



## **China's Back to Jerusalem Movement and Afghanistan**

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### **Abstract**

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With U.S. military withdrawal and Afghanistan's sudden collapse in August 2021, China is now poised to step in and integrate Kabul into its Silk Road initiatives. And along for the ride as a byproduct of Beijing's expanding influence, are Christian missionaries from China's Back to Jerusalem Movement. Where the U.S. failed in addressing the various challenges of Pakistan's complicity with the Taliban, misguided mission of nation-building and especially endemic corruption within the Afghan government, the lessons learned was that Afghan hearts and minds could not be forced to change from the outside. Now with the Chinese missionaries spreading the Gospel and trying to change Afghanistan one heart at a time, it remains to be seen if China will have more success in transforming the country from the inside.

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## Analysis

*"Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." Psalms 127:1*

Long before the U.S. military withdrawal and surrender of Afghanistan to the Taliban, China has been quietly watching with an eye on establishing a strategic foothold in the country post-U.S. departure. Pundits all over the world immediately offered various reasons for why Afghanistan collapsed after nearly two decades of U.S./NATO occupation—from Pakistan's complicity with the Taliban, rampant corruption within the Afghan government, misguided mission of nation-building, to a war-weary American public.<sup>1</sup> In the main, endemic corruption is cited as the major cause of the country's collapse, and if China wants to better navigate this complex terrain, it would need to learn important lessons from where the U.S. failed in Afghanistan.

### Western-enabled corruption: Warlordism, Ponzi schemes, and Bible-burning by U.S. military

In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America", Sarah Chayes—advisor on Afghanistan from 2002 to 2009 in the Bush and Obama administrations—portrayed a dismal picture of how the U.S. enabled a system of elite predation and high-level corruption that had metastasized into so many levels of Afghan government and society.<sup>2</sup> She noted how almost every interaction from local officials to teachers and doctors involved extortion. According to a 2010 survey, the amounts of bribes paid each year was between \$2 billion to \$5 billion, about 13% of Afghanistan's GDP. In another interview, Chayes also discussed how a key error was made when right after 2001, the CIA brought back warlords that the Taliban had kicked out in the 1990s, and re-established a kleptocracy.<sup>3</sup> The corrupt warlords, now backed by the U.S. government, were as equally abusive as the Taliban towards the Afghan people and for decades "committed gross human rights abuses", as observed in an U.S. Institute of Peace article.<sup>4</sup> Yet as a result of their close ties with the United States, there was no accountability and crimes were often overlooked.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, a 2016 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan's Reconstruction (SIGAR) report detailed how U.S. officials turned a blind eye to corruption within President Karzai's inner circle.<sup>6</sup> In a *NBC News* article, Casey

<sup>1</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan supports terrorist groups, and why the US finds it so hard to induce change", Brookings Institution Order from Chaos Blog, January 5, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/05/why-pakistan-supports-terrorist-groups-and-why-the-us-finds-it-so-hard-to-induce-change/>; Casey Michel, "America enabled Afghanistan's corruption for years. The Taliban Knew it", *NBC News*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/america-enabled-afghanistan-s-corruption-years-taliban-knew-it-ncna1277327>; Daron Acemoglu, "Why Nation-Building Failed in Afghanistan", *Project Syndicate*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/afghanistan-top-down-state-building-failed-again-by-daron-acemoglu-2021-08?barrier=accesspaylog>; Trevor Hunnicutt and Idrees Ali, "Biden Afghanistan policy counts on war weary Americans to lose interest", *Reuters*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/bidens-afghanistan-policy-counts-issue-fading-importance-war-weary-americans-2021-08-20/>

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America", *Foreign Affairs*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-03/afghanistans-corruption-was-made-in-america>

<sup>3</sup> "What really happened in Afghanistan: Marianne Williamson conversation with author Sarah Chayes", Youtube, September 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rPjZBNBPrY>; Barmak Pazhwak, Asma Ebadi, Belquis Ahmadi, "After Afghanistan Withdrawal: A return to 'Warlordism'?", U.S. Institute of Peace, June 25, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/after-afghanistan-withdrawal-return-warlordism>

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Gossman, "Doing Human Rights in Afghanistan Right This Time", *Human Rights Watch*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/27/doing-human-rights-afghanistan-right-time#>; Barmak Pazhwak et al, "After Afghanistan Withdrawal: A return to 'Warlordism'?", U.S. Institute of Peace, June 25, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/after-afghanistan-withdrawal-return-warlordism>

<sup>5</sup> "Today We shall all Die"—Afghanistan's Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity", *Human Rights Watch*, March 3, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/03/today-we-shall-all-die/afghanistans-strongmen-and-legacy-impunity#>

<sup>6</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", September 2016, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL-Executive-Summary.pdf>



Michel documented how the U.S. set up a banking system that became a Ponzi scheme which siphoned off nearly \$1 billion to high-level Afghan officials via fictitious companies.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, billions of dollars in illicit funds also flowed out of the country and into money laundering hotspots like Dubai, while at least 40% of thousands of Pentagon contracts worth tens of billions of dollars went to criminal syndicates and criminal officials.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of such rampant corruption, Michel rebuked if we should be surprised when the “willingness of the U.S. to foster kleptocracy in Afghanistan ended up blowing up in our faces, or that a corrupt client-state government would collapse as soon as its patron left?” Likewise, Chayes asked, “how did the Americans ever expect Afghans to keep risking their lives on behalf of a government that had abused them—with Washington’s permission—for decades?” And as former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker lamented a few years ago, “The ultimate point of failure for our efforts...wasn’t an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.”<sup>9</sup>

