

## THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES: HUMAN COST OF WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

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**ABSTRACT:** *Afghanistan is a land that is infamously difficult to administer. Empire after empire, and countries after countries have tried to conquer the nation but have failed to do so. The USA withdrawal resulted in their names joining the long list of those before them. With that, it finally draws the curtains on the 20 years of war in the country that spanned over 4 USA presidencies. The battle began with the US and its allies invading Afghanistan post the 9/11 attack on US soil by bombing Afghanistan under “Operation Enduring Freedom.” What followed was the struggle to rebuild Afghanistan, Taliban insurgency in the region, the USA surge, the subsequent drawdown of troops to the ultimate peace process. This paper analyses the human cost of the war since 2001. It discusses the policy changes needed to understand this issue comprehensively. Numerous academic literature, articles, opinion pieces, and secondary sources were used.*

**KEYWORDS-** Afghanistan, Taliban, USA, War

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### INTRODUCTION

On 31 August 2021, Major General Chris Donahue, the Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, XVIII Airborne Corps, boarded the C-17 cargo plane at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. He became the last American military personnel to leave Afghanistan soil, thus ending the most prolonged overseas war of the United States (Shaurya, 2021).

The USA withdrawal brought an end to the 20-year war waged in Afghanistan. However, the haphazard decision revived academic literature, cartoons, and newspaper headlines that mentioned Afghanistan as “The Graveyard of Empires.”

The land has experienced countless battles and endless wars. It would not be wrong to state that it has been the “Great Political Game” ground for centuries due to its strategic location (Sultani, 2012). For kings and conquerors, ruling the landlocked country has been a dream.

Many empires have arrived here, from Alexander the Great in 330BC to the USA in the 21st century. Time and again, the country has been the source of crushing the dreams of great kings and kingdoms. No one can deny that foreign rulers made progress, won a few battles, and captured a few provinces. No matter how all those who came found better reasons to pull out of the region than set up their tents. Sooner or later, they realised that the country was difficult to govern. That was because of its geographic location, the history of invasions resulting in the

construction of the smallest provinces, and finally, its landscape that intensified its tribal nature (News Desk, 2021).

Amongst the other issues, these factors gave the USA enough reasons to pull out from the region. However, the withdrawal process was heavily criticised by both the world leaders and experts alike.

The grounds for the USA invasion of Afghanistan were set on 11 September 2001, when terrorists of al-Qaeda hijacked four flights. Two flights were crashed in the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, and the third flight was flown into the Pentagon outside Washington DC. The last flight crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It was the only flight that missed its reported target, that was either the White House or the Capitol Building. The Taliban had assisted al-Qaeda to carry out the attack that led to the death of more than 3,000 people.

The attack gave the USA enough reasons to sign a law that recognised the rights of the USA to bring the preparators of 9/11 to justice by using the means of force. Then-President George W. Bush passed this law. In his speech on 20 September 2001, he stated that “Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there” and “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2001).

Starting on 7 October 2001, the USA and Great Britain officially launched “Operation Enduring Freedom” by carrying out airstrikes against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. What began as a campaign to fight the terrorist organisation was soon converted into the ‘nation-building process.’ Becoming a messiah to the Afghans was an unnecessary self-obligation undertaken by the USA. Later, it was the same law that the USA exploited to invade any country in the future in the name of national security.

The expansion required setting up bases to provide logistical assistance to the USA vision of rebuilding Afghanistan. The USA settling in the region stemmed ideological and political influence in Central Asia. This expansion was viewed as a threat by the regional actors, especially Iran, Russia and China. The invasion of Afghanistan and later involvement in Iraq made the USA a dominant force in the Eurasian region. The progress allowed the USA to become a part of the “Great Political Game.”

Twenty years later, the USA withdrawal left Afghanistan in ruins and turmoil. It took the Taliban less than a month to take over the state and push the USA-backed democratic government into exile. The claims of the USA on how they have eliminated terrorism, defeated the Taliban, and trained the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) is far from true as they gave up without a fight. Although the USA weakened al-Qaeda, the critical player Taliban has emerged more robust than ever.

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, it is the Afghan National Army and the locals who are being blamed, and it is incorrect. For a long time, the country has suffered at the hands

of those who claim to be their ‘protectors’ and those who claim that they are ‘protecting them from invaders.’ The USA is known for invading countries and causing a regional imbalance and then leaving a mess behind and is thus not incorrect. However, the Afghan people, especially women and children, will face the same consequences, as the land shall further be used for the “Great Political Game.”

So far, the USA has not given any accounting for one of their longest overseas wars. For over two decades, the country has witnessed the USA invasion, the rise of the Taliban, the USA vision of nation-building, Taliban insurgency in the region, the USA surge, the subsequent drawdown of troops to the ultimate peace process. Alongside that, the Afghanistan war has been one of the costliest wars in history for the USA- both human and economic cost. Nevertheless, it is now essential to understand the cost of the war for about 7,262 days. Post the withdrawal; it is crucial to analyse as to what is the human and the financial cost of the USA-led military operations in the country.

Unfortunately, there was a lack of proper research methodologies and data collection from 2001. For that reason, different academic sources, over time, developed their research methodologies in the later stage of the war to conclude the human cost of the war. Numerous academic literature, articles, opinion pieces, and other sources are secondary sources. As a result of this, it is to be considered that all these figures used are mere estimates and the actual figures are higher than those mentioned in the document. So, this research paper mainly analyses the human cost of the war. The research paper also discusses the policy changes needed to understand the issue comprehensively.

### **The Human Cost of War**

From 2001- 2014, 43 countries and the USA contributed to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which the United Nations Security Council headed. The ISAF mission was declared completed in 2014. Post that mission, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), with an intent to train the Afghan soldiers (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021).

The war witnessed the death of various stakeholders that can be divided broadly into about eight sections. Thus, it is essential to analyse these data to understand better the lives lost to the war. The research paper examines the following:

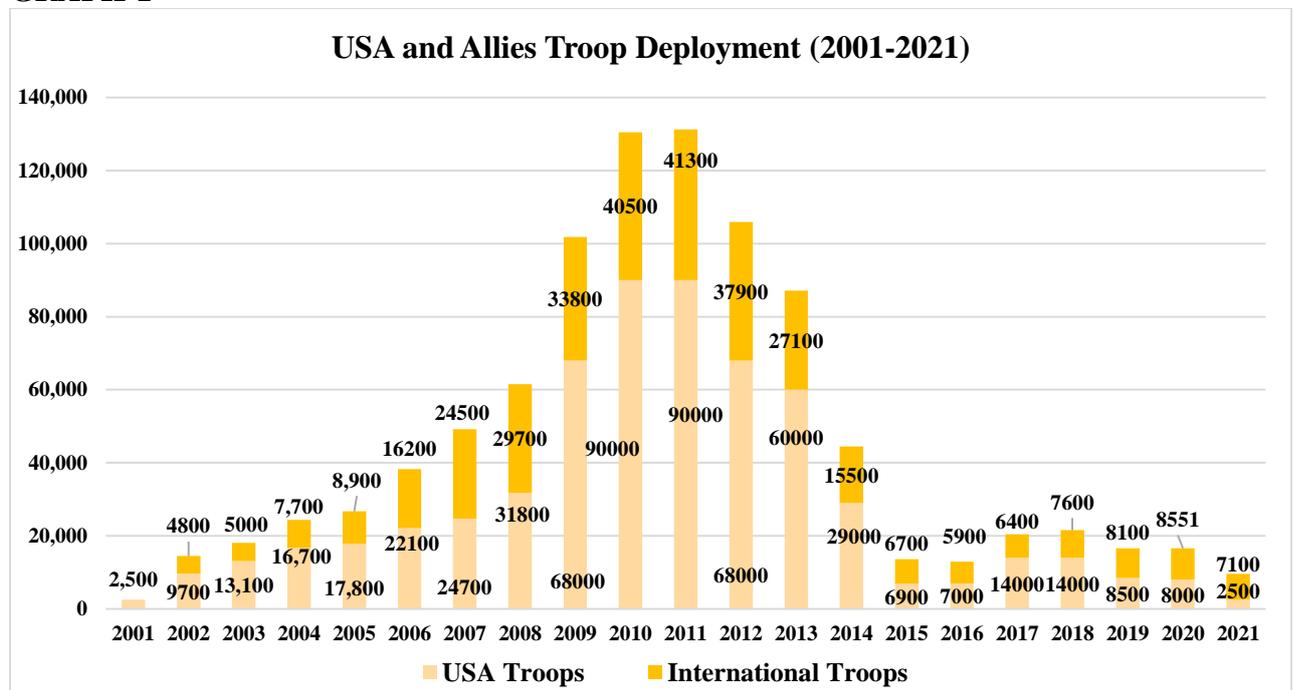
- USA and Allies Service Member Deployment
- USA and Allies Service Member Fatalities
- Contractor Casualties
- Afghan Army Deployment
- Afghan Army Casualties
- Afghan Civilian Deaths
- Afghan Civilians Affected by War
- Journalists and Humanitarian Workers Casualties

