

## Afghanistan after the Soviets: From jihad to tribalism

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In 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from Afghanistan leaving the embattled Afghan Communist government of President Mohammad Najibullah to fight against an emboldened mujahideen insurgency. Most experts expected a quick mujahideen victory once the Soviets were no longer directly involved in counterinsurgency operations in support of the Afghan government. But in the spring of 1989 the Afghan Communists beat the odds and defeated a mujahideen rebel offensive designed to capture the eastern city of Jalalabad. This proved to be a turning point, and for the next three years the Najibullah regime held out against the mujahideen ‘freedom fighters’. In fact the Afghan Communist regime actually outlasted its sponsor the Soviet Union. The reasons for this remarkable achievement can be traced, in part, to ethnic–tribal divisions among the quarreling mujahideen parties and the Afghan government’s ability to exploit them. This largely untold story has obvious implications for understanding the future of post-Karzai Afghanistan, tribalism, ethnicity, and foreign sponsorship in post-US Afghanistan. This article will explore the reasons for the resilience of the Najibullah Communist government and then assess possible implications for a post-2014 Afghan government.

**Keywords:** mujahideen; Soviets; Massoud; Najibullah; Dostum; Karzai; ethnicity

Unlike other wars, Afghan wars become serious only when they are over.  
Olaf Caroe. *The Pathans*. London, 1962.

### **Hubris (Termez, Soviet–Afghan border, 15 February 1989)**

Perhaps no image has become as symbolic of the Soviets’ humiliating defeat in Afghanistan as the photograph of Lieutenant General Boris Gromov leading the last Soviet troops out of Afghanistan and into Soviet Uzbekistan on 15 February 1989 (see Figure 1). After losing almost 15,000 Soviet soldiers and expending billions of rubles on a war that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev came to define as a ‘bleeding wound’, the Russians were withdrawing across the ‘Bridge

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Figure 1. Soviet armored personnel carriers retreating across the Bridge of Friendship back into the USSR from Afghanistan.

of Friendship' in humiliation. The picture of Gromov grimly walking back into the USSR was every bit as emblematic of the Soviet defeat as the famous image of the last US helicopter leaving the American embassy in Saigon in 1975.

The Vietnam withdrawal analogy is apt on many levels, for the Soviets were similarly leaving behind an allied government that was not expected to last long. As the Soviets' 40th Limited Contingent withdrew, Russian newspapers reported that mujahideen rebels were sharpening their knives and massing in the hills outside of Kabul and other cities to attack the weakened Afghan Communist forces. Without their Soviet 'big brothers' to bolster them, many in the Kremlin feared that the dispirited Afghan Communist regime of President Mohammad Najibullah would be quickly overwhelmed by the mujahideen resistance.<sup>1</sup>

The Soviets were not the only ones who seemed to see the writing on the wall. The CIA confidently predicted that the mujahideen would be able to bring down the 'puppet' Afghan Communist government within three to six months of the Soviet departure.<sup>2</sup> Most Western Afghanistan experts agreed. In a televised interview on ABC's MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, Afghan specialist David Isby, for example, predicted:

Najibullah, himself, could go very quickly. The regime, itself, has some staying power and I think it's likely to last into the spring and possibly even into the fall. But I think it's doomed... I think that by the end of the year the PDPA (Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan, i.e. the Communist) government or its successor will have fallen and what will emerge will be a government based on the Mujahadeen.<sup>3</sup>

Zalmay Khalilzad, a Washington DC-based Afghan expert who would later become US ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq under President George

W. Bush, similarly predicted, 'the Soviet-backed regime does not have enough forces to defend itself against the Mujahideen.'<sup>4</sup>

The Americans were not the only ones predicting a swift mujahideen victory over the embattled Afghan government forces. In Peshawar, Pakistan, a Saudi jihad volunteer and scion of the wealthy Bin Laden family named Osama, held celebrations of his own. As the Soviets pulled out, he confidently planned for the takeover of Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Bin Laden was already cultivating his image as the jihadi who had 'brought down the Communists' and was intent on capitalizing on 'his' victory.<sup>6</sup> His ultimate goal was to transform Afghanistan into a 'pure Islamic state' and *plazdarm* (an *Al Qaeda al Jihad*, base for Holy War) for the export of the jihad revolution to other Muslim countries. On that February in 1989 as Bin Laden prepared his small '*tanzim*' (brigade) of a couple of hundred Arab fighters for the final military push for Kabul, this goal appeared to be within reach.

There were other forces in the region banking on a mujahideen victory as well. Thousands of Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agents and military personnel were providing logistic support to the mujahideen as they moved to reclaim their homeland from the Communists. The Pakistanis were intimately involved in all aspects of the mujahideen's final push on Kabul, from helping them establish an interim government to providing weapons and financial support.

On Afghanistan's western borders the *Pasdaran* (the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) also stepped up its support for the Islamic rebels. This was clearly an attempt on behalf of the Shiite Iranians to keep up with the efforts of their Sunni Saudi rivals who were diverting billions of riyals to the seven Sunni mujahideen factions based in Pakistan.

But the support for the Afghan jihad was not limited to the Americans or the Muslim world. The Chinese, who had been clashing with the Soviets on the Ussuri River, got into the act by arming the advancing mujahideen with Chinese manufactured AK-47s and other weapons. Even the Israeli Defense Forces contributed to the Afghan jihad by training and equipping the mujahideen.<sup>7</sup>

With the support of capitals ranging from Washington, London, Cairo, and Tel Aviv, to Riyadh, Islamabad, Tehran, and Beijing (not to mention the backing of grassroots Arab volunteers and charities), the mujahideen rebellion against the Afghan Communist government was an unprecedented global-jihadi phenomenon that seemed destined to achieve a quick victory.

For their part, the Afghan mujahideen who were lionized by everyone from President Ronald Reagan to Bin Laden seemed to be more than deserving of the faith their supporters placed in their abilities. Such mujahideen legends as Massoud, the 'Lion of Panjsher', and Jalaladin Haqqani, the master of the cave complex at Zawhar Kili, had fought off full-scale Soviet offensives for years. These commanders had even expanded their territory in recent months as the Soviets drew down their forces. Without the threat of Soviet helicopterborne *spetsnaz* (special forces) and close air support, many analysts predicted that mujahideen's legendary leaders would make short shrift of the demoralized Afghan Communist forces.

There seemed to be little to stop the mujahideen forces, which were estimated to have swelled to more than 170,000 fighters, from taking the Afghan jihad to its final stage.<sup>8</sup> Most of the mujahideen agreed that that final stage would be the establishment of a legitimate Islamic state in Afghanistan. With the model of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime in Iran beckoning, the mujahideen rejected all talk of compromise with the Najibullah 'infidel' government.<sup>9</sup> They and their American, Saudi, and Pakistani backers rejected calls for a 'national conciliation' government that would include both mujahideen and Communists.

Under Pakistani guidance the mujahideen planned to begin their triumphant march on Kabul by taking an 'easy prize', the border city of Jalalabad.<sup>10</sup> Jalalabad, a strategic town located near the Pakistani frontier, was chosen both for its proximity to the mujahideen's bases in Pakistan and for its symbolic importance as Afghanistan's winter capital. The Pakistani ISI predicted that the city would fall in a week.

From Jalalabad the triumphant mujahideen would follow in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century British and march up the Silk Gorge to seize the Afghan capital. They would then move along the 'ring road', which linked Afghanistan's major cities, liberating the country's towns one at a time. By summer, the country would be free and united under an Islamic government. Or at least that was the plan.

But such grand plans did not take into consideration the important tribal and ethnic divisions in the resistance and ability of the Communist regime to exploit them. As a result, the reality was to be far different from the rosy scenario envisioned by the ISI, CIA, and mujahideen. Far from collapsing by summer, President Najibullah's Afghan Communist regime was to go on to exceed all expectations and survive another three years. In the end, it was brought down not by the mujahideen, but by the fall of its international sponsor, the USSR. Ironically enough, the 'doomed' Najibullah regime actually outlasted the Soviet Union by four months.

In light of the mujahideen's stated objective ('the continuation of the armed jihad until the unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops, the overthrow of the atheistic regime, and the establishing of an independent, free and Islamic Afghanistan'), the continued existence of the Communist regime for more than three years represented a stunning tactical, ideological, and political failure.<sup>11</sup> The mujahideen not only failed to administer a *coup de grâce* against the Communists, they failed to fulfill one of the most basic objectives of a successful jihad, the imposition of sharia Islamic law in the *Dar al Kufr* (the Realm of the Infidel).

Far from completing the jihad, the mujahideen fell to bickering among themselves and eventually launched a bloody civil war that was to devastate Kabul and cost tens of thousands of Afghans their lives. In the process, the very name mujahideen was to be forever tainted as the people took to dismissively calling their mujahideen 'liberators' *qomandan* (commanders), *topakayan* (gunmen), and *jang salaran* (warlords).

The story of the mujahideen's failure to achieve some of their most basic goals begins with the failed siege of Jalalabad in the spring of 1989. It was this

setback more than anything else that signaled the failure of the Afghan jihad and served as a harbinger of worse things to come.

An analysis of the internal and external contradictions that led to the failure of the mujahideen's jihad against the Soviet-sponsored Afghan Communist state will help shed light on possible outcomes of the war in Afghanistan when the Americans and their Coalition allies withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014. *In particular, it points to the importance of sub-state ethnic grouping in Afghan politics and the staying power of governments that have strong international backers and ethnic-tribal support.*

Such a discussion must, however, begin with a discussion of the basic tactical, moral, and strategic advantages that allowed the Afghan Communist regime to outdo all expectations and resist the mujahideen for three long years. While many of these events are case-specific to the mujahideen era, the parallels to the ongoing battle by the Taliban insurgents to defeat the US-backed Karzai regime will be obvious.