The corruption also manifested in the decline of religious freedom in Afghanistan. Despite U.S. rhetoric of bringing democracy to the country, the Afghan government turned it into a tyranny of the majority with no protection for minority and religious rights.<sup>10</sup> This is especially highlighted by decades of persecution against Afghan Christians by the U.S.-backed government.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, the last public Christian church in Afghanistan was razed to the ground, and although Afghan Christians asked for Bibles, in 2008 the U.S. military committed the unspeakable act to many Christians of burning thousands of donated Bibles on Bagram Base as trash.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Casey Michel, “America enabled Afghanistan’s corruption for years. The Taliban knew it.”, *NBC News*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/america-enabled-afghanistan-s-corruption-years-taliban-knew-it-ncna1277327>

<sup>8</sup> Jon Boone, “The financial scandal that broke Afghanistan’s Kabul Bank”, *The Guardian*, June 16, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/16/kabul-bank-afghanistan-financial-scandal>; Craig Whitlock, “Consumed by Corruption”, *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-corruption-government/>

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR report, September 2016, <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/corruption-in-conflict/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> Tom A Peter, “Women’s rights in Afghanistan lose steam”, *Christian Science Monitor*, March 8, 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0308/Women-s-rights-in-Afghanistan-lose-steam>; Edwin Mora, “Not a Single Christian Church Left in Afghanistan, Says State Department”, *CNS News*, October 10, 2011, <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/not-single-christian-church-left-afghanistan-says-state-department>

<sup>11</sup> “Imprisoned Afghan Christian Released from Prison”, *Persecution*, February 24, 2011, <https://www.persecution.org/2011/02/24/imprisoned-afghan-christian-released-from-prison/>; Ray Rivera, “Afghan Rights Fall Short For Christian Converts”, *New York Times*, February 5, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/asia/06mussa.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Gledhill, “No Churches, Violence and Harassment: Life for Christians in Afghanistan”, *Christianity Today*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/no-churches-violence-and-harassment-life-for-christians-in-afghanistan/97709.htm>; Todd Starnes, “The day the U.S. military burned the Bible in Afghanistan”, *Fox News*, March 2, 2012, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/the-day-the-us-military-burned-the-bible-in-afghanistan>; CNN, “U.S. Military Burns Bibles in Afghanistan to Stop Proselytizing” May 20, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL0XgbSUubl>



Source: CNN, "U.S. Military Burns Bibles in Afghanistan to Stop Proselytizing", May 20, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL0XgbSUubl>

According to the Chinese underground church movement Back to Jerusalem which has a presence in Afghanistan, the western world that attempted to build democracy and a market economy, while allowing the continuation of human rights abuses and the persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, was the real reason "it went down in flames."<sup>13</sup>

Now, China is stepping in, and along with it, the underground church movement of Back to Jerusalem (BTJ).

### China's Back to Jerusalem Movement on the New Silk Road

With the departure of the U.S. military, China can finally integrate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Eurasia. There are several reasons why Afghanistan is important to China. Beijing wants to ensure it does not become a safe haven for militant Uyghurs to launch terrorist attacks, and it had been a missing link in railway and transport corridors connecting China to the Middle East and Europe. It is also rich in strategic minerals, and a key transit country for energy corridors.<sup>14</sup>

While some U.S. observers express concern at China's expanding influence in Afghanistan and Eurasia via the BRI, what is usually not reported is that the BTJ movement is treading the same silk roads. Birthed in the 1900s, it was a vision of Chinese missionaries to spread the Gospel from the east coast of China through the landlocked Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim lands until it reached where Christianity was first born—back to Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> The presence of Chinese missionaries across Eurasia is an unintended by-product of the Middle Kingdom's rise, and even if the Chinese Communist Party does not want them there, these Christian missionaries are nonetheless along for the ride, often serving in countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Burma.

Many of them are taking part in BRI projects, and the numbers of Christians in China are growing, with estimates ranging from 130 to nearly 200 million, of which several million are within the Chinese Communist Party. And despite the Chinese government's crackdown in the past few years, Christianity is growing by an average of 10% a year since 1980. Yang Fenggang of Purdue University estimates there will be 250 million Christians by 2030,

<sup>13</sup> Back to Jerusalem, "The Real Reason the Taliban is Back in Power that No One is Talking about", August 2021, <https://backtojerusalem.com/the-real-reason-taliban-is-back-in-power-that-no-one-is-talking-about/>

<sup>14</sup> Christina Lin, "The PLA's 'Orient Express': Militarization of the Iron Silk Road", *China Brief*, Vol 11, Issue 5, March 25, 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-orient-express-militarization-of-the-iron-silk-road/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://vimeo.com/39454827>



making China's Christian population the largest in the world.<sup>16</sup>

What the Chinese Christians learned is that whereas the international community spent billions of dollars hiring the most expensive consultants, lay out the most well-thought-out plans, sent in the best military in the world to execute their roles, sparing no expense for two decades, ultimately Afghanistan could not be forced to change from the outside. It could only be transformed from the inside, with changed hearts and mind.

Now, with the Chinese missionaries on the ground, they are laying a new cornerstone to rebuild Afghanistan. Armed with sacrificial love and a heart for the lost, BTJ teams have already been in Afghanistan for several years, risking their lives and providing humanitarian relief, health and medical services, building infrastructure, serving as interpreters and ministering to persecuted people. Whereas Washington failed to defeat its enemies by wielding fierce military and economic weapons and change Afghanistan from the outside, it may be that this time the Chinese Christians can change Afghanistan—one heart at a time—and transform the country from the inside.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on September 29, 2021.

#### About the Author of this Issue

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Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane's Information Group's Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



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<sup>16</sup> Christina Lin, "China's Back to Jerusalem Movement", *Times of Israel*, March 8, 2015.