- Summary of the Causalities in the War
- Policy Recommendations

### USA and Allies Service Member Deployment

As the war advanced, there was a gradual increase in the forces. In October 2001, about 2,500 USA troops were deployed in the region (Brookings Institution, 2020). By the end of the war, the count came down to 9,592 troops contributed by about 36 countries. The following graph shows the international troop level in Afghanistan (Saif, 2021).

**GRAPH-1**



Although the troop level was steady during the war, many resources were diverted for the Iraq war in 2006 and 2007. In February 2011, when the coalition was at its peak, more than 131,000 troops were deployed. While the USA contributed 90,000 troops, about 41,300 troops were contributed by the allies.

The allies that provided the highest number of troops during 2011 are – United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Canada, Poland, Turkey, Romania, Spain and Australia. Table 1 shows that the top troop supplier countries during the peak of the coalition in February 2011. It further analyses the ratio and the % of the population to the troop contributed by each country in 2011 (The World Bank, 2011).

**TABLE-1: Highest Troop Suppliers by Country as of February 2011**

Countries	Ranking (as per population)	Population in 2011 (Rounded off to nearest 100,000)	Ranking (as per Deployment)	Deployment in 2011	Population: Deployment	As % of Population
USA	1	311,583,000	1	90,000	3,462	0.032
United Kingdom	5	63,259,000	2	9,500	6,659	0.015
Germany	2	80,275,000	3	4,920	16,316	0.006
France	4	65,343,000	4	4,000	16,336	0.006
Italy	6	59,379,000	5	3,770	15,750	0.006
Canada	9	34,339,000	6	2,905	11,821	0.008
Poland	8	38,063,000	7	2490	15,286	0.006
Turkey	3	73,443,000	8	1825	40,243	0.002
Romania	11	20,148,000	9	1695	11,887	0.008
Spain	7	46,743,000	10	1470	31,798	0.003
Australia	10	22,340,000	11	1550	14,413	0.006

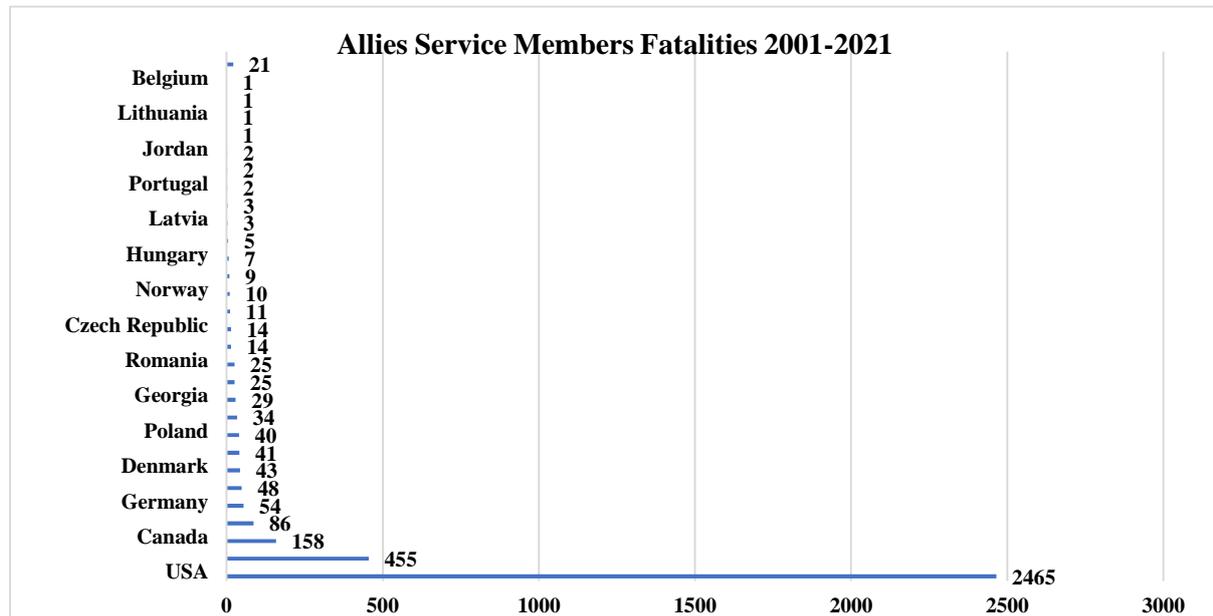
The above data shows that even though the United Kingdom had the fifth-highest population, it was the second-largest contributor. For every 6,659 people, the UK had contributed one personnel for the deployment, or 0.015% of the population. The contribution of the UK is more than two times that of the next highest supplier- Germany, which contributed 4,920 troops, or 0.006% of the population. Even Australia made a substantial contribution in ratio to its population. Turkey had the highest ratio as it only contributed one personnel troop for every 40,243 population, about 0.02% of its population. The sixth-highest contributor with 2,905 troops, Canada has only the ninth-largest population. It supplied about 0.08% of the population.

Other than that, on average, the total contribution by each of the allies stands at roughly 0.005% of its population. One cannot deny that the scale of deployment of these countries is nowhere close to that of the USA as it was the top supplier of troops at 90,000 in 2011. Nevertheless, it does not reduce the importance of each country's role in the troop supply for the war (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2011).

### **USA and Allies Service Member Fatalities**

The below graph mentions the total death toll suffered by the USA and its allies during the war (iCasualties, 2021).

**GRAPH-2**



It shows that the total fatalities of the USA service members were approximately 2,465. At the same time, the allies service members suffered about 1,144 casualties. However, the UK and Canadian soldiers were twice as likely to face casualties as their USA counterparts (Reynolds, 2021). The UK troops have met about 12% more casualties than the USA troops on the overall Iraq-Afghanistan war combined (Sabbagh, 2020).

Overall, about 3,609 deaths were recorded for the USA and allies' armies. Moreover, this is just a figure, as it does not consider the details of the intelligence agents and other task forces used in the region for other security purposes.

Table 2 has a more comprehensive evaluation. It compares the ratio of the percentage of the total deployment in its peak to the total fatalities of each country's troop that contributed since 2001- 2021 (iCasualties, 2021).

**TABLE-2: USA and Allies % of Fatalities**

_Countries	Deployment in 2011	Fatalities 2001-2021	Ranking (as % of fatalities)	Fatalities as % of Deployment
Canada	4,920	158	1	5.4
United Kingdom	9,500	455	2	4.7
USA	90,000	2,465	3	2.7
Spain	1470	34	4	2.3
Romania	1695	40	4	2.3
Turkey	1825	41	6	2.2
France	4,000	86	7	2.1
Australia	1550	29	8	1.8
Poland	2490	43	9	1.7
Italy	2,905	48	10	1.2
Germany	3,770	54	11	1.0

The casualty of the troops also varied based on the place of deployment, the equipment used and various other strategies. While the British forces were mainly deployed in the volatile province of Helmand, the German troops were deployed in the northern region of the country, which was relative peace. Not only that, they were mainly confined to their bases during the nighttime, so their fatality is at 1%. On the other hand, there were significant attacks on convoys in the country. The Canadian troops lacked mine-resistant vehicles (MRAPs) and troop helicopters (Sloan, 2012). Thus, all these factors contributed to the casualty rate.

Nevertheless, according to most recent reports that discuss the cost of war, there is not enough emphasis on the role of the allies. One cannot deny that it was a USA-led military action, and it is the USA that has paid an enormous price for the war. Anyhow, the allies have not been mere spectators to the war. They, too, have invested massively in the war, both in terms of resources and human cost. Thus, merely focussing on the USA aspect of war is a dishonour to the blood spilt by the militaries of other countries. The sacrifice of all the members who have lost their lives must be honoured.

### **Contractor Casualties**

The way the war has ended, everybody is looking for a scapegoat to blame. However, blaming the contactors for the war failure and not acknowledging their sacrifice is hurtful. One cannot deny that they committed several crimes. After the complaints were filed, several commissions were set up to investigate the matter. Several reforms were made to ensure that the guilty were held accountable for the war crimes (Amini, 2020).

The reliance on the contractors was extremely high. However, merely overlooking their sacrifice is incorrect. These people were responsible for supporting the troops in the region, such as logistics, IT support, cooking, haircutting, among many others. They sometimes even replaced the military people to carry out life-threatening missions. Also, they were deployed in regions where the USA Army could be sent legally (Gilsinan, 2020). They were also crucial in carrying out repairs, maintenance, and other jobs necessary for Afghan forces to fight the Taliban (Gibbons-Neff et al., 2021). The reliance on the contractors was extremely high.

When there was an increase in the death toll of the USA troops, the government decided to deploy more contractors and reduce the troops count as it was also politically imperative. By 2010, more than 107,292 contractors were on the ground, when only about 78,00 troops were deployed. (ProPublica, 2020).

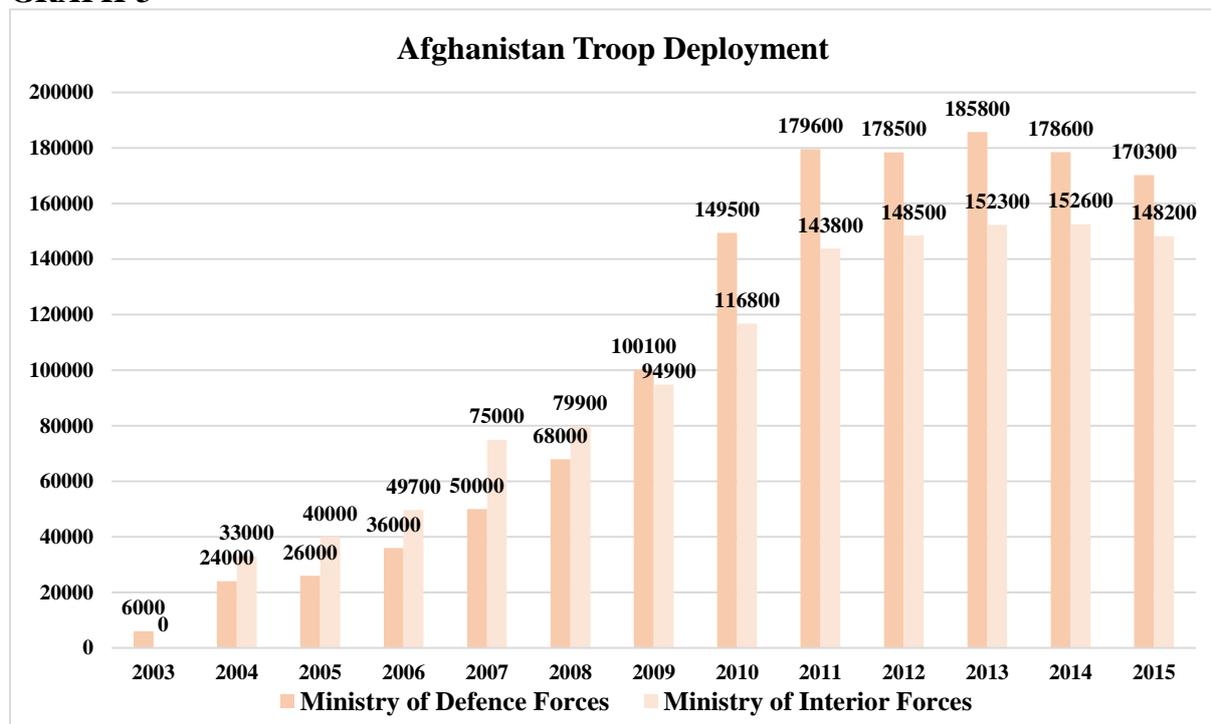
Not only that, there were 2,465 USA troops casualties, less than the 3,917 contractors who have lost their lives in the Afghanistan war since 2001 (ProPublica, 2020b). The Department of Labour is responsible for maintaining data of such casualties. The Department of Labour has quoted 1,774 as the total deaths of contractors in the war (Defense Base Act Case Summary by Nation, 2021). Similarly, another source mentioned 3,814 contractor deaths in the war (Crawford & Lutz, 2019). The massive variation in the estimates is primarily present as the companies that provide contractors for the war fail to report the deaths to the concerned

authorities. It led to a significant lapse in reporting contractor deaths. Also, the Pentagon has never been obliged to inform the public about the same.

Unfortunately, without any Veteran Affairs benefits, they are civilians whose lives and contributions are paid little to no public attention, which is hugely disregarding. They, thus, deserve to be recognised and respected as they are indeed the “unsung heroes of the war” (Cancian, 2021).

### Afghan Army Deployment

**GRAPH-3**



Not months, not weeks, but it took only 11 days for the Taliban to take Afghanistan. The world saw in horror as the Afghanistan troops folded like a house of cards as more than \$83 billion was spent on rebuilding these troops (Live Mint, 2021). After all, One cannot blame the troops for the situation. Several factors have led to the systematic weakness of the forces.

#### *Rampant corruption and cronyism*

There is deep resentment by the troops for the leadership as they turned a blind eye to the harsh reality that gripped the working of the forces. There were many generals and officers in the armed forces who were corrupt. There have been several cases where funds were allotted to purchase logistical resources but were instead pocketed by the officers. Several other issues have also been highlighted where the contractors bribed the commanders to get contracts for

food supplies to the troops. Sadly, the contractors compromised on the quality and quantity of the food supplies, forcing the officers to purchase food from their pockets (Alijani, 2020).

Also, the Afghan Army was forced to wear Army boots that had holes in them and had to stand in a bunker that could not withstand even a minor attack. Such deep-rooted was corruption and cronyism. However, it was not just the Army. The primary source of corruption that weakened the forces was the political system that comprised the policymakers of Afghanistan. The SIGAR report of 2016 narrated how corruption has increased manifold in the USA backed government. The mind-boggling report further expressed how the corruption affected the country's functioning and made several recommendations to address the complication (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2016).

The USA presumed that to purchase information and loyalty, they would have to pay every player in the country, so they did the same. The USA had the resources to fund enormously, and thus they utilised it. Relationships were built by buying loyalty and information. In the end, about 40% of the money went into the hands of Afghan officials, insurgents, and militants (Stockman, 2021). The USA funding that was meant to assist development in due course became a source of funding to the anti-government forces. It made them more robust by the day. These were treacherous to the country's growth and significantly impacted the people trying to give their utmost sincerity and honesty for their country.

The leaders were corrupt and did not take accountability for the betterment of the nation. It became one of the main deterrents to the mission of the Afghan forces. It eventually resulted in the troops lacking loyalty and the urge to fight for their nation and against the Taliban (The Economic Times, 2021). Low morale, lack of support from political leaders, and severe corruption were the fundamental reasons that resulted in the Afghan forces surrendering without a fight rather than going into hiding as a fear of being killed by the Taliban (Rosenberg, 2021). Apart from corruption paralysing the entire force, the systematic practice of "ghost soldiers" further reduced the forces' capabilities.

#### *Ghost-soldiers*

The rampant corruption also meant that the paperwork was far from the truth. As per reports, the USA lost over \$300 million as innumerable soldiers and police officers only existed on the paper (Goraya, 2021). It was a system made by the officers from the Afghanistan forces to pocket in extra cash. So, even though 352,000 soldiers and police were enlisted in the records, only 254,000 could be confirmed by the Afghanistan forces (Mishra, 2021). There were other instances where the seniors never reported the war casualties as they were drawing salaries using the bank accounts of the dead soldiers. Lack of proper planning while training the Afghan troops was one of the many gaps in the system that the USA and its allies tried to rectify (Whitlock, 2019).

The USA tried to solve the problem of 'ghost soldiers' by creating a new method. According to the new guidelines, the salary payments were made only to those registered biometrically in the Afghanistan Army and carried similar identity cards (Donati & Amiri, 2017). Despite that

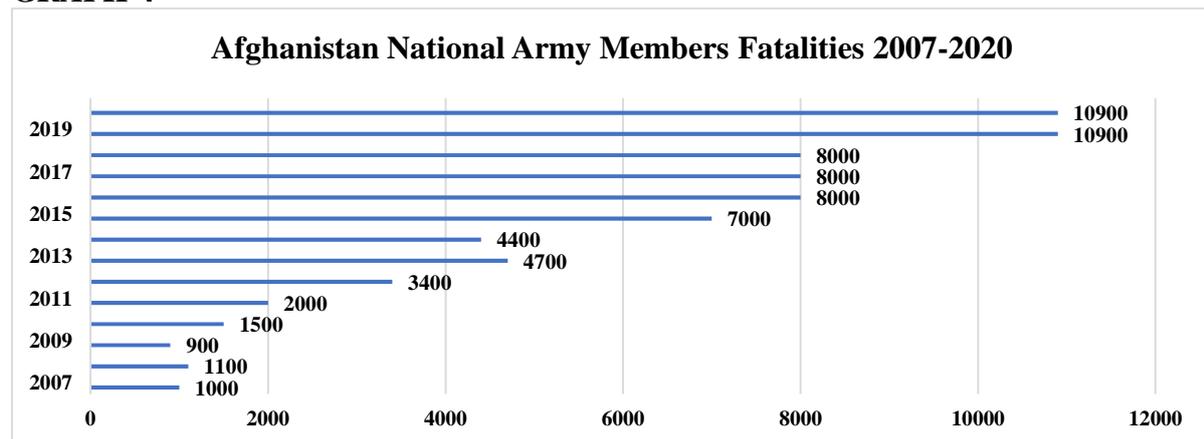
reform, there was not much improvement in the situation. Thus, the 'ghost soldier' issue finally showcased its impact when there was a lack of men to fight the Taliban, as hundred and thousands of officers only existed on paper (BBC News, 2021). Another issue that played a notable role in the lack of success among the forces was the lack of education.

### *Lack of education*

Education is essential for the effective utilisation of modern warfare pieces of equipment. As over 95% of the force was illiterate, they could not use the weapons accurately or coordinate on a map. Thus, over \$200 million was spent on a 15-week training for the troops. However, the lack of re-enlisting in the troops meant that the USA troops and allies were forced to train fresh recruits repeatedly to maintain the number. All this process led to a deterioration in the quality of the forces (Miglani, 2012).

### **Afghan Army Casualties**

#### **GRAPH-4**



The above graph shows a rough estimate of the Afghan army casualties. On average, about 22 deaths were recorded each day (Brookings Institution, 2020). So, to prevent the troops from getting demoralised, the Afghan government formally stopped reporting the casualties in 2016 (Gibbons-Neff, 2017). Overall, there have been more than 66,000 Afghan troop casualties since the beginning of the war (Dunleavy, 2021). As per the statements by President Ghani, the forces have lost 45,00 officers since 2014 (BBC News, 2019). Since then, the number has only increased.

During this period, almost all security responsibilities were handed out to the Afghan troops to prepare for a formal exit of the USA and its allies. Over 500 men were killed each month, and several more were severely wounded (The Guardian, 2018). So, a high casualty rate and low recruitment turnover make it difficult to build an army.

The war involved the policymakers and the troops of the USA and the allies. In addition, there were the Afghanistan policymakers and the military. Now, several loopholes were repeatedly mentioned by the SIGAR in its quarterly reports. However, none of these loopholes was addressed, and if addressed, they were not efficient enough to eliminate the root cause.

Alongside this issue were several barriers to policy implementation among the Afghans. It was prevalent due to the widespread corruption prevailing in the government and the armed forces. It acted as an insidious cause for the lack of progress in the country. In this regard, one can blame the USA and the allies for not reviewing and re-evaluating their errors and rectifying them in time.

Hence, this fact prevented Afghanistan from operating independently without assistance from the West. All of this culminated in the fall of the Afghanistan troops and the ultimate takeover of the country. Thus, the war started with the Taliban ruling the country until the USA invasion, to then finally Taliban ruling the country again after the USA withdrawal. So, one can blame the Afghanistan policymakers and the Afghan troops.

The primary force of demotivation was the leaders fleeing the country rather than facing the situation that resulted in the troops giving up without a fight. So, the Afghan forces should not be entirely blamed for the current situation. Several causes led to an efficient military and government mechanism in the country. Every stakeholder, be it Afghanistan or the USA and its Allies, is responsible for the chaos. One cannot deny that there is no way of losing a war; however, the USA lost the war and left Afghanistan in peril.

### **Afghan Civilian Deaths**

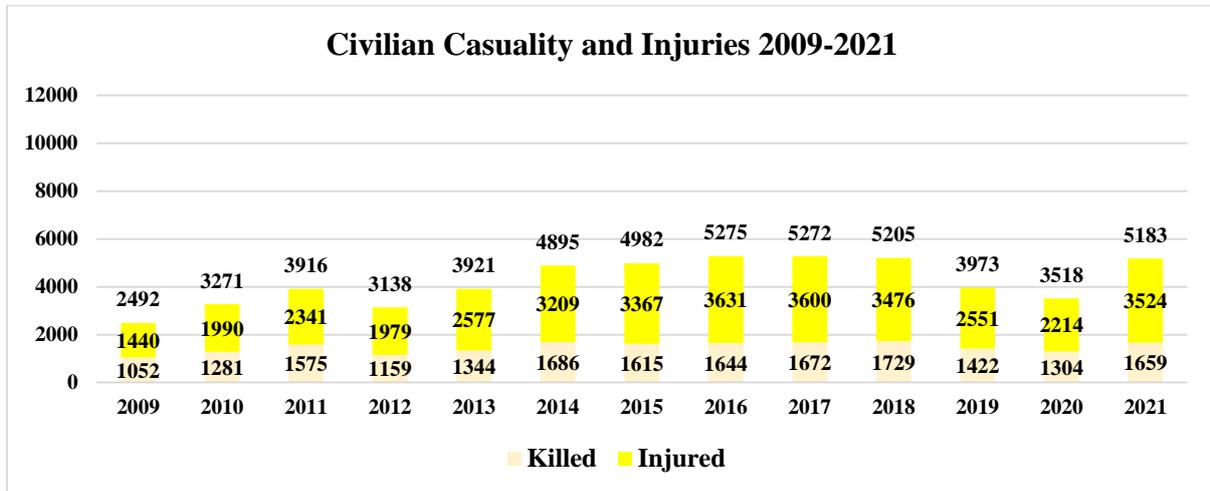
The war had affected all the stakeholders. However, the Afghanistan civilians were affected the most because of the war. Innocent people lost their lives as they paid a massive price for belonging to a country that had sheltered the preparators of the 9/11 attack. Even though the USA-led war began in 2001, neither an international organisation nor any war stakeholder undertook to gather and analyse data to account for the lives lost. In 2008, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) formed the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell that later was transformed into Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team in 2011.

The problem is that the data collected by these organisations was analysed and compiled into reports primarily for the commanders and the security forces. This way, the troops could investigate the locations prone to attack and the high civilian casualty rate. The methodology followed for data collection was not as per the international standards. Also, even though these data were made public, it was not consistent. Hence, it cannot be considered reasonably accurate with the details.

When the war intensified in 2007, The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) decided to get formally involved. The organisation uses a structured method report to explain the civilian deaths caused by the war in Afghanistan following international humanitarian law. To conduct a proper analysis, UNAMA has divided the stakeholders responsible for civilian casualties into three parts:

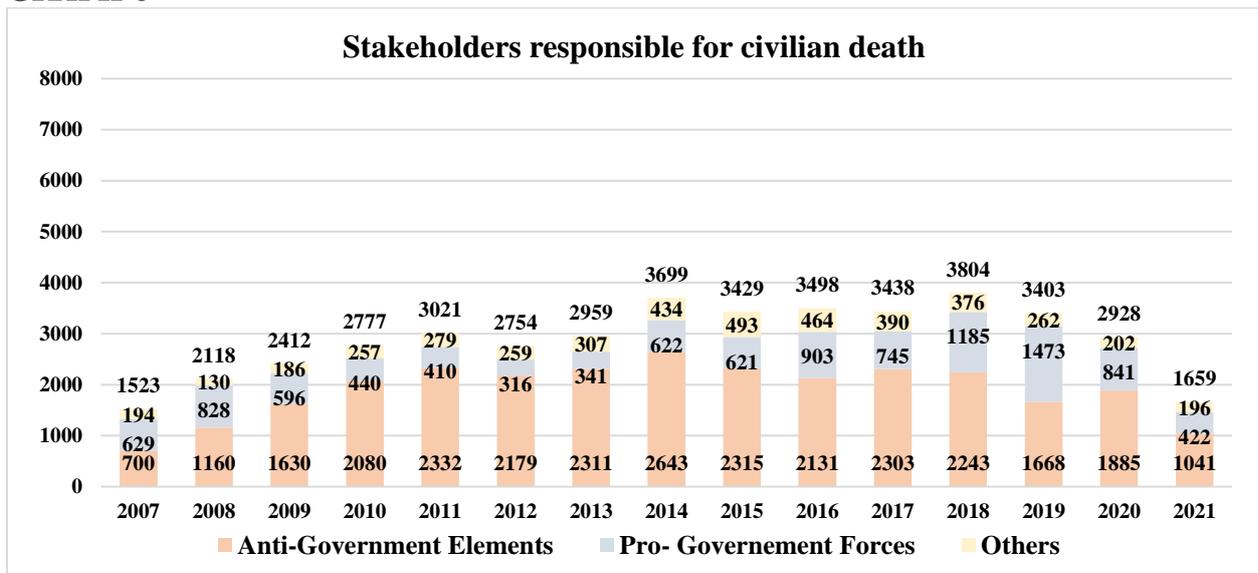
- Anti-government elements
- Pro-government forces
- Others

**GRAPH-5**



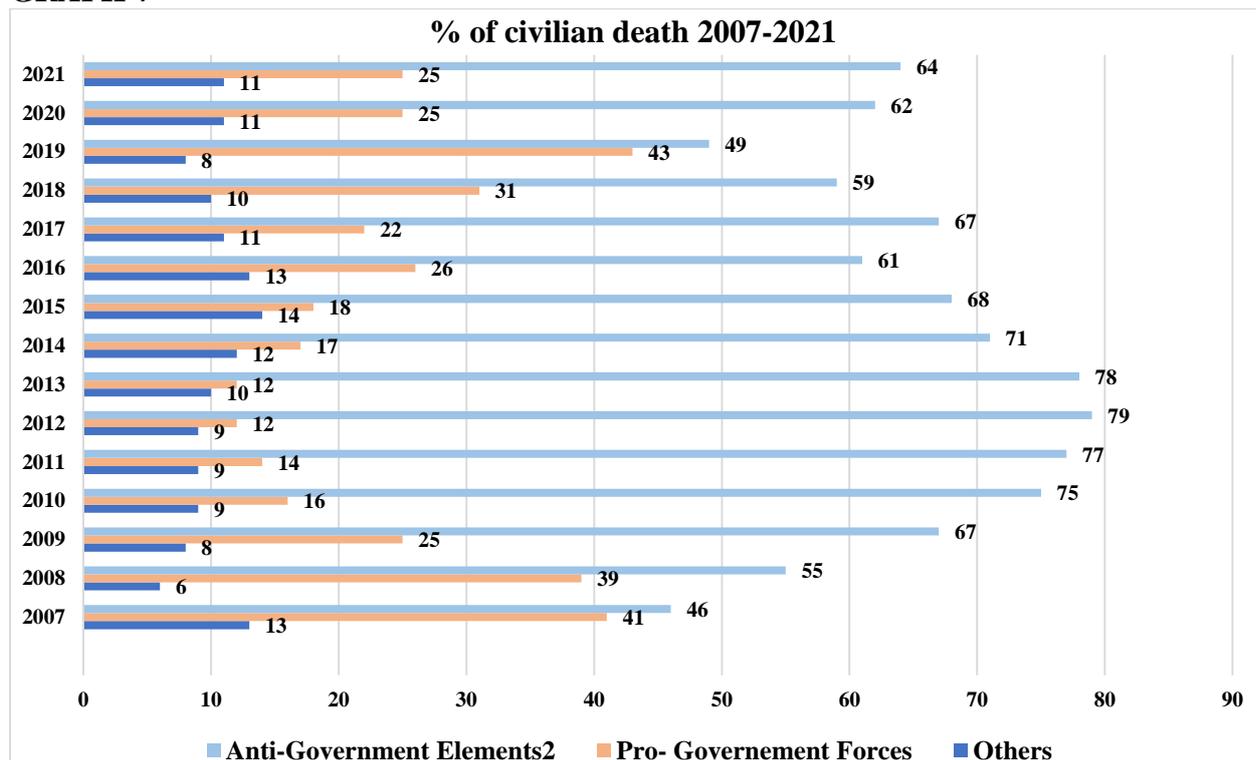
In 2007, the UNAMA had reported that 2,118 deaths followed 1,582 casualties in 2008. Since then, there has mainly been an increase in the total casualties (both killed and injured). After 2014, there were more than 3,000 cases of injured civilians, and it only decreased in 2019. Not only that, but the death toll was also high in 2011, although it did come down in 2012-13. However, it further increased in 2014 and remained so until 2018. As of 2021, 3,524 injuries were reported in the year's first half. The cases are only expected to rise post the withdrawal due to violence. In total, as of this date, more than 47,600 civilian casualties have been reported (Saif, 2021b).

**GRAPH-6**



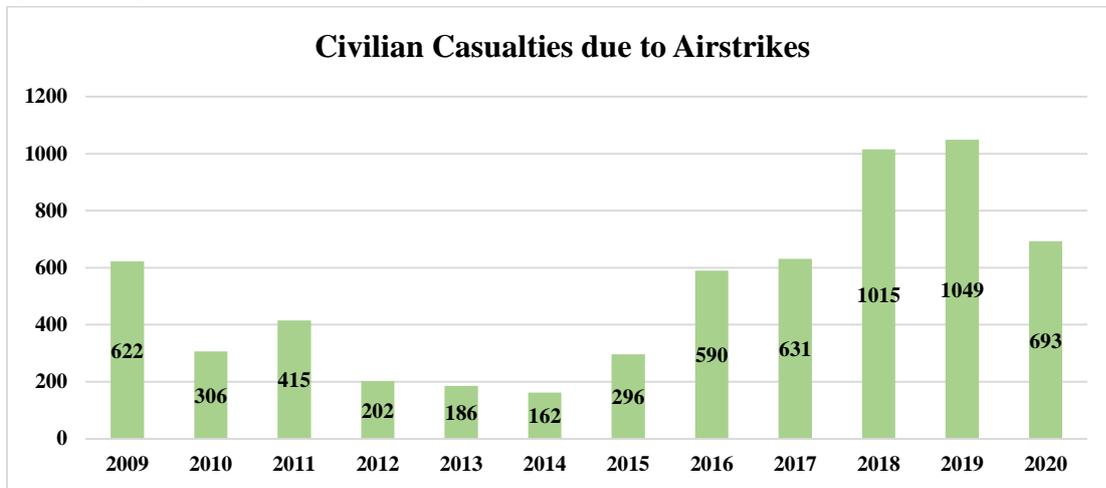
The highest civilian death toll was 1,729 reported in 2018, and the highest reported injury was 3,631 in 2016. It shows that there has been an increase in civilian death in the first half of 2021, and it reverses the entire trend where violence generally takes place in the second half of the year. Not only that, the recorded death toll is more than that in the previous two years. With the USA withdrawal and the subsequent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, it is expected that the numbers would only rise.

**GRAPH-7**

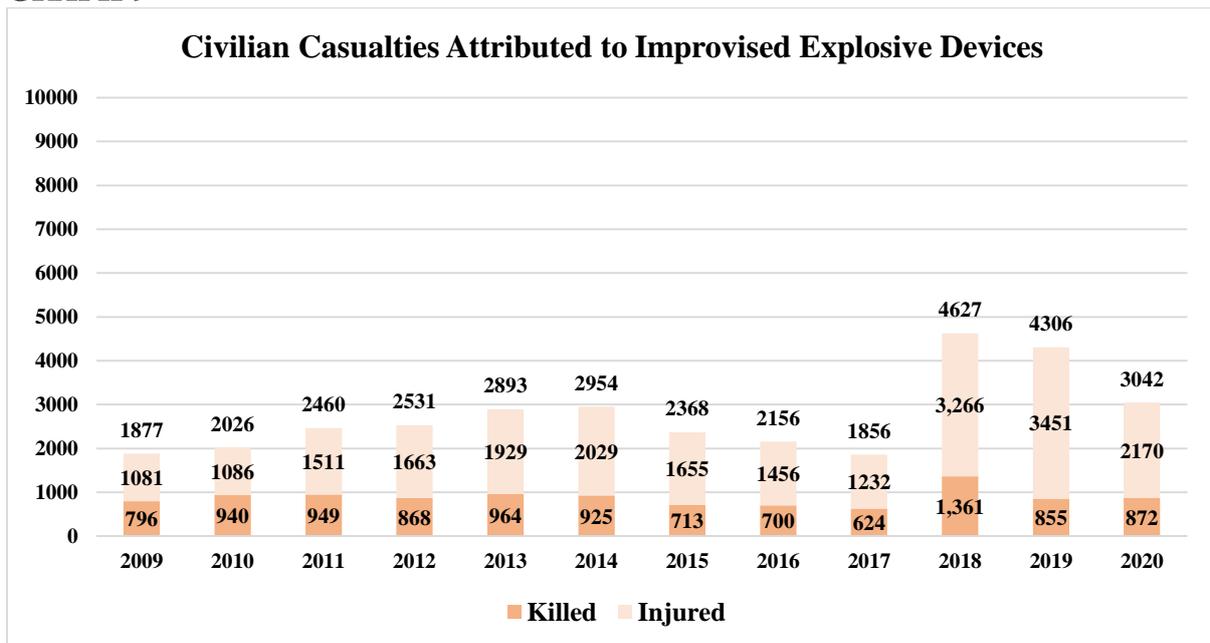


There are several causes to the civilian casualties as divided by the UNAMA. However, the major causes as differentiated by the UNAMA includes – Explosive Remanent of War, Ground Engagements, Targeted Killings, Air Strikes, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and Other causes. However, the casualties due to Explosive Remanent of War, Ground Engagements, Air Strikes and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) are the most significant causes of deaths. The graphs show the casualties due to the four major reasons (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2021).

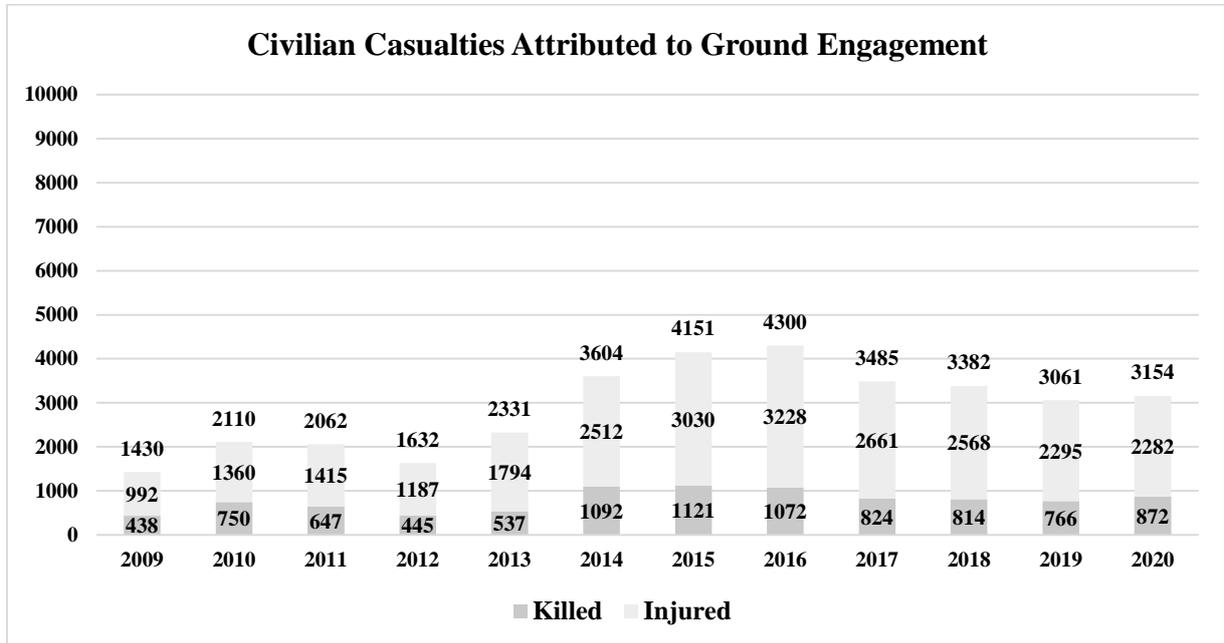
**GRAPH-8**



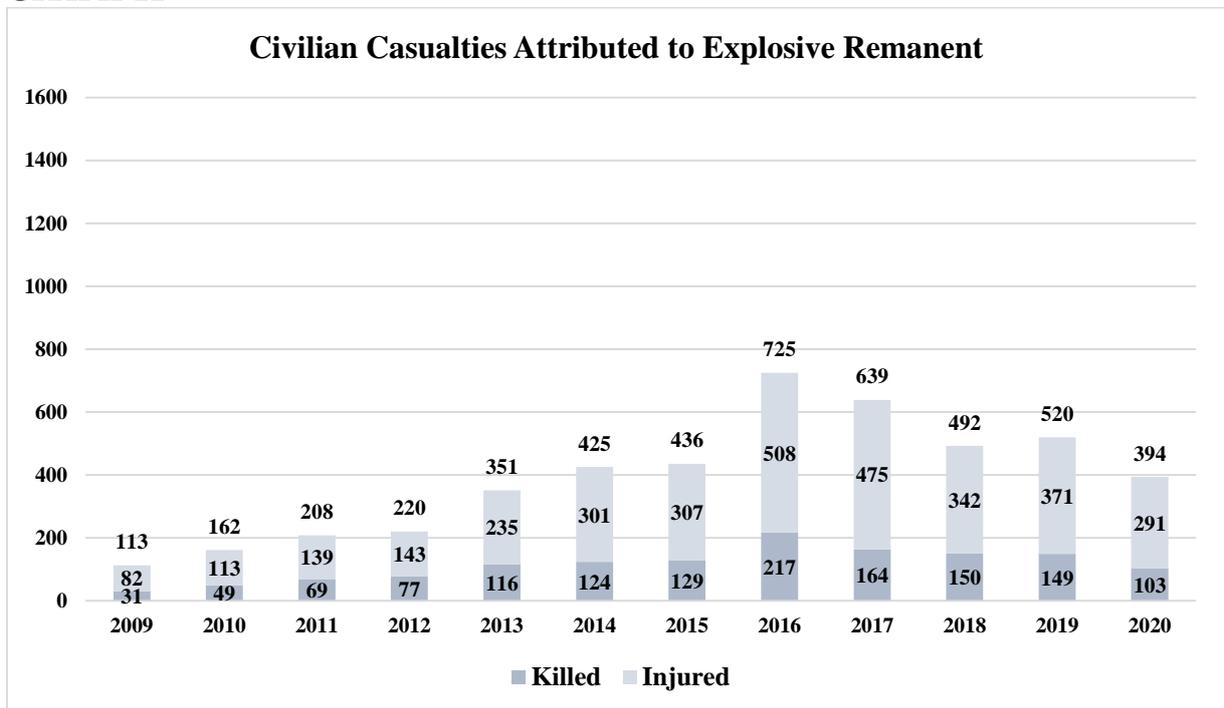
**GRAPH-9**

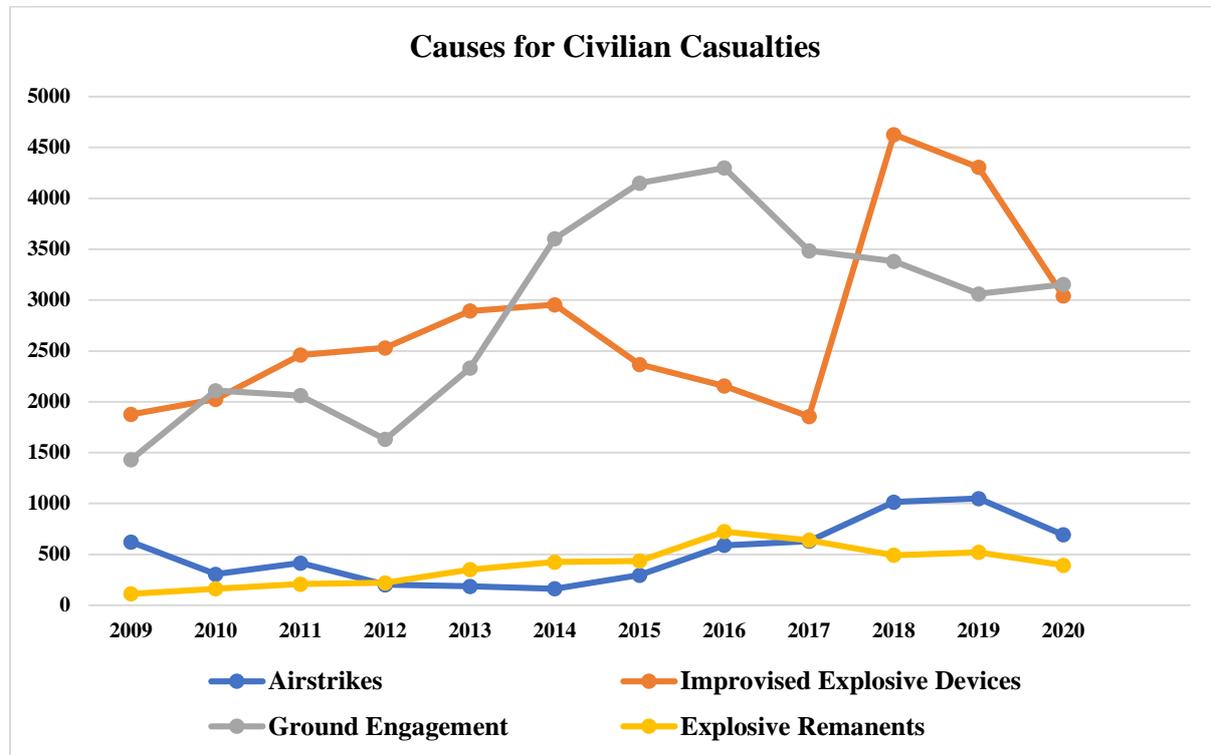


**GRAPH-10**



**GRAPH-11**



**GRAPH-12**

All the figures mentioned above are mere estimates as several casualties are not accounted for due to the adopted research methodologies adopted by the organisation. According to the report- “UNAMA does not claim that statistics presented in this report are complete and may be under-reporting civilian casualties given limitations inherent in the operating environment.” Hence, the actual figures are higher than that is concluded by the UNAMA.

### Afghan Civilians Affected by War

As of 2020, with 2,595,000 refugees, Afghanistan has the third-largest group in the world displaced across the border. The overall international displacement situation of Afghanistan stands at over 2.6 million. More than 90% of the population is in Pakistan and Iran (ReliefWeb, 2021). The maximum number of Afghan refugees reside in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021).

As of December 2020, over 2.9 million internally displaced people and refugees are registered and protected by the UNHRC (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2021). 58% of the people affected due to displacement are children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021).

From January- September 2021, 72,056 new refugees and asylum seekers and over 592,431 internally displaced people have been added to that list since the rise in the conflict in Afghanistan (The UN Refugee Agency, 2021b). However, according to another report, in 2020,

there will be over 404,000 newly displaced people 2020, taking the entire count to 3,547,00 internally displaced people by the end of the year (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021).

Thus, the estimates by the UNHRC are understated as the UNHRC does not register all the internally displaced people. Not only that, as of 2019, Afghanistan had the second-highest new individual asylum applications. If that was not enough, there has been a rise in gender-based crimes in Afghanistan against women and children by 97% (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021).

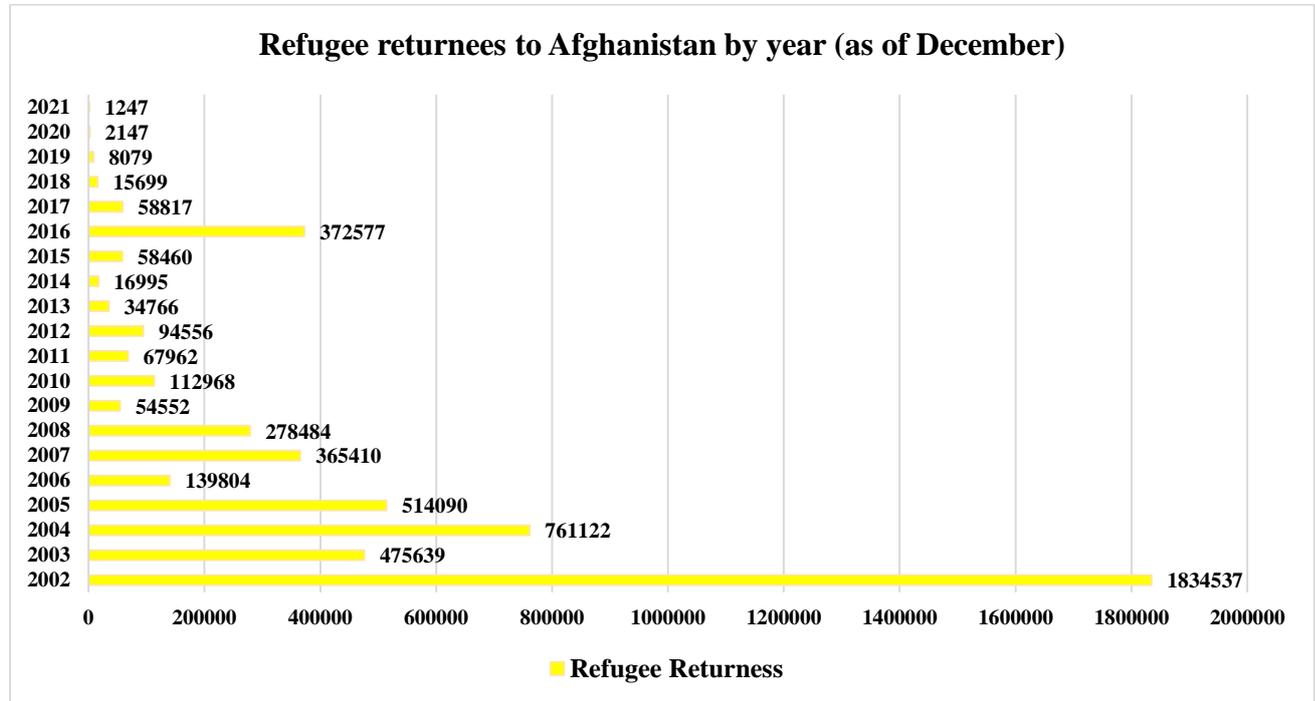
**TABLE-3 Affected Civilians in Afghanistan (The UN Refugee Agency, 2021a)**

Category	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
<b>Refugees</b>	72,278	72,228	72,231	75,928	237,069	59,771	237,069
<b>Asylum Seekers</b>	167	251	285	218	82	128	82
<b>Internally Displaced People (IDP)</b>	28,863,197	2,553,390	2,106,893	1837079	1174306	1797551	1174306
<b>Returned IDP</b>	-	-	73,527	32,649	123,653	383,951	123,653
<b>Returned Refugees</b>	2311	8402	16220	60545	61379	114221	63379
<b>Others of Concern</b>	82595	447093	489854	448032	150317	-	150317
<b>Refugee like concern</b>	-	-	-	-	20,485	-	20,485

All of these are mere figures. After the withdrawal, over 49,000 refugees live in former military bases, hoping to resettle in the USA. In comparison, over 18,000 refugees live on overseas bases (Steinhauer & Sullivan, 2021). With the winter to set in and people living under open or unprotected spaces with little to no basic needs, the UN believes that over 1 million children might suffer from severe malnutrition (Santora et al., 2021).

The below graph describes the refugee returned to Afghanistan. It has been observed that since 2017 when the withdrawal of the USA troops began from Afghanistan began, the number of returnees has reduced (Operational Data Portal, 2021).

**GRAPH-13**



**Journalists and Humanitarian Workers Casualties**

According to Committee to Protect Journalists, an estimated 64 journalists and 11 media workers have died in Afghanistan since 2001. (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021) Also, 459 humanitarian workers have died and 378 injured in Afghanistan from 2001-2021 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021).

**Summary of the Casualties in the war**

Group	Casualties
USA Troops	2,465
Allies	1,144
Contractors	3,917
Afghanistan troops	66,000
Journalists	75
Humanitarian Workers	459
Afghanistan Civilians	47,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>102,518</b>

One can thus state that a lot needs to be understood about the human cost of the war. There is a lack of accurate data on deaths and injuries during the war. Different sources quote different figures. It highlights the discrepancies in accountability of the human cost of war in Afghanistan. Also, there is vast corruption and no standardised methodology to collect and account for the data. Consequently, it is safe to assume that these numbers are mere estimates and the actual figures are higher than the same. All the estimates are based on the different

academic sources that, over time, developed their research methodologies to conclude the human cost of the war.

Hence, it is essential that all the governments of countries involved in the war formulate a commission that can further review the data reporting and make necessary reforms to further deeply understand the human cost of the war.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The 20-year war in Afghanistan has ended, and the USA has played a significant role. Thus, it is essential to understand the current policy framework while also accepting several loopholes in the reporting. There are specific recommendations that the policymakers need to consider for proper understanding of the “Cost of War.”

#### *Need for comprehensive accounting on the USA and Allies casualties*

Despite the war taking place for over two decades, there is no development of the research methodology for collecting data and accounting for the USA's deaths and injuries and allies' troop's contractors from the USA and other nations in the war zone. Time and again, government departments, such as the Department of Defence (DOD) Department of Labour, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, have issued figures on the human cost. Unfortunately, they never provided exhaustive documentation to justify the concluding numbers. Neither the government of the USA nor that of the allied nations took any step regarding the same.

This lack of systematic reporting encouraged several private and public organisations to formulate their methodologies to report on the human cost of the war. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Cost of War project by The Watson Institute of International Affairs at Brown University, are some of these organisations working on the project about the cost of war in Afghanistan, among many others. Therefore, the USA government must collect and analyse data, compile a systematic and detailed report on the casualties, and make it available.

#### *Need for reporting on the Afghan troops killed and injured*

There has been a lack of reporting on the deaths and wounded in the Afghan troops since 2016. these details were not reported due to the high number of casualties in the Afghan troops. Besides that, there was a massive turnover in the recruitment process. There are only estimates in the public forum about it due to media reports. However, they are not consistent with being considered mere estimates.

Nonetheless, with the war coming to an end, it is essential that there is proper reporting regarding the number of deaths and wounded number. Reporting these to the public would only lower the people's morale who aspire to join the forces. In this manner, they will know the repercussion of the decision made by their policymakers (Nordland, 2018).

#### *Need for comprehensive accounting on Afghan civilian casualties*

It was only in 2007 that the UNAMA started recording the civilian casualty due to the rising intensity of the war. It was almost six years after the war began. Before that, there was neither meticulous research methodology nor proper reporting on civilian death. Thus, the UNAMA reports are one of the most extensive reports on the civilians of the war. However, it is considered only an estimate and not complete data about the on-ground reality. The methodology adopted by UNAMA does not account for all the civilian deaths in the country due to war. Their report states - "UNAMA does not claim that statistics presented in this report are complete and may be under-reporting civilian casualties given limitations inherent in the operating environment."

First, there has been a lack of proper documentation of the civilian casualty since the beginning of the war. Moreover, the existing reports also understate it as many more people have lost their lives than documented. Those lives will thus be never be considered taken into account.

Hence, the USA government and the United Nations should ensure that all the civilian casualties must be considered and systematically compiled into a report that analyses the civilian cost of war. The concerned report should include deaths that have occurred directly and indirectly due to the war.

#### *Need for comprehensive accounting on opposition fighter casualties*

Despite the comprehensive reporting by the UNAMA on the Afghan civilian casualties, there is no statement in the deaths of the opposition fighters. These forces are declared anti-government forces by the United Nations. Despite them being one of the major causes of civilian casualties, it is essential to estimate the number of opposition fighters who have lost their lives in this war. after all, they are also human lives.

Consequently, it is significant that the USA and the United Nations record the deaths of the opposition fighters. When we include their death toll, we will culminate the total human cost of war.

#### *Need for annual reporting by the Congressional Research Service*

As the USA Congress's research institute, the organisation provides research reports on significant issues about the USA. However, despite having a humungous responsibility, there has been no delineated report by the Congressional Research Service that reports the cost of the "Global War on Terror".

The last such report was published in 2014. Since then, there has been no update on that report, nor have any new reports documenting those aspects of the war. There is no denying that there are several other reports on the Afghanistan war, hoover, there is a lack of thorough reporting on the cost of the war. Thus, the Congressional Research Service should publish a comprehensive annual report on the cost of war waged by the USA in Afghanistan.

*Need for annual reporting by the Congressional Research Service on the displaced Afghan civilians*

There are still millions of refugees who were displaced. Millions of those are not getting necessities to lead a livelihood due to the war. Hence, the Congressional Research Service should publish a structured report on the displaced refugees.

*Need for transparency and easy access to the reports about the cost of war*

There is a dire need for consistent documentation in the public domain. So far, there have been several documents on the human war. However, these documents are opaque and difficult to comprehend by the general public. Many of these reports run into 100s of pages with figures, graphs and data. They are scattered under various government departments and international organisations. All these intra-department reports must be compiled methodologically and comprehensively. Also, all these documents should be easily accessible to the public for better public understanding.

### **Research Implications**

War was and always shall remain a tragedy in terms of the human cost. However, the prolonged war in Afghanistan has increased this tragedy by several manifolds. Proper reporting of casualties is essential. It is too crucial on both legal and moral grounds. Each life is precious, and it ensures that all of them are treated equally and respectfully. However, despite decades of war and having enormous humanitarian relevance, there was not much emphasis on the same. There are numerous inadequacies in the reporting of the bloodshed. Several international organisations have varied data on the same aspect of the human cost of war. Hence, this research work titled 'The Graveyard of Empires: Human Cost of War in Afghanistan' was conducted to delineate the human cost of war in Afghanistan.

The research work involved collecting data from several UN agencies, government reports, media sources and work by other research centres. The paper analyses and delineates the data to account for the lives lost and the devastating impact on millions due to the war. The report also involves investigating all these data to comprehend the depth of the human cost while simultaneously reviewing the fallacies on various reporting stages. Hence, the paper aims to highlight all these loopholes and provide conventional policy recommendations to rectify the same.

### **CONCLUSION**

The USA and its allies withdrawing from Afghanistan drew curtains on the 20-year war in the country. What went wrong? Where did it go wrong? What could have been the ideal course of action that could have changed the present scenario? were some of the vital questions that both policymakers and the public started raising crucial questions about the cost of the war. Unfortunately, these questions and retrospection on the involvement in the war should have started taking place long back when the world leaders realised that there had been a stagnation

in progress. They should have reviewed their involvement in the country and re-evaluated whether the country would fall into the hands of the Taliban in case the troops withdrew from the region. Thousands of people have lost their lives in this war. More so, are those who are hurt the most are the people who are still alive to see their sweat and blood being turned to dust. The force that was considered evil, the force they wanted to destroy completely, is the same force that has now formed the government and is ruling the country. Nevertheless, everyone will agree that - the war has ended, the cost has not.

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