#### **'The Afghan Stalingrad' (Jalalabad, March–July 1989)**

The mujahideen siege of Jalalabad began successfully enough for the approximately 10,000–12,000 rebels who moved on a key position known Samarkhel and the Jalalabad airport on 5 March. Pakistani Brigadier commander Mohammad Yousaf recorded the mujahideen's assault as follows, 'Their initial impetus and enthusiasm carried them forward. The ridge east of Samarkel fell, and shortly afterwards the little village itself. Next the airfield, only 3 kilometers from the city, was taken by jubilant warriors yelling their war cries.'<sup>12</sup>

In the process of taking the airport, the mujahideen were also able to capture scores of Communist government troops who surrendered to them as the siege intensified. Afghanistan experts saw this Afghan-style surrender as a sign that momentum was on the side of the mujahideen. In Afghanistan's unique culture of defection, it was not unusual for soldiers to switch sides if they felt the tide had turned against them. While the Americans were inclined to view the Afghan jihad in stark black and white terms, many Afghans saw it as grey. Defections from green (Muslim) to red (Communist) and back again were not uncommon during this relatively fluid war.<sup>13</sup>

Only on this occasion, the Afghan tradition of accepting an enemy's surrender, confiscating his arms, and allowing him to return to his fields, was not applied by one mujahideen group. As the Communist prisoners were distributed to the various mujahideen factions, some captives were given to a group of Arab Wahhabi volunteers. Unlike the Afghan mujahideen who were fighting fellow Afghans who might have come from their own ethnic group or *qaum* (clan, tribe, or community), these foreign fighters saw the jihad against the Afghan Communists a total war against the 'atheist infidels'. When the Arabs received approximately 60 prisoners, they broke all rules of Afghan battle conduct and tortured them to death. They then cut their bodies into pieces and sent them back

to the Communist garrison in Jalalabad with a warning that this was the fate of unbelievers.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, this act of senseless savagery seems to have backfired. Far from intimidating the besieged government troops, it only served to strengthen their resolve to resist at all costs. All talk of surrender ended, and the Afghan government troops furiously stepped up operations to break the siege.

It soon became obvious that the government troops were better armed and motivated than anyone had foreseen. Without the presence of the Soviet 'infidels' to taint their struggle, they fought on with a new found resolve and sense of mission. The war was no longer one to carry out the goals of the '*Shuvari kofrs*' (Russian infidels), it was a war by an entrenched Afghan faction to defend its power from another. For the government's 11th Division, which had been tasked with defending Jalalabad, this city became known as the 'Afghan Stalingrad', and its soldiers vowed to defend it just as the Soviets had defended that great city against the Nazis.

In this struggle, the Afghan Communists were aided by the vast quantities of weapons the Soviets had left behind for them to use against the rebels. In particular, they were militarily superior in the 'three A's': artillery, aircraft, and armor. President Najibullah's Communist forces had as many as 60 MiG-21 fighter bombers, 60 Su-22 fighter bombers, 25 Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters, 1568 tanks, and 4800 artillery pieces. They also had vast reserves of mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and light weapons.<sup>15</sup>

While the mujahideen had the famed Stinger anti-aircraft missile to negate the advantage of the Afghan Air Force, the Communist pilots proved adept at flying beyond the range of these missiles and bombing the massed mujahideen from high altitudes. They also outfitted Antonov An-12 transport planes to drop cluster bombs on mujahideen troop concentrations.

From a psychological standpoint, however, the Afghan government's most effective weapon was the R-300 Scud B medium range missile. While the Soviets claimed to have withdrawn all their troops in February, in actuality they had left over 300 missile specialists behind to man three Scud batteries near Kabul. These batteries fired more than 400 Scuds at the mujahideen during the March–July siege of Jalalabad. This was the largest concentration of ballistic firings since the German V-1 and V-2 rocket campaign against Britain in World War II.<sup>16</sup> The Scuds, which carried a 2000-pound payload, had a devastating psychological effect on the mujahideen whose only warning that they were coming was the sonic boom they made seconds before impact.<sup>17</sup>

The mujahideen were also hurt by their inability to switch from guerrilla warfare to conventional tactics. While they had been successful in waging hit-and-run attacks and ambushes on Soviet convoys, bases, and checkpoints, they were not experienced in coordinating complex siege warfare of the sort needed to take heavily defended Jalalabad. Most notably, they failed to prevent government forces from using the road from Kabul to re-supply their troops in the city.

Interestingly enough, the mujahideen from the countryside were also unpopular with people in the city, who were often more urbane, educated, and secular than the largely illiterate rebel fighters from the countryside. Millions of moderate Afghans had fled to Jalalabad, Mazar i Sharif, Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and other Communist-controlled cities to escape the mujahideen fundamentalists. This was due to the fact that the mujahideen frequently executed teachers, burnt schools and health clinics, demanded *ushur* (Islamic tithe) taxes, and terrorized or executed those suspected of having links to the government or rival factions. This large population that feared the mujahideen bolstered the Communist government in its struggle with the rebels in Jalalabad. For all these reasons, the siege of Jalalabad ultimately failed by the summer of 1992 and the mujahideen retreated to the mountains and Pakistan.

The implications for this failure were profound and have widespread applications to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Namely, that an insurgency like that of the mujahideen or Taliban can prevent a foreign-sponsored government from controlling the countryside. But that does not necessarily translate into the ability to take and hold towns and key positions from a stronger government force like that of Presidents Najibullah or Karzai. By pushing the mujahideen to transition prematurely from asymmetric warfare to frontal combat, the CIA and ISI revealed their weakness to all Afghanistan's tribal/political factions. This served to bolster the previously demoralized Najibullah government forces and enable them to prolong the war for three long, bloody years.

Similarly, if the ISI-backed Taliban prematurely attempt to transition from insurgent tactics to attacks on urban areas or to storming fixed government positions they can expect to suffer defeat from an army that consists of over 300,000 troops, compared to a Taliban force of approximately 20,000.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of the mujahideen whose numbers were significantly greater than those of the Taliban, tribal divisions were a key weakness. One of their greatest flaws was not their tactical failures, but their inability to win over political, ethnic, and tribal elements that remained loyal to the government. For, as it transpired, not all of Afghanistan's tribes or ethnic groups were fighting in the ranks of the mujahideen rebels. Many tribal-ethnic groups were actively fighting *against* the mujahideen on behalf of the Communists for money, autonomy, or in fulfillment of ancient blood feuds with ethnic or clan groups involved in the mujahideen resistance.

The same holds true today. Many pro-government Pashtun factions and all members of the former anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (i.e. ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras) are opposed to the Taliban. While many uninformed Westerners are prone to paint a gloomy picture of a unified 'Afghani' nation supporting the Taliban against meddling outsiders, the majority of Afghans are actually opposed to the Taliban insurgents. This includes many pro-government tribes among the Pashtuns and all non-Pashtun groups who live in the north and make up 60% of the country's population (the Taliban are almost exclusively Pashtun).

Similarly, in the 1980s, vast swaths of Afghanistan supported the Communist government in its struggle against the mujahideen. The story of the mujahideen's failure is thus full of implications for understanding events in the current situation where the USA is set to withdraw the majority of its forces by 2014. In fact, the odds facing the Taliban today in much of Afghanistan are much greater than they were facing the mujahideen in the 1980s, which makes the mujahideen's failure to administer a *coup de grâce* against the Najibullah regime in 1989 all the more indicative of the hurdles facing the Taliban today.

To understand the underlying reasons for the mujahideen failure in the siege of Jalalabad and its implications for post-2014 Afghanistan, it is necessary to make a journey back into Afghanistan's murky past to explore the origins of these complex ethno-tribal feuds. Only then can one understand the inherent weaknesses of the Afghan jihad movement in the 1980s and by extension today.

#### **Qaumistan (Sheberghan, Northern Afghanistan, 1989)**

Like many states cobbled together under the influence of nineteenth-century European colonial powers, Afghanistan is a diverse hodgepodge of jostling ethnic groups that were cut and pasted into an artificial state. Historically, the region was known as Khorasan and was a wild frontier region between Iran, Central Asia, and India that was famous for its kaleidoscope of competing ethnic and tribal groups.

The process of forcefully unifying the peoples of this inchoate region began in the mid eighteenth century when the *amir* (commander) of a confederation of Durrani Pashtun (Afghan) tribes, Ahmed Shah Durrani, conquered his Ghilzai Pashtun rivals. While the Ghilzais resented the Durrani, they acquiesced to their rivals' rule in return for autonomy. In the end, the Afghan *amir* agreed to rule as first among equals over a loose confederation Pashtun *serdars* (prince commanders) and tribal *khans* or *maliks* (chieftains) from among the two Pashtun tribal confederations.

To prevent tension between these numerous leaders and the quarreling Ghilzais and the Durrani, the Afghan-Pashtun ruler, Ahmed Shah, began to divert their energies outward. Soon thereafter the Pashtun *lashkars* (tribal armies) moved to the west and seized the Iranian city of Herat from the Qajar dynasty. Ahmed Shah's heirs subsequently established a loose hegemony over the Turkic-Uzbek tribes living south of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River and the Persian-speaking Tajiks who lived in the Hindu Kush Mountains. They then forced the Shiite Hazara Mongols of the central Hindu Kush Mountain plateau to pay them tribute.

But for all their success, the Pashtuns' control over the various unrelated ethnic groups of Khorasan remained rather tentative. In the mid nineteenth century, several of them even rejected Pashtun dominance and regained their former independence. In 1880, however, an Afghan Durrani ruler named Abdur Rahman, the 'Iron Amir', was encouraged by the British to re-conquer these



groups and forcefully incorporate them into a centralized Afghan (i.e. Pashtun) state. With weapons and money from his British sponsors, Abdur Rahman began his conquests by moving against rebellious elements in his own Pashtun ethnic group. He did so by crushing the rebellious Ghilzai Pashtun tribes of the east and deporting them to other regions to act as 'internal colonists'. The Ghilzais never forgave their Durrani rivals for this brutality, and tensions between the two largest Pashtun confederations remain to this day.

Having defeated the Ghilzai Pashtuns, Abdur Rahman then moved to break the back of the Uzbek resistance in the north by using his new cannons to destroy their cavalry. The Tajiks fell soon afterwards and, like the turbulent Uzbeks, their elders were tied to field cannons and blown to bloody bits as punishment for their resistance.

But the worst fate was reserved for the Hazaras, who were labeled 'heretics' for adhering to Shiite Islam. Declaring himself 'Commander of the Faithful', Abdur Rahman declared a Sunni jihad on the Hazaras and conquered their plateau homeland enslaving thousands of this people in the process.<sup>19</sup> By the time of his death in 1901, Abdur Rahman had bludgeoned the region's various ethnic groups into something resembling a state. But he had done so at the cost of tens of thousands of lives and the centrifugal forces of tribalism would always be lurking in the background even as his successors worked to forge a common national identity.

In the succeeding century, the Afghan state continued to be dominated by ethnic Afghans/Pashtuns who saw the country as their patrimony much as the English saw multiethnic Britain as theirs.<sup>20</sup> Non-Pashtun ethnic groups, and the Hazaras in particular, suffered from various forms of discrimination or outright persecution in a country whose name translates to 'Land of the Afghans'.

But there was no modern sense of articulated nationalism among these various 'Afghanistani' ethno-tribal groups (of the sort one finds for example in the Balkans), so resistance to the central government was localized and fragmented. Far from resisting on a unified ethno-national basis, the average Tajik, Pashtun, Uzbek, or Hazara's concept of nation and *watan* (homeland) was limited to his or her immediate kin group, village or tribal lands, valley, or micro-region. With little or no exposure to the Western concept of overarching nationalism, it was loyalty to one's immediate *qaum* (tribe, clan, village, etc.) and faith that defined most of Afghans.<sup>21</sup> Even as Afghanistan continued to undergo gradual centralization, it remained in many ways a loosely organized land of competing *qaums* that might best be called *qaum-istan*.

Fully knowing the deep loyalties that Afghanistan's various sub-ethnic groupings had to their *aq saqals* ('white beard' elders), *khans*, *sheikhs*, and *maliks*, the Afghan *walis* (governors) adopted a live-and-let-live policy towards them. As long as a *qaum's* *khan* paid taxes, prevented rebellion, and followed the basic laws of the land, he and his people were free to live in relative autonomy. It was only when a particular *khan* or *malik* grew too strong that the government undermined him by promoting his rival.

Thus the timeless tribal patterns of Islamic tribalism of the sort described by the fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldun were maintained in Afghanistan right up until the mid twentieth century. Ibn Khaldun's comments on the importance of *asabiyyah* (tribal affiliation) to the Arabs of the fourteenth century certainly applied to the Afghans of the late twentieth century.

The one rare exception to this rule of disunity was when the central state interfered too deeply in *qaum* affairs or engaged in activities that were deemed un-Islamic. When this happened, the local *mullahs*, who did not exercise political power in Afghanistan, were told by the *khans* to declare a jihad. This is exactly what happened in 1978 following the Saur (April) Revolution, which brought a Communist government to power in Afghanistan. The new Marxist regime made itself unpopular through a series of reforms that were quickly defined as 'anti-Islamic' in the conservative countryside. While the provincial *khans* and *mullahs* were infuriated by the Kabul government's policies (which included programs that forced girls to attend schools), it was the Communists' unprecedented interference in the country's *qaums* that finally sparked a rebellion.

In particular, the *qaums* reacted to the Communist regime's campaign to eradicate 'reactionary elements' in the countryside. As the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (i.e. the Communists) began to arrest or execute *mullahs*, *khans*, and other 'anti-Revolutionary parasites', these elements decided to fight back. The call for jihad soon resounded from the forested mountains of the Ghilzai Pashtuns to the barren plateau of the Hazarajat to the Uzbek-dominated plains of the north. By the summer of 1978 the Communist regime was confronted with a full blown *ashrar* (rebel) uprising that included all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups. Only the rebels did not see themselves as *ashrars*, they defined themselves as mujahideen and their struggle as a jihad.

But things were not as black and white as they appeared, for it soon became evident that there were deeper ethnic and tribal cleavages among both the Communists *and* the mujahideen. Far from being a united government, the Communists, for example, were divided into two competing sub-parties known as the Khalq (People) and the Parcham (Flag). The Khalqi faction was dominated by Ghilzai Pashtuns, while the Parchami faction was dominated by Durrani Pashtuns and was more open to non-Pashtun ethnic minorities.

As the mujahideen rebellion spread in the countryside, the pro-minority Parchami Communists began to reach out to disaffected ethnic minorities and clans in order to strengthen their hand vis-à-vis both the mujahideen *and* their Khalqi Communist rivals. This process began the unleashing of the ethnic-*qaum* genies that had been kept in the bottle since the time of the 'Iron Amir'.

In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and replaced the increasingly unpopular Khalq Communists with the more moderate Parchami Communist faction. This encouraged the new Parchami Communist government in its efforts to reach out to persecuted groups like the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmen who had traditionally been discriminated against by the dominant Pashtuns. Playing upon the fact that Pashtuns dominated the mujahideen

resistance parties based in Pakistan, the Soviets (who had decades of experience of exploiting ethnic cleavages in the neighboring Central Asian republics) sought to lure these disaffected minorities to their side.

The Parchami Communists subsequently offered these oppressed minorities schooling and newspapers in their own languages and access to military and government positions that had long been reserved for the dominant Pashtuns. Their ultimate goal was to offer repressed *qaums*, and even whole *kabiles* (ethnic groups), a degree of autonomy in return for direct military support against the mujahideen.

The fact that the Pashtun mujahideen parties did not recognize the Shiite Hazara and Uzbek-Turkmen mujahideen parties further played into the Communists' hands. Major Ghilzai Pashtun mujahideen leaders, such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, publicly labeled the Hazara Shiites 'heretics'. They also refused to work with the fledgling Uzbek mujahideen party of a leader named Azad Beg.

In response, the Parchami Communists offered the Hazaras a truce and armed and financed members of the Ismaili Shiite Hazara minority of the north to guard Soviet convoys crossing over the Hindu Kush Mountains. The Communists subsequently fulfilled their end of the bargain and both avoided operations in the Hazarajat mountains and kept funds flowing to the pro-government Ismaili militias. The Hazaras reciprocated and did not play a major role in the anti-Communist jihad of the 1980s. This buy-off gave the Communist regime a vital respite from fighting in a large portion of the country.

The 13,000-man army of the Hazara Ismaili *pir* (holy man), Sayad Mansur Naderi, went even further and actively fought for the Communist government against their hereditary enemies, the Pashtun mujahideen. The well-paid Ismaili Hazara-*qaum* militia proved to be crucial in keeping the Salang Pass, which led from the USSR to Kabul, open throughout the conflict.

The Communists found an even greater ally in the undeveloped Uzbek and Turkmen-dominated province of Jowzjan. Here they hired local Uzbeks and Turkmen to guard the gas and oil fields that they themselves had helped build with Soviet 'fraternal' assistance in the 1970s. The Uzbeks and Turkmen of Jowzjan formed a 'revolutionary defense' militia in the provincial capital of Sheberghan that was successful in repulsing the Tajik and Pashtun-dominated mujahideen.

By the mid 1980s tens of thousands of Turkmen and Uzbek mujahideen had defected from the mujahideen parties to fight in ranks of the pro-Communist Jowzjani Division formed by an Uzbek commander named General Abdul Rashid 'Dostum' (an Uzbek *nom de guerre* meaning 'My Friend'). Dostum's fighters came from his own *qaum*, the local Uzbek and Turkmen population of his home district. By the late 1980s Dostum's 'capital' at Sheberghan became known as 'Little Moscow'. From this base, his men moved out to 'pacify' the plains of the north known as Afghan Turkistan.

Having subdued the north, Dostum's 40,000-man division of fierce Uzbek and Turkmen fighters was subsequently used as shock unit in other areas as well. They fought ferociously against the Pashtun mujahideen forces in such southeastern regions as Kandahar, Paghman, Jalalabad, and Khost. Dostum's Jowzjanis appear to have taken to their task with relish, and their reputation as plunderers of Pashtun villages earned them the epithet of *gilimjans* (carpet thieves).

In the summers of 2003 and 2005, I lived with General Dostum. During the course of several weeks of interviews, Dostum explained his motives for fighting against his countrymen who were engaged in a holy jihad against the Communist unbelievers.<sup>22</sup> His rationale is illuminating and points to the means whereby the Communist government was able to rally the support of the Uzbeks and some Hazaras against the Islamist rebels:

When the mujahideen came to burn our (gas) facilities we fought them off. I gathered hundreds of our Jowzjani boys and we began to defend Sheberghan from the mujahideen. I knew who the local (Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik) mujahideen were and began to lure them to our side. If they did not attack us, we didn't attack them. I also offered them better pay . . .

I pointed out that we were all good Muslims, none of us were Communists. I told them that outsiders (here he was referring to Pashtun mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) were just fighting for their own gains under the banner of jihad. The mujahideen were being controlled by the Pakistanis who did not care about us people of the north the way the (Communist) government did . . .

We were being used like we always had. But now we had the chance to fight for ourselves. The government gave us everything we asked for, from ambulances for our troops to tanks and salaries . . .

By the end (of the Soviet occupation) we had gained the support of the people of Mazar i Sharif and the entire north from Kunduz to Maimana. They didn't want anything to do with the fanatics and their endless jihad. They just wanted peace and stability. We kept the universities open for women, and Sheberghan and Mazar i Sharif were the safest areas in Afghanistan. This made us proud and gained us the respect of our people. We were promised we would never return to our former second class status like before.<sup>23</sup>

But not all members of the Afghan Communist Party were happy with this state of affairs. Many Khalqi (predominantly Ghilzai Pashtun) Communists in particular resented the Parchami government's deployment of Uzbeks against mujahideen members from their own Ghilzai *qaum*. In March 1990, General Tanai, a hard-line Ghilzai Pashtun Communist from the Khalqi faction, launched a coup against President Najibullah in conjunction with a mujahideen attack by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (a fellow Ghilzai Pashtun). Najibullah, a Pashtun, ultimately beat off the coup attempt, but only with the help of his Uzbek 'tribal militia'.

The Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Ismaili Hazaras were not, however, the only *watanparast* (*qaum*-based militias) who fought to prop up the Communist

government in the 1980s. Several Pashtun tribes also abandoned the jihad and went over to the government. Their motives were usually linked to feuds with other Pashtun tribes involved in the mujahideen rebellion that proved more salient than their allegiance to the greater jihad cause.

The case of Ismatullah Muslim, an early mujahideen leader of the Pashtun Achakzai sub-tribe, is typical and shows just how tenuous many *qaum* leaders' ties were to the jihad. In 1983, Ismatullah fell out with the Pakistani ISI over his unwillingness to join one of the major mujahideen parties. He subsequently defected with his tribe to the Communist government. The Communists promptly made him a general and, when he was not entertaining guests in his house in Kabul with prostitutes and alcohol, he and his men kept the road between the Pakistani border and Kandahar free of mujahideen.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the Achakzai tribe, the Communists also hired or made strategic alliances with the Arghandabis, Mohmands, and Pashtun warlords in Helmand Province, such as Khano and Allah Noor.<sup>25</sup> This policy proved easier once Najibullah began to roll back the unpopular Communist reforms of previous leaderships. To win over *qaums* that were 'on the fence', Najibullah built hundreds of mosques, hired thousands of mullahs, and carried out symbolic acts, such as attending mosque on Fridays.

By the time the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in February 1989, hundreds of local Pashtun mujahideen commanders had responded to these measures by making truces with the Communists who had renamed their party the *Watan* (Homeland) Party. Many of those who defected to the 'former' Communists had taken up arms to preserve their *qaum* autonomy and power as khans. Having achieved both of these objectives, they were no longer willing to make sacrifices for mujahideen party leaders based in Pakistan who came from different *qaums*.

In addition, those mujahideen, like Hekmatyar's *Hezb i Islam* faction, who were too close to the Pakistani '*dhal horde*' ('bean eaters', a derogatory term Afghans use for Pakistanis from Punjab) became distrusted as 'puppets' of Afghanistan's traditional enemy, Pakistan. With the Soviets gone, President Najibullah skillfully worked to portray the Pakistani-based, CIA-funded mujahideen parties as the real foreign puppets, not the former Communists.<sup>26</sup> One mujahideen commander from the southern city of Kandahar captured the impact that the Soviet departure had on deflating the jihad as follows, 'Before, here were Russians, there were Russians, everywhere Russians, so people were busy with the fighting. No question, everybody was against the Russians. But now people are confused.'<sup>27</sup>

But the greatest threat to the mujahideen came not from defections to the Najibullah ex-Communist government or their suspect ties to Pakistan, but from internal tensions and rivalries between the various factions that had been brought together by the common struggle. Far from being the united band of 'freedom fighters' that many of their supporters in the West naively depicted them as, it became increasingly evident that the mujahideen were a bickering coalition.

Instead of being united by common goal of defending their faith they often seemed more concerned with fighting one another.

It was this intra-mujahideen warfare, which was exacerbated by *qaum*-based allegiances, that proved to be the most damaging factor in the Afghan jihad. As will be demonstrated, a foreign 'infidel' occupation like that of the British, Soviets, or US-led Coalition in Iraq, can bring together strange tribal bedfellows. Remove that unifying 'infidel occupier' presence and the pre-existing, intra-tribal cleavages tend to resurface with devastating consequences.

### **Rebels without a cause (Takhar Province, Northern Afghanistan, 9 July 1989)**

Perhaps no incident better highlights the deep divisions within the Afghan mujahideen movement than a bloody incident, which took place in Tangi Farkhar, northern Afghanistan in the final stages of the failed siege of Jalalabad. It all began when a group of Tajik *muhtareks* (mobile mujahideen) belonging to Massoud's Panjsheri *qaum* faction were ambushed by a group of fighters belonging to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Pashtun *Hezb i Islam* faction. In an act of savagery that was more reminiscent of the mujahideen's treatment of captured Soviets, Hekmatyar's mujahideen captured the outgunned Panjsheri Tajiks and tortured them to death. Among other things, they gouged out their eyes and filled them with gunpowder before killing them. Those who were not tortured to death were 'released' then shot in the back as they attempted to escape.<sup>28</sup>

When word of the execution of some 36 of his most effective commanders, including several close friends, reached Massoud, he spared no effort to track down and kill those responsible. Hundreds of Massoud's men were pulled from the front to hunt the guilty party. They eventually succeeded in tracking them down and capturing those responsible for killing his men. Massoud then publicly executed Hekmatyar's men in the town of Taloqan, one of the few Afghan towns to fall to the mujahideen.

Ironically enough, this mujahideen on mujahideen violence actually began in Taloqan when Massoud and Hekmatyar jointly seized the town. But far from working in coordination, the two groups quickly began to fight one another for the spoils (a trend that was followed in the second town to fall to the mujahideen, Khost).

The roots to this conflict, however, went much deeper. Part of the problem was personal and stemmed from a falling-out between the two commanders years before the Soviet invasion. But underlying reasons stemmed from intra-*qaum* tension. Massoud and his Panjsheri faction were Persian-Dari speaking Tajiks. It seems to have bothered the warlike Pashtuns that Massoud's Tajik upstarts were responsible for most of the damage to the Soviets (the Soviets claim that Massoud and his forces were responsible for two-thirds of their 'killed in action' in Afghanistan).<sup>29</sup> Not since the 1929 overthrow of the '*munafiq*' (apostate) King Amanullah by the Tajik rebel Bacha i Saqao 'The Water Carrier' had Afghanistan's second largest race, the Tajiks, dared to supplant the ruling Pashtuns.<sup>30</sup>

There were also political differences between the two most powerful of the mujahideen commanders. Hekmatyar's *Hezb i Islam* Party was driven by an extremist Islamist ideology sponsored by the Saudis and Pakistani fundamentalists. Hekmatyar's followers enforced a harsh brand of Islamic extremism in the Afghan refugee camps he controlled in Pakistan that presaged the extremism of the Taliban. The Pakistanis directed as much as \$600 million from the US to his forces for precisely this reason.<sup>31</sup> As an Islamist, Hekmatyar was seen as less willing to stir up irredentist plans for unifying Pashtuns in Afghanistan and those living in Pakistan to unify to create a larger 'Pashtunistan'. His primary platform was not Pashtun nationalism, but Islamism. For this reason, the Pakistanis trusted him more than the mujahideen leaders who sought a return of the monarchy. The fact that Pakistan's leader at the time, Zia ul Haq, was a dedicated Islamist himself only strengthened the Pakistani resolve to place Hekmatyar, the Pashtun Islamist, on the 'throne' in post-Communist Afghanistan.

For his part, Massoud was distrusted by the Pakistanis because he was seen as a pragmatic-fundamentalist. He spoke French, regularly met with Western reporters, accepted weapons from the Shiite Iranians and British, and was comparatively liberal in the enforcement of sharia law in the areas he controlled. Most importantly, Massoud lived far from the reach of the Pakistani ISI in the combat zone in Afghanistan, unlike the Pakistani-based Hekmatyar who was beholden to his Pakistani hosts. This made Massoud less reliable in the eyes of the Pakistanis, who convinced the CIA to distribute the majority of their weapons and funds to Hekmatyar's Pashtun faction instead.

When the Pakistanis cobbled together a *shura* (council) to choose an Afghan Interim Government following the Soviet retreat in 1989, they deliberately sidelined the Tajik faction to which Massoud belonged, the *Jamiat i Islam*. According to Barnett Rubin, 'The council was composed almost entirely of Peshawar-based party officials, mostly Pashtuns from eastern Afghanistan (Ghilzais). The IIGA (Islamic Interim Government of Afghanistan) it chose was the result of ISI and Saudi manipulation of the *shura's* electoral process.'<sup>32</sup>

Hekmatyar was made commander of the Interim Government's army, and it was this army that launched the assault on the border town of Jalalabad in March of 1989. When this predominantly Ghilzai Pashtun force began its attack, Hekmatyar expected Massoud to move aggressively in his region to the north to cut off Najibullah's supply lines from the USSR. But Massoud, whose own supply lines from Pakistan had been interdicted for years by Hekmatyar, failed to assist Hekmatyar by attacking the '*doroga zhizn*' (Russian, the 'road of life' extending from Uzbekistan through his territory to Kabul).

To compound matters, the pro-Communist Uzbek militias led by Dostum protected the supply convoys coming from the Soviet border and over the Hindu Kush Mountains. The Uzbeks fought so effectively at Jalalabad against the mujahideen that their commander, General Dostum, was given a Hero of the Republic of Afghanistan award by Najibullah (not to mention more weapons and

the right to include even more men in his semi-autonomous fighting force, a development that would come to haunt Najibullah).

Hekmatyar might have asked the Hazaras who controlled the central highlands to attack Kabul from the west to divert Communist forces, but he had not included them in the Afghan Interim Government *shura*. The ISI and Hekmatyar detested the Shiite Hazaras almost as much as the Communists. Fully knowing how his people were despised by the Sunni Pashtuns, Sayyad Naderi's Ismaili Hazara militia helped the Uzbeks protect Communist convoys coming over the Hindu Kush from the USSR.

But it was not only the Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Tajiks that failed to support the mujahideen assault on Jalalabad. It should be noted that the Pashtun mujahideen parties based in Peshawar, Pakistan were dominated by Ghilzai Pashtuns, not the southern Durrani Pashtuns who had served as Afghanistan's ruling *qaum* since the country's inception. Major Durrani sub-tribes, such as the pro-monarchist Achakzai, Popalzai, Barakzai, and Sadowzai, were strongly opposed to Hekmatyar's Ghilzai-dominated Islamist faction.

One source described the distrust between the royalist Durrani and upstart Ghilzai mujahideen as follows, 'The crucial battle between guerrillas and the Government at Jalalabad, to the north, holds little interest here [Kandahar, in the south] because it [Jalalabad] is in the territory of the other major Pathan [Pashtun] tribal confederation, the Ghilzai... This is not a matter for the Durrani. It is Ghilzai against Ghilzai.'<sup>33</sup> This resentment helps explain why the Durranis of the south failed to launch a major diversionary during the siege of Jalalabad.<sup>34</sup>

The Durranis were not the only Pashtun mujahideen who were opposed to the Ghilzai mujahideen siege of Jalalabad. It should be noted that not all Pashtun factions were extremists. While Hekmatyar and his ally, a Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi named Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, were devoted to establishing Afghanistan's first fundamentalist theocracy, there were other parties in the Peshawar Seven (a group of six Pashtun and one Tajik mujahideen parties based in Pakistan) that held more moderate views. These ranged from parties that were based on Naqshabandi and Qadiriya Sufi brotherhoods to monarchists who wanted to bring back the exiled king, Zahir Shah. One of these moderate Pashtun mujahideen leaders, Abdul Haq, explained his lack of support for Hekmatyar's assault in the following terms. 'You want to know why it's dumb to attack Jalalabad? Because it's dumb to lose ten thousand lives... And if we do take it, what's going to happen? The Russians will bomb the shit out of us, that's what.'<sup>35</sup>

But it was not just the other Pashtun mujahideen factions who were growing to distrust Hekmatyar. By 1989 Hekmatyar's primary financial sponsor, the USA, had come to have serious misgivings about him as well. As the Soviets began to withdraw from the country, the CIA began to reassess its support for the man the Pakistanis hoped to install as head of a new Afghan government. Up until then Hekmatyar had proven to be appealing because he was seen an extremist who might 'bleed' the Soviets. But the Americans did not want 'a fanatic Muslim who



might turn out to be Afghanistan's version of the Ayatollah Khomeini' to rule the country.<sup>36</sup>

It is a little known fact that when the USA (belatedly) began to send weapons to his moderate Tajik rival, Massoud, Hekmatyar responded by putting out a 'hit' on Marc Sageman, the CIA field officer who ran the mujahideen.<sup>37</sup> As tensions with Hekmatyar mounted, Hekmatyar, the man who had famously refused to shake hands with the 'infidel' president Ronald Regan during a 1985 mujahideen visit to the White House, came to be defined as a potential threat to US interests. This put the USA, which hoped to build a moderate government in Afghanistan, squarely on a collision course with the Saudis and Pakistanis, who wished to see a fundamentalist theocracy put in place.

The lack of consensus between the Americans, Saudis, and Pakistanis on which mujahideen faction to support was only the tip of the iceberg. The Iranians were also supporting their own mujahideen faction made up of Hazaras and other small Shiite groups known as the 'Tehran Eight'. As soon as the Soviets withdrew, the divergence of interests in the mujahideen's international supporters began to mirror their own internal divisions.

With the Arabs, Americans, Iranians, Saudis, Pakistanis, and of course the Soviets all supporting their separate Afghan surrogates, the already complicated jihad became even more convoluted. As the disunity of the jihad sponsors competed with that of the mujahideen, the rebels lost their momentum and the siege of Jalalabad was broken in July of 1989. This victory inspired government troops in cities and garrisons across the country. As Hekmatyar's fighters retreated back into the hills to plot their next move, the war settled into an impasse. Stunned and disheartened by their loss, the divided mujahideen adopted a 'you attack first' attitude and satisfied themselves with divvying up the territories they had already acquired.

The glorious jihad that was supposed to see the implementation of 'a good government, an Islamic government... under the Afghan people, not the Russians, the Indians or others' failed to materialize. Instead, the war settled into a stalemate. In the process, all pretense of unity that had kept the fractious mujahideen together began to fray, and they soon began to war against one another. The mujahideen, who had once been proudly fed by villagers who saw them as honor-bound holy warriors, turned their guns on one another and began a struggle for power that was to cost tens of thousands their lives. The story of their struggle is the story of the final devolution of the Afghan jihad from a noble struggle for faith into a bloody scramble for territory, wealth, and power.

#### **Yaghistan (the Afghan provinces, 1989–1992)**

The history of Afghanistan has been described as one of fusion followed by fission, of centralization and fragmentation. Prior to the disintegration of the country in the late 1980s, it had fragmented on several occasions, most notably during the first British invasion of 1839–1842 and during the overthrow of King

Amanullah in 1929. But never before had it seen the sort of total disintegration that took place in 1989. As President Najibullah increasingly devolved central power to tribal militias in order to win their support in the war with the mujahideen (who were themselves fracturing on political, religious, ethnic, and *qaum* lines), the country that the 'Iron Amir' Abdur Rahman had brutally forged with a sword, disintegrated into dozens of small autonomous regions. In Afghan terms, it reverted to its original state of chaos, a term the Afghans define with the word *yaghistan* (loosely 'Chaos-istan').

A tour of this land of quarreling mujahideen commanders, *qaum* chieftains, opium compradors, fanatical mullahs, pro-government warlords, and Communist generals serves to highlight the complexity of a war that many Americans simplistically defined as a war between 'good' mujahideen and 'bad' Communists.

The tour begins in the north where Massoud ran a relatively organized sub-state, which included the Panjsher Valley, and the neighboring provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar. One of the greatest threats to his state, which was protected by a mujahideen army of 13,000 well-trained mujahideen *zabatis* (professionals) and village militiamen, was tensions between the Panjsheri-Tajik *qaum* and the Badakhshani-Tajik *qaum*. These two factions began to quarrel as soon as the Soviets left. Massoud also faced threats from Hekmatyar, which distracted him from his efforts to move through the Shomali Plain and attack the environs of Kabul.

South of Massoud's lands, the inhabitants of the neighboring province of Kunar Province organized a Wahhabi-style fundamentalist 'Amirate' controlled by a commander named Jamil al Rahman. These Wahhabis promptly clashed with mujahideen belonging to more moderate groups in the south.

In the areas south of Kunar, the Nangarhar *Shura* (Council), an alliance of local mujahideen commanders, made a truce with the government and began to run local affairs. On occasion, the government parachuted supplies to both the besieging *Shura* mujahideen and besieged Communist garrison troops in order to ensure truces and ceasefires.

Hekmatyar also had strong influence in this area and in the lands of the northeast. But his followers were mainly de-tribalized Ghilzais who held sway in a variety of pockets of discontinuous territory stretching from Kunduz in the north to Jalalabad in the east. Hekmatyar's primary base was actually in Pakistan, in the Shamsatoo refugee camp. This naturally limited his authority in Afghanistan and spoke volumes to his low level of grassroots support in his homeland among the various *qaums* and tribes.

But Hekmatyar still had the support of the Saudis, Pakistanis, and of course the Arab volunteer fighters. While the Afghan Arabs' original leader, Abdullah Azzam, declared that 'no-one among the mujahidin had Masoud's stature' and called him 'the hero of the north', Azzam was killed by assassins in 1988.<sup>38</sup> With the death of the comparatively moderate Azzam, Bin Laden became the

uncontested *amir* of the transnational jihad brotherhood. He then threw his weight behind Hekmatyar, not Massoud.

But Bin Laden and many of his followers quickly grew disillusioned with the intra-mujahideen war after their costly failure at the Battle of Jalalabad. It became obvious to the Arabs that they were the only ones in Afghanistan waging a war purely for the sake of Allah. As their idealized jihad devolved into a sordid struggle for ethnic and tribal power, many 'Afghan Arabs' grew disgusted and returned home. This weakened Bin Laden tremendously, and he never forgave Massoud for preventing his Afghan ally, Hekmatyar, from taking Kabul in the subsequent Afghan Civil War.

To the south of Jalalabad lay the tribal lands of the *Zadran qaum* led by the legendary Pashtun commander Jalaladin Haqqani. Unlike many of his mujahideen compatriots, Haqqani had not established a *modus vivendi* with the local Communist garrison. On the contrary, he persisted in his efforts to take the regional capital of Khost. In 1991 his efforts paid off, and this city finally fell to his troops. But in a sign of what awaited Kabul should it fall, his illiterate peasant fighters, many of whom had never been in a city before, poured into Khost and thoroughly looted it. Not a single bazaar remained un-plundered, and many local merchants and traders fled to Kabul or to other Communist-controlled cities to escape the mujahideen.

To the south of Haqqani's Ghilzai territory, in the plains around the old royal capital of Kandahar, the Durrani Pashtun mujahideen kept up a siege of this strategic city, but did so halfheartedly. The Kandahari mujahideen had been hurt by the fact that their most famous commander, Haji Abdul Latif, had recently been killed by poison. Tellingly, they blamed his death not on their Communist enemies, but on fellow-Pashtun Hekmatyar.

Further west, the province of Helmand was divided between two pro-government Pashtun warlords who ruled the north, the aforementioned Khano and Allah Noor, and a mujahideen commander named Mullah Nasim Akhonzade who ruled the south. Akhonzade was typical of the new breed of mullah-commanders who had replaced the traditional khans throughout the country since 1978. The tribal khans who had always ruled the land were devastated by the Communist governments attack on their class and by the rise of Islamist parties in Pakistan. As the old khan elite were killed off or displaced by mullahs and mujahideen commanders, village clerics like Mullah Nasim Akhonzade rose to power.

While Mullah Nasim did fight the Soviets on occasion, he seems to have spent more of his time fighting Hekmatyar's *Hezb i Islam* forces and in growing and exporting heroin-producing poppies. It was Mullah Nasim who issued the fateful *fetwa* (decree) legitimizing poppy production in the irrigated province of Helmand. His armed followers then forced the peasants to grow poppy, which they sent to Pakistan for refining. Mullah Nasim's men subsequently made a business truce with Hekmatyar, who purchased their product and refined it in his heroin plants located in Pakistan.

This truce between Hekmatyar and Mullah Nasim did not, however, prove to be long lasting and Hekmatyar's agents eventually succeeded in assassinating Mullah Nasim while he was visiting Pakistan. But Mullah Nasim's contribution to the jihad lived on long after his death at the hands of his fellow mujahideen. To this very day, Helmand Province is the world's largest producer of opium, an ironic outcome for a jihad in the defense of a faith that bans the use of opiates.

Further west, the great city of Herat held out against a Tajik mujahideen commander operating in the Hindu Kush Mountains named Ismail Khan, the 'Amir of Herat'. While Ismail Khan was nominally a member of the same Tajik-dominated mujahideen party as Massoud, the *Jamiat i Islam*, he was effectively autonomous. For instance, he thought nothing of attacking Mullah Nasim Akhunzade, who was also a member of the *Jamiat i Islam* and a neighboring *Jamiat* commander named Afzali.

Ironically, Ismail Khan's struggles against another local mujahideen party, the *Harakat i Inqilab*, drove this group's members to defect to the Najibullah government. The fact that both Najibullah and the *Harakat i Inqilab* mujahideen were Pashtun presumably trumped their allegiance to the jihad. Astri Suhrke, a scholar who analyzed this sort of de-ideologization or re-tribalization of the jihad, captured this sort of *asabiyyah* sentiment, stating 'ideology has no place in a tribal conflict'.<sup>39</sup>

This statement certainly applied to the people living to the east of Herat in the inaccessible Hindu Kush Mountains. This was the domain of one of Afghanistan's most isolated ethnic groups, the Hazaras. Like the Sunni groups, the Shiite Hazaras rose up against the Communists when they began to arrest their khans in 1978. By 1979 they had expelled the Communists from the Hazarajat plateau (except for the main city of Bamiyan) and had reached an accommodation with the government in Kabul. The Hazarajat might thus have remained peaceful during the war had the Hazaras' jihad not devolved into a vicious civil war. This war pitted the traditionalist khans and sayyids (a religious class made up of descendants of Muhammad) against Iranian-trained Hazara mullahs who sought to establish a Khomeini-style theocracy in the Hindu Kush.<sup>40</sup>

Far from waging a liberation jihad against the Communists, the Hazara mujahideen busied themselves with raiding the occasional Sunni mujahideen caravan that crossed their territory and fighting one another. By the late 1980s the traditionalists had been pushed out of their capital by the Iranian-sponsored radicals, but had not been fully eradicated. The Hazaras' civil war thus entered into a tenuous stalemate. Rather than take the struggle to its bloody finish, Iran decided to accept the fact that its Hazara proxies would not be able to establish an Iranian-style regime in the heart of Afghanistan. Their decision was based in part on the Soviet decision to withdraw at this time. As the various Sunni mujahideen parties began to assume an ethnic character in anticipation for the struggle for power, the Hazaras began to discover their own ethnic identity. Long despised as Mongol 'flat noses', they began to identify themselves on an ethnic basis rather than a purely religious basis. In the process, the Iranian-backed radicals

moderated their extremist objectives and began to cooperate with nationalists to present a common front against the Sunni mujahideen parties.

By 1991 the quarreling Hazaras had put aside their differences and created an ethno-religious party known as *Hezb i Wahdat* (the Unity Party). In this new climate, Hazara nationalists began to revive the memory of their people's Mongol ancestry and the images of Ayatollah Khomeini were replaced by pictures of Genghis Khan. Thus the jihad in the Hazarajat morphed into an ethnic-based movement for Hazara rights at a relatively early stage.

In the plains to the north of the Hindu Kush it similarly became apparent that tribal or ethnic identity was increasingly becoming a rallying point for various government and mujahideen groups. In this region General Dostum and his alliance of Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Parchami (pro-minority) Communists, maintained a level of stability unrivalled elsewhere in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan's other major cities were regularly shelled or besieged by the mujahideen, Mazar i Sharif, the capital of the north, remained safe.<sup>41</sup>

The fact that the most prominent mujahideen commander in the northern region that was dominated by Dostum's Uzbeks, a Tajik named Zabiullah Khan, had been killed by another mujahideen faction in 1984 facilitated this process. As previously stated, General Dostum was aided in his efforts to recruit from Uzbek and Turkmen mujahideen by the Turcophobia of the Pashtun-dominated mujahideen parties. Seracattin Mahdum, the son of the Kizil Ayak Sheikh, a Turkmen *pir* (holy man) who was actively involved in the jihad resistance, claimed that the Pashtuns did not share funds or weapons with a Turkic mujahideen party established by a pan-Turkist named Azad Beg.<sup>42</sup> While many Uzbeks and Turkmen who had a long history of fighting Communists in Soviet Central Asia during the 1930s resigned themselves to fighting in the Pashtun and Tajik mujahideen parties led by Hekmatyar and Massoud, others were drawn to the pro-Communist forces of their fellow Uzbek, Dostum. As the jihad devolved into an ethnicized struggle for power and resources, even devoted Uzbek mujahideen commanders like Samangan Province's Ahmed Khan went over to fellow Uzbek Dostum. In a 2005 interview, Ahmad Khan explained his defection to me as follows:

It was no longer a jihad and Dostum was not really a Communist, everyone knew that. He was skilled at bringing mujahideen and government people together. He was the most powerful person in (Afghan) Turkistan, and he was one of us. But he was not a (Turkic) nationalist like some have claimed. Yes he recruited Uzbeks from Jowzjan, but he only became an Uzbek himself when the mujahideen parties became Tajik and Pashtun. It was easy for Uzbek Communists and Uzbek mujahideen to come together under him, it is our tradition to join the strongest. Especially if they are one of us and are not against Islam.<sup>43</sup>

By this time Dostum had the largest fighting force in Afghanistan and had become the main pillar propping up the Najibullah regime. Time and again Dostum's praetorian guards were flown into besieged Communist garrisons to repulse besieging Pashtun mujahideen. When the mujahideen marched on Kabul

from the province of Paghman, Dostum led his men in storming their positions and flushing them out of the province. When Pashtun-dominated government troops refused to lift the siege of Kandahar (which was incidentally being carried out by fellow Ghilzai Pashtun mujahideen), Dostum's Uzbeks were only too happy to do the job. For the backwater Uzbeks who had been excluded from power in Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan for a century, every military success brought them greater rewards in the form of glory, weapons, funds, and autonomy.

But for all the fact that he and his men were serving to keep President Najibullah in power, Dostum's brutal suppression of Pashtun mujahideen won him many enemies among the Khalqi (pro-Ghilzai) Communist faction. On one of his missions to support the garrison in Jalalabad (which was being besieged by Ghilzai Pashtun mujahideen), Dostum and his men were poisoned and several of them died. In his interviews with me, Dostum blamed Pashtun nationalists in the very government he was supporting for this attempt on his life.<sup>44</sup> He claimed that it was this event that began to make him distrust President Najibullah.

But Dostum was not the only one who faced attempts on his life as the war became more complex. In March of 1990, Shanawaz Tanai, the Ghilzai-Khalqi Minister of Defense, launched a coup attempt against his friend and mentor, President Najibullah. Afghanistan experts initially misread the motives that drove Tanai, a Communist hardliner who had advocated the Scud missile attacks on the mujahideen, to topple his own Pashtun master. Most incorrectly felt that he was trying to sabotage Najibullah's efforts to reach out to the mujahideen. But such analyses underestimated the importance of Tanai's *qaum* ties. It soon became clear that his coup attempt was launched in conjunction not with fellow Communist hardliners, but with fellow Ghilzais among the mujahideen force besieging Kabul. And not just any Ghilzais, Tanai had made a secret agreement with the extremist hardliner, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb i Islam* faction. As Tanai's Khalqi forces bombed the presidential palace, Hekmatyar's fighters launched an assault on the city.

Fortunately for Najibullah (and the many citizens of cosmopolitan Kabul who dreaded a takeover by Hekmatyar's fanatical forces), the coup attempt failed, and General Tanai was forced to flee to Pakistan. There the Najibullah regime's most dedicated Communist was publicly embraced by his fellow Ghilzai ally, Hekmatyar, the very fundamentalist who had refused to shake the 'infidel' President Reagan's hand. Once again blood proved to be thicker than water, or at least than ideology, in a war that had become increasingly blurred as Ghilzai Pashtun Communists defected to Ghilzai Pashtun mujahideen.

But for all the fact that the coup attempt failed (in part due to the lack of support from other mujahideen factions who did not want to empower Hekmatyar), it signaled the end of the jihad and the beginning of the struggle for spoils. According to Barnett Rubin, many mujahideen at the time felt, 'If Khalq and Hizb could ally, there is no more jihad, just a struggle for power.'<sup>45</sup>

This proved to be an apt description of what followed. In the aftermath of Tanai's failed coup attempt, the mujahideen parties, all of which had previously had some degree of intra-tribalism/intra-ethnicity, gradually came to be more mono-ethnic. There were many 'green' to 'red' and 'red' to 'green' defections at this time as Communists and mujahideen defected to join the most dominant leader of their ethnic group. By the winter of 1991–1992, Uzbek mujahideen who had once fought under the banner of Massoud's *Jamiat i Islam*, for example, began to defect to Dostum's pro-Communist militia. For their part, Tajik members of the Parchami Communist faction did just the opposite and began to defect to Massoud's Tajik mujahideen. Hazara Communists similarly defected to the Hazaras' *Hezb i Wahdat* mujahideen party, and Pashtun Communists defected to Hekmatyar and other Pashtun mujahideen leaders.

To stem the tide of defections by Pashtun Communists, President Najibullah (a Ghilzai Pashtun) finally decided to reign in his non-Pashtun 'tribal militias'. As Soviet aid began to dwindle in the winter of 1991–1992 following the collapse of the USSR, the president decided to decrease funds to his main 'ghulam' (a derogatory Persian word used to describe Medieval Turkic 'slave warriors', which was applied to the Uzbeks), General Dostum. Najibullah then began to systematically replace non-Pashtun commanders in the north with Pashtuns in an effort to shore up Pashtun control of these regions before his regime was toppled. In response, a furious Dostum, who by now had the largest personal army in Afghanistan (approximately 40,000 men), responded by seizing the last Soviet military shipment to Afghanistan and rallying the non-Pashtun Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek government commanders of the north to his side.

But Dostum's rebellion did not stop there. To Najibullah's horror, the Uzbek 'Pasha' (general) sealed the Pashtun president's fate by making a pact with the most powerful Tajik mujahideen commander in the north, Massoud. In a quintessential display of Afghan-style pragmatism, Dostum was quickly proclaimed a 'mujahideen' and he and his Uzbek Communist forces joined Massoud's Tajiks in the fight against Dostum's former master, Najibullah.

Dostum, Massoud, and Naderi, the head of the pro-government Ismaili Hazara militia, then seized Mazar i Sharif in March of 1992. The opposition now had a major Afghan city. The loss of Mazar i Sharif, proved to be the first in a series of dominoes that was to bring down the Communist government. Mazar i Sharif was the capital of Afghanistan's wealthiest province, the natural-gas rich Afghan Turkistan, and it also held one of Afghanistan's holiest shrines, the *Rowza*, the purported tomb of Ali. From a strategic and political level, the seizure of Mazar i Sharif and the nine provinces of the north cut off Najibullah from all assistance from the former Soviet Union and demonstrated that momentum was on the side of the mujahideen.

As Jalalabad, Kandahar, Ghazni, and other cities followed suit and began to capitulate to local mujahideen, Najibullah saw the writing on the wall. Having skillfully kept his government alive for three tumultuous years following the Soviet withdrawal, he finally announced his resignation on 18 March 1992.

The long jihad that had begun back in the spring of 1978 was finally finished and Communism in Afghanistan was over.

But far from creating unity, the final overthrow of the Pashtun-dominated Communist government accelerated the process that begun with the Soviet withdrawal. This act removed the final unifying ingredient that had kept the mujahideen parties tenuously united. With no common 'infidel' enemy to fight, the various ethnicized mujahideen parties soon fell into open conflict. In the process, ethnicity, something that many Afghan groups had had only passive awareness of prior to the war, became increasingly salient. While ethnic nationalism never assumed the levels of intensity that one found in the Balkan battlefields of the 1990s, it nonetheless became a rallying point for various *qaums*.

In the new struggle for resources, power, and security, there was, for example, no room for internal ethnic tension between Jowzjani and Kunduzi Uzbek *qaums* or between Panjsheri and Badakhshani Tajik *qaums*. As Afghanistan's various ethnic power groupings coalesced and prepared themselves for the upcoming battle for Kabul, the principles of jihad (but not the rhetoric!) were jettisoned and the race for the capital began. But it was to be a race with no winners. In the ensuing struggle, Kabul would be obliterated by the self-proclaimed warriors of Allah. As the once vibrant Afghan capital was reduced to rubble in artillery duels, the Afghan jihad would forever come to be linked with the word *fitna* (a term found in the Qur'an, which means 'cataclysmic civil war between Muslims').

While it initially looked as if Hekmatyar was going to win the race for the capital (due to his close ties with the powerful Khalqi government faction and ISI backing), Dostum, Massoud, and the Hazara leader Mazari were able to get there first and repulse him. Together the northern ethnic groups expelled Hekmatyar's Pashtun *Hezb i Islam*/Khalqi alliance from the capital's southern approaches in a series of bloody battles in April of 1992. Massoud's Tajik political master, Burhanuddin Rabbani, subsequently went on to become president of Afghanistan, a move that was seen by Hekmatyar and many Pashtuns as a threat to the old, Pashtun-dominated order.<sup>46</sup> Hekmatyar responded to this setback by turning his guns on the capital and furiously bombarding its civilian packed neighborhoods.

No mujahideen leader bore more responsibility for the ensuing slaughter of thousands of Kabulis than Hekmatyar. While he was given the post of prime minister in an effort to persuade him to end the siege, it was not enough. As a consequence, the world was treated to the spectacle of the Afghan prime minister shelling his own capital in the name of Islam. Conveniently overlooking his own previous alliance with the hard-line Pashtun Communist General Tanai, Hekmatyar claimed he was killing his own people to expel the pro-Communist warlord Dostum from the city.

In a further effort to appease Hekmatyar, President Rabbani subsequently excluded Dostum from the newly established government. In a rage, Dostum withdrew his support for the new Tajik-dominated mujahideen government and retreated to the north. There he proceeded to carve out six northern provinces



from Afghanistan and create a de facto Uzbek-dominated mini-state based on his 'capital' at Mazar i Sharif.

Dostum and his army did not return to Kabul until January of 1994. His return exposed for all the hypocrisy of Hekmatyar who still claimed to be fighting in the name of Islam, for on this occasion Dostum returned as an ally of his former fundamentalist enemy, Hekmatyar. Once again, Hekmatyar's willingness to make alliances with 'Communist infidels' demonstrated that his real objective was not waging jihad, but gaining power at any cost.

If Dostum and Hekmatyar's joint siege of Tajik-dominated Kabul did not finally put an end to any pretense of jihad, Massoud, the Minister of Defense, subsequently decided to conquer western Kabul, which was claimed by Hazaras. In the ensuing conflict, hundreds of innocent Hazaras were killed by Massoud's forces and those belonging to his ally-of-the-day, the Pashtun fundamentalist Sayyaf. Afghans and foreigners alike were stunned by the bewildering array of ad hoc alliances between Shiites, Communists, Pashtuns, Sunnis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, Khalqis, and Parchamis that led to the destruction of the previously safe capital. All mujahideen factions seemed to be bent on terrorizing Kabul. Fanatical mujahideen burnt libraries, plundered the country's greatest museum, forced women off the street, and waged artillery duels in a city packed with civilians.

But the senseless bloodshed perpetuated in Kabul paled in comparison to the havoc being wreaked in the Pashtun provinces of the south. While Dostum, the Nangarhar *Shura*, Ismail Khan, the Hazaras, and Massoud ran orderly sub-states in their *own* territories (excluding Kabul, which was seen as a no-man's-land), the various mujahideen commanders of the Pashtun south used their weapons to terrorize their own people. In a swath of land extending from the lands south of Khost to southern Herat, Pashtun mujahideen used their guns to set up checkpoints where people were robbed or killed. They also plundered the local merchants, fought battles for territory and power, and preyed on defenseless civilians.

From 1992 to 1994 thousands of ordinary people in the south became the victims of Pashtun mujahideen gangs. Commerce and industry suffered (except for the opium trade, which was run by the ex-mujahideen), the educational systems collapsed, and Kandahar, the capital of the south, became the seat of power for a brutal ex-mujahideen warlord named Gul Agha Sherzai.

Pashtun sources whom the author interviewed from the Kandahar region spoke of regular gun battles between mujahideen factions that saw civilians killed in their own homes, of families unable to travel on roads for fear of being robbed at checkpoints, and of systematic rape of boys and women by mujahideen *qomandans* who ran every district.<sup>47</sup> In the process, the people of southern Afghanistan came to know the word *musibat* (calamity), a word they apply to the predations of the mujahideen as much as the devastation of the Soviets. There was no more honor in jihad by this time and those who continued to wage it did so

not to defend the *Dar ul Islam* from the infidel invaders, but to enrich and empower themselves.

But the period of the mujahideen *musibat* was not to last forever, for the quarreling 'warriors of God' had sown the seeds of chaos and would soon reap the whirlwind of destruction at the hands of a new force that would sweep to power known as the Taliban. It was the Taliban that were to end the inter-*qaum* fighting between the Pashtuns' two major tribal groupings, the Ghilzai and the Durrani, and channel their energies to conquest of the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan in the name of Islam. From 1995 to 2001 the Pashtun Taliban systematically conquered the northern ethnic groups (except for a small Tajik pocket in the north-east dominated by Massoud) and brought them back under Pashtun control. Their goal was to crush the upstart northern ethnic groups and re-create the Pashtun-dominated state built by the Iron Amir, Abdur Rahman, in the late nineteenth century.

But the northern ethnic groups, the Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks, resented the Taliban's rule and recalled their days of autonomy in the early 1990s with nostalgia. All it would take to get the northern ethnic groups mobilized to fight against their hereditary Pashtun enemies was a spark. September 11 provided that spark. The fragility of the Pashtun Taliban government was vividly demonstrated in 2001 when the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, and even disgruntled southern Pashtuns led by Hamid Karzai, rose up against the Pashtun Taliban government and destroyed it with the help of the Americans and their NATO allies during Operation Enduring Freedom.

### **Conclusion: Implications of the post-Soviet Najibullah era for post-US Afghanistan**

While the parallels are not perfect, there are many similarities between the Najibullah and Karzai/post-Karzai governments' ties to their foreign benefactors and their wars against the local Islamist rebels who then, and now, call themselves warriors of God. In vast swaths of the countryside of the south and east that were dominated by the Pashtun mujahideen in the late 1980s and first two years of the 1990s, the Pashtun Taliban prevail today. They rule through the same sorts of shadow courts and local *andiwali* (networks) that the mujahideen commanders did in the 1980s. The roots of their fury and inspiration then, and now (a potent mixture of xenophobia, Pashtunwali traditionalism, and Islamicism), are the same. As in the 1980s, today the Taliban fighters are fighting from the south and from their rear area staging bases in the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan to overthrow an 'infidel puppet' government and re-establish Islamic law. Their aims are maximalist, and most Taliban believe that, when the foreign infidels leave, they will be able to quickly overthrow the Afghan 'puppet' government. The Taliban strongly resent both the role of the NATO allies *and* the northern ethnic groups that played a key role in the Karzai government.

But the previous history shown above would indicate that this task may be harder than the Taliban think. Despite their expectations, the mujahideen of the

1989–1992 post-Soviet period were unable to take any of Afghanistan's top 10 major urban centers (Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar i Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad, Kunduz, Ghazni, Balkh, Baghlan, and Gardez). While they were able to take two small towns (Taloqan and Khost), they could not seize a major city to serve as a capital. This stemmed from the fact that the mujahideen were not equipped and trained for siege warfare and were heavily outgunned by the Afghan Army. There was also the fact that the comparatively urban population of these cities had seen some of the benefits of the Communist regime and were disinclined to allow their more rustic mujahideen kin to seize their cities. As long as the Soviets kept their supplies flowing to the Afghan Army garrisons, the war in Afghanistan was essentially stuck in a stalemate. The cities and major bases were firmly in the hands of the Army, while the open countryside belonged to the mujahideen. Had the Soviet Union not imploded in December 1991 and ceased its life support payments to its Afghan government proxies, the war would have continued for many more years.

Similarly today, the Taliban have been unable to capture any sizeable city and have been easily driven out of the two small towns they held, which served as their unofficial capitals in the country (Musa Qala and Marjah in Helmand District). While the Taliban launched 'swarm attacks' on several COPS (command outposts) and larger FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) in the early 2000s, the heavy losses they sustained in these frontal operations taught them that they could not compete with NATO or Afghan Army troops in head-on combat. Like the mujahideen before them, they lacked the training and heavy weapons required to seize and hold bases, garrisons, and cities against an enemy supported by superior numbers, artillery, and firepower. Like the mujahideen, the Taliban have been forced to plant landmines (now known as IEDs), launch the occasional mortar into a base, carry out suicide bombings (a novelty of the new war), and engage in hit-and-run asymmetric warfare with the more powerful ANA (Afghan National Army).<sup>48</sup> Their only real successes in seizing territory have been in the sparsely populated mountain valleys of Kunar Province (namely the Pech and Korengal Valleys), which American Regional Command East decided not to hold in 2010 because its commanders felt there was little real reason to hold exposed COPS in a region with little tactical value.

When the Americans and other NATO allies began their drawdown in 2013 and 2014 the Taliban were emboldened, but the Afghan Army seemed to be holding its own. Kabul today, as in the 1989–1992 period, is the most heavily guarded center in the country and will be easily held, as will other major urban centers that have heavy ANA and Afghan National Police presences. Today's ANA, like Najibullah's government forces before it, has a huge advantage in the three As (artillery, aircraft, and armor). It has Soviet-built T-55 and T-62 main battle tanks as well as US-built M-60 Pattons, BM-21 Grad, Luna, and Uragan multiple rocket launchers, howitzers, mortars, machine guns, etc. The Afghan Air Force also has 35 Mil Mi-24 Hip attack helicopters. And even though most Americans and their allies will be withdrawing by December 2014, they are

expected to leave 'residual' forces of a few thousand rapid reaction troops and special forces as well as an air component equipped with such ground support aircraft as A-10 Warthogs, Predator and Reaper drones, and Apache Longbow attack helicopters to assist the Afghan Army in repelling Taliban forces (this process of creating a post-2014 Status of Forces Agreement was delayed by the outgoing President Karzai in the fall and winter of 2013–2014). While President Karzai refused to sign a Status of Forces Agreement with the US that would allow US troops to remain in Afghanistan, all the presidential candidates running for the presidency in the spring of 2014 agreed to sign it when Karzai stepped down.

The ANA currently numbers roughly 300,000 troops. NATO has already given the Afghan government control of Bamiyan, Kabul, and Panjsher Provinces, as well as such towns as Herat, Mazar i Sharif, Mehtlarlam, and Lashkar Gah.<sup>49</sup> In March of 2012 President Karzai shocked NATO by demanding that their troops step up their drawdown and withdraw from 'village outposts and return to their bases' by 2013.<sup>50</sup> Karzai announced, 'Even right now the Afghan security forces are ready to take all security responsibilities.'<sup>51</sup>

Already there has been a move to push ANA forces to the forefront of military operations such as Joint Special Operations Command's night raids on suspected Taliban houses. As the NATO-funded ANA meets its goal of 300,000 troops, it is preparing to take over the struggle from the departing Americans and their allies.

But in asking NATO troops to return to their bases and allow Afghan Army units to take the lead in the war Karzai may have been acting prematurely. According to one report, of the Afghan Army's 158 *kandaks* (battalions) only one was rated in 2011 as ready to fight on its own.<sup>52</sup> The ANA, like its predecessor, Najibullah's Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan Army, is also plagued with a high rate of desertion, especially among Pashtuns, who do not like fighting fellow Pashtuns in the ranks of the Taliban. In 2011 approximately one in three recruits in the ANA defected.<sup>53</sup> As in the early 1990s, blood is often thicker than the pay these soldiers earn. Many Pashtuns resent the important role that the northern ethnic groups, especially the Tajiks, play in the ANA, and the Taliban play upon this resentment.

To overcome such deficiencies and extend its writ into the provinces, the Karzai government took a page out of the Najibullah government's game plan and has begun to arm local, anti-Taliban militias once again known as *arbakis* (messengers). These ad hoc village and tribal forces known as Local Defense Initiatives or Guardians have been tacitly blessed by the Americans.<sup>54</sup> In the north, Uzbek and Turkmen followers of General Dostum have begun to fight off resurgent Taliban insurgents in Balkh, Kunduz, and Faryab Provinces as have Tajiks belonging to the *Jamiat i Islam* faction previously dominated by Massoud.<sup>55</sup> In the east, one of the largest Pashtun tribes, the Shinwari, have armed themselves to fight against Taliban infiltration.<sup>56</sup>

In the northern plains, one can expect these homegrown, *qaum*-based fighting units to gain in strength to help keep their areas free of Taliban domination in coming years. As in the 1989–1992 period, Dostum could thus come to exert considerable influence over his Uzbek militiamen in the context of fighting against Pashtun Islamist insurgents. Post-Karzai Kabul will have to walk a tightrope when it comes to the powerful Northern Alliance ethnic groups, the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras, as it attempts to maintain its support for the struggle against the common enemy (without devolving too much power as Najibullah fatefully did). The fact that Kabul in 2014 has a much stronger, centralized army than Najibullah before him should, however, mitigate the risks of the government being overthrown by Dostum or a rearmed Northern Alliance made up of Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Tajiks (as of March 2014 Dostum is actually running for vice president along with Pashtun presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani).

There are thus parallels between the US-backed Karzai government's tactics to fight the Islamist insurgents and those of its predecessor, the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime. The main differences are that the Soviets withdrew their entire army in February 1992 (except for a few technicians to man Scud missiles) whereas the Americans expect to maintain a sizeable 'residual' element of Special Forces and support aircraft (including drones) in the country to bolster the ANA post 2014. There is also the fact that Karzai has proven to be much more effective at centralizing authority than Najibullah who was forced to rely on essentially autonomous ethnic fighting units like those of the Uzbeks and Ismaili Hazaras of Baghlan Province. The ANA of today, which was constructed from the ground up, has its problems (illiteracy, corruption, drug use, defection) but it is still a much more centralized fighting force than Najibullah's army after the Soviets left. What today's Afghan Army lacks in fighting spirit compared to the fanatical Taliban, it makes up for in sheer numbers, foreign logistic and financial support, and heavy and light weaponry.

There is also the fact that the Afghan Army of today does not have to fight against the same array of mujahideen enemies that its predecessor did in the 1989–1992 period. In the early 1990s the Najibullah government forces were forced to fight against the Tajiks (the most effective of the rebel fighting forces) in the northeast and in the west in Herat as well as the Pashtuns in the south and east. The center of the country, the Hazara lands, remained hostile/neutral. Today the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras are firmly with the government against the Taliban. These groups play a major role in the ANA, which is seen by many as the protector of rebuilding and democracy, not Communist atheism.

For their part, the Taliban of today are a much smaller fighting force than the mujahideen of the Najibullah era and are not openly armed and financially supported by Pakistan, the Arab states, and the West like the mujahideen were. While the mujahideen rebels could muster between 150,000 and 200,000 fighting men in their heyday, today's Taliban can only muster between 20,000 and 30,000

men. They are outnumbered by at least 10 to 1 in numeric terms by the Afghan Army. The Taliban, like the mujahideen before them, are also ill equipped to carry out siege warfare or large scale frontal assaults of the sort needed to take cities or bases from the Afghan National Army. To a large extent, the Taliban relied upon defection, bribes, intimidation, and, when necessary, attacks by fleets of pickup trucks known as *ahis* (deer), to seize territory in the mid to late 1990s. They have since then lost all of their heavy weapons (tanks, artillery), which were taken by NATO and the Afghan National Army.

There is also the fact that the 'Taliban' (in the broadest sense of the term), are not as unified as they might seem. There are at least three factions operating among the anti-Kabul insurgents: Hekmatyar's separate *Hezb i Islam* faction; the semi-independent Ghilzai Pashtun faction from the provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika known as the Haqqani network; and the Durrani-dominated main Taliban faction, which dominates in such southern provinces as Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Ghazni.

The main Taliban faction led by Mullah Omar's Quetta, Pakistan-based shura (council) considers Hekmatyar to be a rough mujahideen warlord and removed him from power in 1996 after a long battle. For its part, the Haqqani Ghilzai Taliban network based in South Waziristan, Pakistan, resents Mullah Omar's Durrani dominance and runs its operations independently of the main Taliban faction based in Quetta. While all three groups share the same goal, the overthrow of the Karzai government, the *qaum* tensions between them will certainly hurt their ability to present a united front post 2014.

The Taliban will most likely be able to play a major spoiler role in the Pashtun belt and will be able to dominate vast swaths of the countryside, much as the mujahideen did in the 1980s, but they will not be able to conquer major population centers or bases. While the mujahideen, who included the effective Tajiks, focused their energies on taking Kabul (a Tajik-dominated city), the Taliban will doubtless focus on retaking their spiritual capital, Kandahar. History shows that they, like the mujahideen, will be able to take villages on the outskirts of Kandahar in the so-called Green Zones, but will find it difficult to launch an urban assault on their former capital.

The Najibullah past would seem to tell us that the war in post-2014 Afghanistan will thus, in all likelihood, devolve into a stalemate with the post-Karzai government controlling the lands of the Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks, as well as urban areas and districts dominated by pro-Kabul tribes in the Pashtun belt. Kabul and the major cities will remain firmly in government hands as the Taliban insurgents maintain their control in swaths of countryside in such provinces as Uruzgan, Kunar, Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, and Ghazni in the south and east. The main lesson of the Najibullah era is that if Kabul has most of the country's *qaum* ethno-tribal groups on its side and a strong foreign backing, Karzai's successor can hold out indefinitely against a determined, but outgunned, outnumbered, disunited, and under-resourced enemy.

## Notes

1. For an overview of the Soviet–mujahideen war and its aftermath, see Williams, *Afghanistan Declassified*. For more on the post-Soviet Najibullah era, which has been largely overlooked by historians, see Williams, *The Last Warlord*.
2. Rubin. *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, 169.
3. 'Final Retreat?' *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, 9 February 1989.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For the best source on Bin Laden's role in these events, see Coll, *Ghost Wars*.
6. Wright. *Looming Tower*, 146.
7. Hilali, *The US Pakistani Relationship*, 124.
8. Cooley. *Unholy Wars*, chs. 2 and 5; Grau. 'Breaking Contact', 244.
9. Rubin. *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, 119.
10. Akhund. *Trial and Error*, 175.
11. Khakar. *Afghanistan*, 261.
12. Yousaf and Adkin, *Bear Trap*, 'Two Disasters'.
13. This tradition drove one frustrated Pakistani ISI officer to complain 'You can rent an Afghan, but you can never own him.'
14. Sageman. *Understanding Terror Networks*, 58–9.
15. The Soviets also flew high altitude bombing raids from bases in Soviet Central Asia in support of the mujahideen and gave the Afghan government as much as US\$3000 million a year to sustain itself. In addition, the Soviets launched a Berlin Airlift-style 'air bridge' which involved as many 30 transports per day filled with spare parts, ammunition, fuel, food etc.
16. Zaloga. *Scud*.
17. Perrimond. *Theatre Ballistic Missiles*, 8–9.
18. 'NATO Mulls Paying for Afghan Force After 2014'. *ABC News*, 2 February 2012.
19. For more on the under-studied Hazaras, see Williams. 'Afghanistan'.
20. Afghanistan had two national languages: Pashto and Dari-Persian, which served as a *lingua franca*. The Pashtuns made up approximately 40% of the country's population and dominated the government and military. As self-proclaimed Aryans, the Indo-European Pashtuns tended to look down on 'flat-nose' Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and other Turco-Mongol groups. The name for the Afghan national airlines, *Ariana*, reflects their pride in their Aryan Indo-European origins.
21. *Qaum* is a flexible term that has even been used in the macro-sense to mean ethnic groups, but it usually means more localized groups. It is in some cases synonymous with *wulus* and *tyfah*, words which usually mean clan, tribe, or village community.
22. For more on Dostum see my photographs, online videos, and article entitled 'Writing the Dostumname' found under Publications at <http://brianglynwilliams.com>. See Williams, 'General Dostum'.
23. Interview with General Dostum, Mazar i Sharif, Afghanistan, August 2003.
24. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 159.
25. Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan*, 100; Giustozzi and Ullah, 'Tribes and Warlords'.
26. Many Afghans came to distrust the Pakistanis at this time, and this suspicion of Pakistanis' hidden motives continues to this day.
27. Kifner. 'New Problem for Guerrillas'.
28. Human Rights Watch, 'Violations of the Laws of War'.
29. Rowan. *Ahmed Shah Massoud*, 41.
30. The Pashtuns make up roughly 40% of Afghanistan's population followed by Tajiks (25%), Hazaras (10%), Uzbeks (8%), Turkmen (3%), followed by Nuristanis, Aimags, Baluchs, Wakhis, Kizil Bashis, and other small minorities.
31. Peter Bergen states that Hekmatyar had the dubious distinction of 'never winning a significant battle during the war, training a variety of militant Islamists from around

- the world, killing significant numbers of mujahideen from other parties, and taking a virulently anti-Western line' (Bergen, *Holy War*, 69).
32. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, 103.
  33. Kifner. 'New Problem for Guerrillas'.
  34. Tarzi. 'Politics of the Afghan Resistance Movement', 491.
  35. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God*, 136.
  36. Elson. 'Misplaced Optimism', 2.
  37. Interview with Marc Sageman, Naples, Florida, June 2008.
  38. 'Saudi academic recounts experiences from Afghan war.' *Hayat* (London), 8 March 2006.
  39. Suhrke 'Afghanistan', 243.
  40. For more on the Hazaras and their civil war, see Williams, 'Afghanistan'.
  41. Steele, 'Moscow's Kabul Campaign', 4.
  42. Author's interview carried out in Sheberghan and Mazar i Sharif, northern Afghanistan, Summer 2005.
  43. Author's interview carried out in Aybak, Samangan Province, Summer 2005.
  44. Author's interview with General Dostum, Sheberghan, Summer 2003.
  45. Rubin. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 256.
  46. After a brief rule by the Pashtun mujahideen leader Mujadidi.
  47. Interviews carried out in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Gardez, Afghanistan, Spring 2007.
  48. For more on Taliban suicide bombing, see Williams, 'Mullah Omar's Missiles'.
  49. 'Ahead of Security Transfer, Bombing Shakes Afghan City'. *New York Times*, 20 July 2011.
  50. Ardolino, 'Karzai Calls'.
  51. Ibid.
  52. 'Karzai Criticizes NATO on Deaths of Civilians. Faults US Inquiry'. *New York Times*, 17 March 2010.
  53. 'Canada's quest to turn Afghanistan's army of phantoms into fighters'. *The Globe and Mail*, 10 January 2012.
  54. Mohammad, 'New "Guardian" Militia'.
  55. 'Why the Plan to Army Local Militias is Bound to Backfire'. *The New Republic*, 17 August 2011.
  56. 'Afghan Tribe, Vowing to Fight Taliban, to Get US Aid in Return'. *New York Times*, 27 January 2010.

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