

Chapter 2

THE MAR R AFCHARISTAR



National flag of Afghanistan



Map of Afghanistan

OVERVIEW

THE WORLD CHANGED ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 the infamous 9/11, and the United States reacted quickly. President George W. Bush promised to "bring our enemies to justice."¹ Afghanistan, where the 9/11 terrorist hijackings and attacks were organized by al-Qaeda, became the first combat zone in the Global War on Terrorism. The military codename for the war in Afghanistan was Operation Enduring Freedom. President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban, the Sunni Islamic fundamentalist party controlling Afghanistan, surrender al-Qaeda leaders who were under their protection. When the Taliban refused, the United States and Great Britain sent military forces to overthrow the Taliban.

Afghanistan has suffered four decades of continuous warfare. Roughly the size of Texas, it has a population of thirty-one million people. Almost half of the country is over six thousand feet in altitude. The mountainous terrain and forbidding weather can be harsh. War has destroyed much of the country's infrastructure, making it one of the poorest nations on earth. Ninety-nine percent of the country is Muslim-predominantly Sunni. There is a 75 percent illiteracy rate, life expectancy is only forty-three years, and the infant mortality rate is the highest in the world. Only 12 percent of the land can support agriculture, and water is scarce. Poverty, drug trafficking, and other criminal enterprises are widespread.² It has been said, only partly in jest, that the only measure in which Afghanistan leads the other nations of the world is alphabetically. To say Afghanistan is challenging-geographically, culturally, politically, and militarily-is an understatement.3

The first U.S. Special Forces deployed to northern Afghanistan less than one month after the September 11 attacks. Rapid success soon placed the United States and its coalition partners in control of major cities throughout the country. By mid-December, the Taliban had been removed from power. Despite rapid initial success, the Taliban soon resurfaced across the country (especially along the border with Pakistan and in the Helmand Province) and increasingly threatened coalition forces.

Operation Enduring Freedom lasted from 2001 to 2014, when the United States formally ended combat operations in Afghanistan. On May 2, 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan by U.S forces. On December 28, 2014, President Barack Obama observed that "for more than thirteen years, ever since nearly 3,000 innocent lives were taken from us on 9/11, our nation has been at war in Afghanistan. Now, thanks to the extraordinary sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, our combat mission in Afghanistan is ending." The president continued, "We honor the profound sacrifices that have made this progress possible. We salute every American-military and civilian, including our dedicated diplomats and development workers-who have served in Afghanistan, many on multiple tours, just as their families have sacrificed at home. . . . Afghanistan remains a dangerous place, and the Afghan people and their security forces continue to make tremendous sacrifices in defense of their country."4

After the president's remarks, Chuck Hagel, U.S. secretary of defense, commented, "At the end of this year, as our Afghan partners assume responsibility for the security of their country, the United States officially concludes Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2015, we begin our follow-on mission—Operation Freedom's Sentinel—to help secure and build upon the hard-fought gains of the last thirteen years." Secretary Hagel expressed his "deep gratitude to all U.S. personnel, both military and civilian, who have served in Afghanistan since 2001, many on multiple deployments. I also thank the thousands more who were a part of the mission at home and around the world. In fighting America's longest war, our people and their families have borne a heavy burden, and some paid the ultimate price."⁵

The war in Afghanistan is by far the longest continuous military engagement in the history of

the United States. As a special double issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine observed in 2019, "Exactly when the war in Afghanistan surpassed the Vietnam War as America's longest overseas war is debated—the comparison depends on which benchmarks you use. Last September [2018], however, the United States reached an indicator that clears away at least some of the confusion: The first cohort of Americans who were born after the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, became old enough to enlist in the war that followed," concluding that "Whatever else it is, the Global War on Terrorism is now a second-generation war."⁶ (See the Afghanistan timeline for additional details.)

CHURCH ORGANIZATION

WHEN CHURCH PRESIDENT GORDON B. HINCKLEY stood at the pulpit in the Salt Lake City Conference Center as the last speaker of the Sunday morning session during the October 2001 general conference, he said, "I have just been handed a note that says that a U.S. missile attack is under way. I need not remind you that we live in perilous times. I desire to speak concerning these times and our circumstances as members of this Church." He then continued:

You are acutely aware of the events of September 11, less than a month ago. Out of that vicious and ugly attack we are plunged into a state of war. It is the first war of the 21st century. The last century has been described as the most war-torn in human history. Now we are off on another dangerous undertaking, the unfolding of which and the end thereof we do not know. For the first time since we became a nation, the United States has been seriously attacked on its mainland soil. But this was not an attack on the United States alone. It was an attack on men and nations of goodwill everywhere. It was well planned, boldly executed, and the results were disastrous.... It was cruel and cunning, an act of consummate evil....

Those of us who are American citizens stand solidly with the president of our nation. The terrible forces of evil must be confronted and held accountable for their actions. This is not a matter of Christian against Muslim. . . . I ask particularly that our own people do not become a party in any way to the persecution of the innocent. Rather, let us be friendly and helpful, protective and supportive. It is the terrorist organizations that must be ferreted out and brought down. . . .

We are people of peace. We are followers of the Christ who was and is the Prince of Peace. But there are times when we must stand up for right and decency, for freedom and civilization, just as Moroni rallied his people in his day to the defense of their wives, their children, and the cause of liberty (see Alma 48:10).