequence of political and strategic choices rather than due to a single decisive error. Saikal traces how expanding objectives led to internal contradictions over time. Counterterrorism, coalition management and institution-building were pursued simultaneously, often without a clear understanding of how these goals might interact or undermine one another. The chapters on Afghan governance are particularly effective in showing how elite fragmentation and institutional design contributed to declining state legitimacy and administrative weakness. In this respect, the book offers a convincing explanation for why extensive international resources failed to translate into durable political authority.

At the same time, the book's explanatory framework would benefit from a clearer ordering of causal factors. Pakistan's enabling role in sustaining the Taliban insurgency is empirically important, but at times it risks becoming an overdetermining explanation. Taliban durability is discussed largely through the lens of Pakistan's tolerance of Taliban leadership networks and the availability of cross-border safe havens, while less attention is paid to subnational dynamics such as Taliban governance practices, localised grievance dynamics and everyday mechanisms of coercion and compliance. As a result, the analysis is strongest on geopolitics and elite bargaining, but thinner on the micro-level processes through which authority is produced and contested.

This imbalance is closely connected to how governance failure is conceptualised. Saikal persuasively demonstrates that internationally sponsored institutions failed to generate legitimacy, yet governance is often framed primarily in terms of elite corruption or flawed institutional design. Increased engagement with alternative analytical approaches, such as a neopatrimonial lens (Attai et al. 2025)¹, could further clarify these dynamics. Such a perspective draws attention to how formal bureaucratic institutions introduced or reinforced through intervention coexist with, and are penetrated by, informal patronage and personalistic networks. Used sparingly, this approach would complement Saikal's argument by helping explain why technocratic reform and institutional redesign repeatedly faltered in practice.

The book also leaves important counterfactual questions underdeveloped. Saikal suggests that alternative strategic choices, particularly a narrower counterterrorism mission, might have avoided later escalation and collapse. However, these alternatives are not explored in detail. It therefore remains unclear whether they would have produced greater stability or simply a different form of failure, such as earlier fragmentation or prolonged civil war.

Another limitation concerns the sources on which the analysis relies. Much of the narrative draws on policy documents and elite-centred accounts. These materials are essential for understanding strategic decision-making, but they are less suited to explaining how legitimacy, justice and coercion were experienced across Afghanistan's diverse local contexts. This reliance risks reproducing the perspective of the intervention itself, presenting Afghan political order primarily through the categories of external actors and state elites. By contrast, scholarship that approaches Afghanistan from the vantage point of everyday governance and lived political authority emphasises dynamics that remain less visible in Saikal's account.

1 Zinab Attai / Maryam Jami / Boshra Moheb (2025): Neopatrimonial Perspectives on Political Structures in Afghanistan. In: Anna Larson / Dipali Mukhopadhyay / Omar Sharifi (eds): *Power and Authority in Afghanistan: Rethinking Politics, Intervention, and Rule*. New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 71–81.

This body of work includes studies of warlord and provincial governance (Mukhopadhyay 2014)², informal legal and political order (Murtazashvili 2016)³, democratic participation and exclusion (Sadr 2025)⁴, public administration beyond formal design (Ayobi / Rahimi 2018)⁵, indigenous sources of authority and legitimacy (Abid 2016)⁶ and feminist analyses of peace processes that centre Afghan women's marginalisation and political agency (Sobat 2022)⁷ – all of which offer alternative vantage points on how authority and legitimacy have been negotiated outside elite and interventionary frameworks.

Relatedly, the discussion of US strategy and counterinsurgency would benefit from greater attention to domestic and bureaucratic constraints. Saikal traces the consequences of counterinsurgency (COIN)-driven state-building effectively, but gives less attention to the internal debates, institutional rivalries and political pressures that shaped how COIN was adopted and unevenly implemented. As a result, strategic incoherence in Saikal's account can appear primarily as a failure of strategic design rather than as the outcome of domestic political and bureaucratic constraints.

Overall, *How to Lose a War* is an important and timely contribution to debates on intervention, state-building and regional security. Its careful tracing of how political and strategic choices accumulated over time makes it a valuable entry point for scholars of Afghanistan and Asia more broadly. While the analysis could be strengthened through deeper engagement with subnational dynamics and alternative causal pathways, the book offers a compelling account of why externally sponsored state-building has so often produced enduring contradiction rather than durable order.

Zinab Attai

2 Dipali Mukhopadhyay (2014): *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (2016): *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 Omar Sadr (2025): Failed Democracy in Afghanistan: Lack of Deliberation and Pluralism. In: Anna Larson / Dipali Mukhopadhyay / Omar Sharifi (eds): *Power and Authority in Afghanistan: Rethinking Politics, Intervention, and Rule*. New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 250–270.

5 Mirwais Ayobi / Haroun Rahimi (2018): *A Study of Afghanistan's Organization and Structure of Public Administration under the 2004 Constitution*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

6 Mujib Abid (2016): Legitimacy in Afghanistan: A Critical Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Sources of Authority. *International Relations* 4(7), pp. 441–446.

7 Tahmina Sobat (2022): No Peace for Afghanistan: A Case Study of the Failure of Peace-Building Processes in Afghanistan from a Transnational Feminist Standpoint. Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato.