Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?

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Articles & Testimony

The roots of the Afghan civil war and the country's subsequent transformation into a safe-haven for the world's most destructive terror network began in the decades prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

As the United States prepared for war against Afghanistan, some academics or journalists argued that Usama bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida group and Afghanistan's Taliban government were really creations of American policy run amok. A pervasive myth exists that the United States was complicit for allegedly training Usama bin Ladin and the Taliban. For example, Jeffrey Sommers, a professor in Georgia, has repeatedly claimed that the Taliban had turned on "their previous benefactor." David Gibbs, a political science professor at the University of Arizona, made similar claims. Robert Fisk, widely-read Middle East correspondent for The Independent, wrote of "CIA camps in which the Americans once trained Mr. bin Ladin's fellow guerrillas."(1) Associated Press writer Mort Rosenblum declared that "Usama bin Ladin was the type of Soviet-hating freedom fighter that U.S. officials applauded when the world looked a little different."(2)

In fact, neither bin Ladin nor Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Umar were direct products of the CIA. The roots of the Afghan civil war and the country's subsequent transformation into a safe-haven for the world's most destructive terror network is a far more complex story, one that begins in the decades prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

THE CURSE OF AFGHAN DIVERSITY

Afghanistan's shifting alliances and factions are intertwined with its diversity, though ethnic, linguistic, or tribal variation alone does not entirely explain these internecine struggles. Afghanistan in its modern form was shaped by the nineteenth-century competition between the British, Russian, and Persian empires for supremacy in the region. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention that formally ended this "Great Game" finalized Afghanistan's role as a buffer between the Russian Empire's holdings in Central Asia, and the British Empire's holdings in India.

The resulting Kingdom of Afghanistan was and remains ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. Today, Pushtuns are the largest ethnic group within the country, but they represent only 38 percent of the population. An

almost equal number of Pushtuns live across the border in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Ethnic Tajiks comprise one-quarter of the population. The Hazaras, who generally inhabit the center of the country, represent another 19 percent. Other groups -- such as the Aimaks, Turkmen, Baluch, Uzbek, and others comprise the rest.(3)

Linguistic divisions parallel, and in some cases, overlap ethnic divisions. In addition to Dari (the Afghan dialect of Persian that is the lingua franca of half the population) and the Pushtun's own Pashtu, approximately ten percent of the population speaks Turkic languages like Uzbek or Turkmen. Several dozen more regional languages exist.(4)

Tribal divisions further compound the Afghan vortex. The Pushtuns are divided among the Durrani, Ghilzai, Waziri, Khattak, Afridi, Mohmand, Yusufzai, Shinwari, and numerous smaller tribes. In turn, each of these tribes is divided into subtribes. For example, the Durrani are divided into seven sub-groups: the Popalzai, Barakzai, Alizai, Nurzai, Ishakzai, Achakzai, and Alikozai. These, in turn, are divided into numerous clans.(5) Zahir Shah, ruler of Afghanistan between 1933 and 1973, belongs to the Muhammadzai clan of the Barakzai subtribe of the Durrani tribe. Such clan, subtribal, and tribal divisions contribute already intense rivalries and divisions.

Religious diversity further complicated internal Afghan politics and relations with neighbors. Once home to thriving Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities as recently as the mid-twentieth century, Afghanistan today is overwhelmingly Muslim. The vast majority -- 84 percent -- are Sunni Muslims. However, the Hazaras are Twelver Shi'i, and so have sixty million co-religionists in Iran. In the northeastern Badakhshan region of Afghanistan, there are many Isma'ili Shi'ia. When I traveled along the Tajik-Afghan frontier in 1997, numerous Tajik villagers told me they had regular clandestine contacts with the Isma'ili communities "just across the river," despite the watchful guard of the Russian 201st brigade.

Many countries thrive on diversity. However, in the context of both Afghanistan and the civil war, the fact that most identifiable Afghan groups have co-linguists, co-ethnics, or co-religionists across national boundaries became a catalyst for the nation's collapse, as well as a major determinant in the coalition-building during both the years of Soviet occupation and post-liberation struggle. For example, the Pushtuns of Kandahar have traditionally looked eastward toward their compatriots in Pakistan, while the Persian-speakers of Herat have looked westward into Iran. Uzbeks in Mazar-i Sharif have more in common with their co-linguists in Uzbekistan than they have with their compatriots in Kandahar.

As various Afghan constituencies looked toward their patrons across Afghanistan's frontiers for support, they created an incentive for Afghanistan's neighbors to involve themselves in internal Afghan affairs. The blame cannot be placed only on outside interference in Afghanistan, though, for the Afghan government has a long though often forgotten history of interfering with the ethnic minorities in surrounding countries and especially Pakistan.

DOWN THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Zahir Shah took the throne of Afghanistan in 1933 after the assassination of his father, Nadir Shah. Zahir was not a strong leader, though. As Louis Dupree, the preeminent anthropologist of Afghanistan observed, "King Mohammed Zahir Shah reigned but did not rule for twenty years."(6) Instead, real power remained vested in his uncles who sought to break Afghanistan out of both its isolation and dependence on either the Soviet Union or Great Britain. It was during this period that Afghanistan and the United States first exchanged ambassadors. The Afghan government awarded a San Francisco-based engineering firm the rights to develop hydroelectric and irrigation projects in the Hilmand River Valley. Slowly, Afghanistan began drifting toward the West, both politically and economically.

In 1953, Zahir Shah's first cousin, the 43-year-old Muhammad Daoud Khan became prime minister. Daoud sought to root out graft in the huge Hilmand scheme, speed up reforms, but he remained a firm opponent of the liberalization in Afghan society. Seeking to recalibrate Afghanistan's neutrality, Daoud sought closer relations with the Soviet

Union.(7) However, neutrality in the Cold War was a fleeting phenomenon.

Both the Soviet Union and the United States increasingly plied Afghanistan with economic and technical assistance. Daoud's government sought to buy arms, and approached the United States several times between 1953 and 1955. However he was unable to come to an agreement with Washington, which tied arms sales to either membership in the anti-Communist Baghdad Pact or at least in a Mutual Security Pact.(8)

The Soviet Union, though, was eager to supply what the United States would not. In 1956, Afghanistan purchased $25 million in tanks, airplanes, helicopters, and small arms from the Soviet bloc, while Soviet experts helped construct or convert to military specifications airfields in northern Afghanistan. The Cold War had come to Afghanistan.

While acceleration of the Cold War competition in Afghanistan -- with its subsequent tragic impact on the country -- would be a major legacy of Daoud, it would not be his most important one. Rather, during Daoud's premiership Afghanistan's relations with neighboring Pakistan would irreversibly sour. Afghanistan increasingly saw in Pakistan both a competitor and a threat. Indeed, Daoud's quest for arms was in large part motivated by Afghanistan's own cold war with Pakistan. However, it was Daoud's support for a Pushtun nationalist movement in Pakistan that would have the greatest lasting repercussions.

THE QUESTION OF GREATER PUSHTUNISTAN

The root of the Pushtunistan problem begins in 1893. It was in that year that Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary of India, demarcated what became known as the Durand line, setting the boundary between British India and Afghanistan, and in the process dividing the Pushtun tribes into two countries.

The status quo continued until 1947, when the British granted both India and Pakistan their independence. Afghanistan (and many Pushtuns in Pakistan) argued that if Pakistan could be independent from India, then the Pushtun areas of Pakistan should likewise have the option for independence as an entity to be called "Pushtunistan," or "land of the Pushtun."(9) Once independent of Pakistan, Pushtunistan would presumably choose to unite with the Pushtun-dominated Afghanistan, to form a "Greater Pushtunistan" (and also bolster the proportion of Pushtuns within Afghanistan).

The Pushtunistan issue continued to simmer into the 1950s, with Afghanistan-based Pushtuns crossing the Durand Line in 1950 and 1951 in order to raise Pushtunistan flags. Daoud, prime minister from 1953 to 1963, supported the Pushtun claims. The issue soon became caught up in Cold War rivalry. As Pakistan ensconced itself more firmly in the American camp, the Soviet Union increasingly supported Afghanistan's Pushtunistan agitations.(10)

In 1955, Pakistan reordered its administrative structure to merge all provinces in West Pakistan into a single unit. While this helped rectify, at least in theory, the power discrepancy between West and East Pakistan (the latter of which became Bangladesh in 1971), Daoud interpreted the move as an attempt to absorb and marginalize the Pushtuns of the Northwest Frontier Province. In March 1955, mobs attacked Pakistan's embassy in Kabul, and ransacked the Pakistani consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar. Pakistani mobs retaliated by sacking the Afghan consulate in Peshawar. Afghanistan mobilized its reserves for war. Kabul and Islamabad agreed to submit their complaints to an arbitration commission consisting of representatives from Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Arbitration failed, but the process provided time for tempers to cool.(11)

Twice, in 1960 and in 1961, Daoud sent Afghan troops into Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. In September 1961, Kabul and Islamabad severed diplomatic relations and Pakistan attempted to seal its border with Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was more than happy to provide an outlet, though, for Afghanistan's agricultural exports, which the Soviets airlifted out from the Kabul airport. Between October and November 1961, 13 Soviet aircraft departed Kabul daily, transporting more than 100 tons of Afghan grapes.(12) The New Republic commented, "The Soviet Government does not intend to miss any opportunity to increase its leverage." Indeed, not only did the Soviet Union

"save" the Afghan harvest, but Pakistan's blockade also effectively ended the U.S. aid program in Afghanistan.(13)

Pakistan, meanwhile, looked with growing suspicion on the apparent development of a Moscow-New Delhi-Kabul alliance.(14) For the next two years, Afghanistan and Pakistan traded vitriolic radio and press propaganda as Afghan-supported insurgents fought Pakistani units inside the Northwest Frontier Province. On March 9, 1963, Daoud stepped down. Two months later, with the mediation of the Shah of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan reestablished diplomatic relations.

Nevertheless, the Pushtunistan issue did not disappear. In 1964, Zahir Shah called a loya jirga -- a general assembly of tribal leaders and other notables -- during which several delegates spoke out on the issue. Subsequent Afghan prime ministers continued to pay lip service to the issue, keeping the irritant in Afghan-Pakistani relations alive.

Even if Kabul's support for Pushtun nationalist aspirations did not pose a serious challenge to the integrity of Pakistan, the impact on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations was lasting. As Barnett Rubin commented in his 1992 study, The Fragmentation of Afghanistan, "The resentments and fears that the Pashtunistan issue aroused in the predominantly Punjabi rulers of Pakistan, especially the military, continue to affect Pakistani perceptions of interests in Afghanistan."(15)

THE RETURN OF DAOUD AND THE RISE OF THE ISLAMISTS

In 1973, Daoud overthrew his cousin Zahir Shah and declared Afghanistan a republic. Pakistan, still reeling from the secession of Bangladesh, feared a return of the fierce Pushtun nationalism of Daoud's first term. Meanwhile, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, embracing a strategy of Third World activism, sought to exploit Daoud's coup to retrench Soviet regional interests.(16)

In 1971, Pakistan fought a bloody and, ultimately unsuccessful, war to prevent the secession of East Pakistan which, backed by India, had declared its independence as Bangladesh. While Pakistan had been founded on the basis of Islamic unity, the 1971 war reinforced the point that in Pakistan, ethnicity trumped religion. Accordingly, Pakistan viewed Daoud's Pushtunistan rhetoric (and his simultaneous support for Baluchi separatists), as well as his generally pro-India foreign policy, as a serious threat to Pakistani security.

Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto responded by supporting an Islamist movement in Afghanistan, a strategy that Islamabad would replicate two decades later with the Taliban.(17) For Islamabad, the strategy was two-fold. Not only could Pakistan deter Afghan expansionism by pressuring Afghanistan from within, but also a religious opposition would have broad appeal in an overwhelmingly Muslim country without the implicit territorial threat of an ethnic-nationalist opposition. It was from this Islamist movement that Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), would introduce the United States to such important later mujahidinfigures as Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Masud, and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. The latter is actually a Ghilzai Pushtun, but from the north, with only limited links to the Pushtuns of the south. Accordingly, he was not considered a Pushtun nationalist by his Pakistani benefactors (or most Afghans).(18)

In 1974, the Islamists plotted a military coup, but Daoud's regime discovered the plot and imprisoned the leaders -- at least those who did not escape to Pakistan. The following year, the Islamists attempted an uprising in the Panjshir Valley. Again they failed, and again the Islamist leaders fled into Pakistan. Islamabad found that supporting an Afghan Islamist movement both gave Pakistan short-term leverage against Daoud, and also a long-term card to play should Afghanistan again seek to strategically challenge its neighbor to the East. With a sympathetic force in Afghanistan, Pakistan would be better able to influence succession should the elderly Daoud die. It was thus in the mid-1970s, while both the United States and the Soviet Union continued to ply the Kabul regime with aid, that Pakistani intelligence -- with financial support for Saudi Arabia -- first began their ties to the Islamist opposition in Afghanistan.(19)

THE SAUR REVOLUTION

Under Daoud's presidency, Afghanistan became increasingly polarized. The Islamists were by no means the only opposition seeking to reshape the status quo. Just as Pakistan backed the Islamist opposition, the Soviet Union threw its encouragement behind the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), sometimes referred to by either of its two constituent factions, the Khalq and the Parcham. The Khalq and the Parcham effectively remained competitors under separate leadership between 1967 and 1977, when the Soviet Union pressured them to reunite.

Why did the Soviet Union shift its support from Daoud, with whom it previously had a good relationship? Barnett Rubin explains that Soviet policy toward the Third World underwent a fundamental shift in the 1970s. The ouster of President Sukarno in Indonesia and Anwar Sadat's decision to expel Soviet advisers from Egypt convinced Moscow that it could no longer rely on non-communist nationalists. Simultaneously, the American defeat in Vietnam had emboldened the Soviet Union to push harder and compromise less.(20)

In 1978, a leading Parcham official fell to an assassin's bullet. Massive demonstrations erupted against Daoud and the CIA, which Parcham blamed for the killing. Daoud responded by arresting the PDPA leadership, spurring military officers sympathetic to the PDPA to move against his government. On April 27, 1978, they seized power in a bloody coup. On April 30, a Revolutionary Council declared Afghanistan to be a Democratic Republic.

The Soviet Union welcomed the new regime with a massive influx of aid. However, the old rivalries between the Khalqis, who dominated the new government, and the Parchamis, crippled the regime. Hafizullah Amin sought to implement the Khalq's program through brute force and terror, alienating many of his former partners. The Soviet Union, witnessing the disintegration of state control, sought to salvage their influence in Afghanistan through a change of leadership, but Hafizullah Amin refused to accept Soviet dictates.

THE SOVIET INVASION

Having lost in Iran's Islamic revolution their staunchest regional ally, the United States again sought to engage Afghanistan. In December 1979, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, not willing to lose the tenuous Soviet advantage in Afghanistan, sent the Red Army pouring into the country. When Hafizullah Amin still refused to relinquish power, Soviet units stormed his palace and executed him. While the Red Army and its client regime in Kabul controlled the city, the Soviets were never fully able to gain control over the countryside. Pockets of resistance continued despite all attempts to stamp them out.

Despite the oversimplifications of some in academe and opponents of the military campaign against the Taliban, the mujahidin was not simply created by the CIA in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion. Rather, as Red Army crack soldiers flew on Aeroflot planes into Kabul, and as Soviet tanks rolled across the Friendship Bridge from what is now Uzbekistan, a cadre for the enlargement of the Afghan mujahidin already existed. This cadre had remained in Pakistani exile since their failed uprising four years before. However, even if the mujahidin existed prior to the Soviet invasion, it was the occupation of a foreign power that caused the mujahidin movement to grow exponentially in both influence and size as disaffected Afghans flocked to what had become the only viable opposition movement.

ARMING THE AFGHAN RESISTANCE

The decision to arm the Afghan resistance came within two weeks of the Soviet invasion, and quickly gained momentum.(21) In 1980, the Carter administration allocated only $30 million for the Afghan resistance, though under the Reagan administration this amount grew steadily. In 1985, Congress earmarked $250 million for Afghanistan, while Saudi Arabia contributed an equal amount. Two years later, with Saudi Arabia still reportedly matching contributions, annual American aid to the mujahidin reportedly reached $630 million.(22) This does not include contributions made by other Islamic countries, Israel, the People's Republic of China, and Europe. Many

commentators cite the huge flow of American aid to Afghanistan as if it occurred in a vacuum; it did not. According to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the Soviet Union contributed approximately $5 billion per year into Afghanistan in an effort to support their counterinsurgency efforts and prop up the puppet government in Kabul.(23) Milton Bearden, Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Pakistan between 1986 and 1989, commented that by 1985, the occupying Soviet 40th army had swollen to almost 120,000 troops and with some other elements crossing into the Afghan theater on a temporary duty basis.(24)

Initially, the CIA refused to provide American arms to the resistance, seeking to maintain plausible deniability.(25) (The State Department, too, also opposed providing American-made weapons for fear of antagonizing the Soviet Union.(26) The 1983 suggestion of American Ambassador to Pakistan Ronald Spiers, that the U.S. provide Stingers to the mujahidin accordingly went nowhere for several years.(27) Much of the resistance to the supply of Stinger missiles was generated internally from the CIA station chief's desire (prior to the accession of Bearden to the post) to keep the covert assistance program small and inconspicuous. Instead, the millions appropriated went to purchase Chinese, Warsaw Pact, and Israeli weaponry. Only in March 1985, did Reagan's national security team formally decide to switch their strategy from mere harassment of Soviet forces in Afghanistan to driving the Red Army completely out of the country.(28) After vigorous internal debate, Reagan's military and national security advisors agreed to provide the mujahidin with the Stinger anti-aircraft missile. At the time, the United States possessed only limited numbers of the weapon. Some of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also feared accountability problems and proliferation of the technology to Third World countries.(29) It was not until September 1986, that the Reagan administration decided to supply Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the mujahidin, thereby breaking the embargo on "Made-in-America" arms.

[While there was significant fear of Stinger missiles falling into the wrong hands in the 1990s, very little attention was paid to the threat from the anti-aircraft missiles in the 2001 U.S. campaign against the Taliban. This may have been due to an early 1990s covert campaign to purchase or otherwise recover surplus Stinger missiles still in the hands of the mujahidin factions .](30)

The CIA may have coordinated purchase of weapons and the initial training, but Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) controlled their distribution and their transport to the war zone. John McMahon, deputy director of the CIA, attempted to limit CIA interaction with the mujahidin. Even at the height of American involvement in Afghanistan, very few CIA operatives were allowed into the field.(31) Upon the weapons' arrival at the port of Karachi or the Islamabad airport, the ISI would transport the weapons to depots near Rawalpindi or Quetta, and hence on to the Afghan border.(32)

The ISI used its coordinating position to promote Pakistani interests as it saw them (within Pakistan, the ISI is often described as "a state within a state").(33) The ISI refused to recognize any Afghan resistance group that was not religiously based. Neither the Pushtun nationalist Afghan Millat party, nor members of the Afghan royal family were able to operate legally in Pakistani territory. The ISI did recognize seven groups, but insisted on contracting directly with each individual group in order to maintain maximum leverage. Pakistani intelligence was therefore able to reward compliant factions among the fiercely competitive resistance figures.(34) Indeed, the ISI tended to favor Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, perhaps the most militant Islamist of the mujahidin commanders, largely because Hekmatyar was also a strong proponent of the Pakistani-sponsored Islamist insurgency in Kashmir.(35) Masud, the most effective Mujahid commander, but a Tajik, received only eight Stingers from the ISI during the war.

Outside observers were not unaware that Pakistan had gained disproportionate influence through aid distribution. However, India, the greatest possible diplomatic check to Washington's escalating relationship with Islamabad, removed herself from any position of influence because its unabashed pro-Soviet policy eviscerated any American fear of antagonizing India. The U.S. State Department considered India a lost cause.(36)

While beneficial to Pakistani national interests at least in the short-term, the ISI's strategy had long-term consequences in promoting the Islamism and fractiousness of the mujahidin. However, the degree to which disunity would plague the mujahidin did not become fully apparent until after the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan was a bleeding wound for the Soviet Union. Each year, the Red Army suffered thousands of casualties. Numerous Soviets died of disease and drug addiction. The quick occupation had bogged down into a huge economic drain at a time of tightening Soviet resources. In 1988, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev announced his intention to withdraw Soviet troops. Despite Gorbachev's continued military and economic assistance to Najibullah, Afghanistan's communist president, most analysts believed the Najibullah would quickly collapse. The CIA expected that, at most, Najibullah would remain in power for one year following the Soviet withdrawal.

However, Najibullah proved the skeptics wrong. Mujahidin offensives in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal failed. Washington had only budgeted money to support the mujahdin for one year following the Soviet withdrawal, but Saudi and Kuwaiti donors provided emergency aid, much of which went to Hikmaytar and other Wahabi commanders.(37) While the United States budgeted $250 million for the mujahidin in 1991, the following year the Bush administration allocated no money for military assistance. Money is influence, and individuals in the Persian Gulf continued to provide almost $400 million annually to the Afghan mujahidin.(38)

Many Afghan specialists criticized the United States for merely walking away from Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet Union. Ed Girardet, a journalist and Afghanistan expert, observed, "The United States really blew it. They dropped Afghanistan like a hot potato."(39) Indeed, Washington's lack of engagement created a policy void in which radical elements in the ISI eagerly filled. However, to consider Afghanistan in a vacuum ignores the crisis that developed when, on August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. Washington's attention and her resources shifted from the last battle of the Cold War to a different type of conflict.

Islamist commanders like Hikmaytar, upset with the U.S.-led coalition in the Persian Gulf, broke with their Saudi and Kuwait patrons and found new backers in Iran, Libya, and Iraq. [Granted, while the break was sudden, the relationship with Tehran was not. Hikmaytar had started much earlier to collaborate with Iran]. It was only in this second phase of the Afghan war, a phase that developed beyond much of the Western world's notice, that Afghan Arabs first became a significant political, if not military, force in Afghanistan.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE AFGHAN ARABS

One of the greatest criticisms of U.S. policy, especially after the rise of the Taliban, has been that the CIA directly supported Arab volunteers who came to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviets, but eventually used those American arms to engage in terrorist war against the West. However, the so-called "Afghan Arabs" only emerged as a major force in the 1990s. During the resistance against the Soviet occupation, Arab volunteers played at best a cursory role.

According to a former intelligence official active in Afghanistan during the late 1980s, the Arab volunteers seldom took part in fighting and often raised the ire of local Afghans who felt the volunteers merely got in the way. In an unpublished essay, a military officer writing under the name Barney Krispin, who worked for the CIA during its support of the Afghan mujahidin's fight against the Soviet Army, summoned up the relationship between Afghan and non-Afghan fighters at that time:

The relationship between the Afghans and the Internationalists was like a varsity team to the scrubs. The Afghans fought their own war and outsiders of any stripe were kept on the sidelines. The bin Ladin's of this Jihad could build and guard roads, dig ditches, and prepare fixed positions; however, this was an Afghan Jihad, fought by real Afghans, and eventually won by real Afghans. Bin Ladin sat out the 'big one.'

Milton Bearden, former CIA station chief in Pakistan, was equally blunt, writing:

Despite what has often been written, the CIA never recruited, trained, or otherwise used the Arab volunteers who arrived in Pakistan. The idea that the Afghans somehow needed fighters from outside their culture was deeply flawed and ignored basic historical and cultural facts.

Bearden continued to explain though that while the Afghan Arabs were "generally viewed as nuisances by mujahidin commanders, some of whom viewed them as only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets," the work of Arab fundraisers was appreciated.(40)

In 1995, Ali Ahmad Jalali, a former Afghan Army Colonel and top military planner on the directing staff of the Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahidin, along with Lt. Col. Lester W. Grau, US Army, ret., a career Soviet Foreign Area Officer, published a collection of essays by mujahidin commanders explaining their tactics in various engagements. Throughout their essays, various commanders make reference to the presence of Afghan Arabs, often in ways which indicate their combat role was marginal at best. For example, describing a 1987 mujahidin raid on a division garrison in Kandahar, Commander Akhtarjhan commented, "We had some Arabs who were with us for jihad credit. They had a video camera and all they wanted to do was to take videos. They were of no value to us."(41) Similar comments were made by other commanders.

So where did the Afghan Arabs come from? Many of the volunteers originated in the Muslim Brotherhood or other radical Islamist organizations. The Saudi Arabia-based Islamic Coordination Council organized both the new recruits, and disbursement of assistance. In Pakistan, Arab volunteers staffed numerous Saudi Red Crescent offices near the Afghan frontier.

The Arab volunteers also disproportionately gravitated to the Ittihad-i Islami (Islamic Union), led by Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf. Sayyaf was a Pushtun, but he long lived in Saudi Arabia, had studied at al-Azhar in Cairo, and spoke excellent Arabic. Sayyaf preached a strict Salafi version of Islam critical of manifestations of both Sufism and tribalism in Afghanistan. However, successful as he was with Saudi financiers, he remained unpopular among ordinary Afghans both because of his rampant corruption and also because Afghans considered both Sayyaf and his fundamentalist brand of Islam foreign.(42)

Even without a central role in the jihad, though, Afghan Arabs did establish a well-financed presence in Afghanistan (and the border regions of Pakistan). While he does not cite his source, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid estimated that between 1982 and 1992, some 35,000 Islamists would serve in Afghanistan.(43)

Is the United States responsible for creating the Afghan Arab phenomenon? It would be a gross over-simplification to ascribe the rise of the Taliban to mere "blowback" from Washington's support of radical Islam as a Cold War tool. After all, while many mujahidin groups are fiercely religious, few adhere to the combative radicalism of the Arab mercenaries. Nor can one simply attribute the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to U.S. involvement, for this ignores the very real fact that a country preaching official atheism occupied Afghanistan. Nevertheless, by delegating responsibility for arms distribution to the ISI, the United States created an environment in which radical Islam could flourish. And, with the coming of the Taliban, radical Islam did just that.

THE RISE OF THE TALIBAN

The Taliban seemingly arose from thin air. Newspapers like The New York Times only deemed the Taliban worthy of newsprint months after it had become the dominant presence in southern Afghanistan.(44) The rise of the Taliban was accompanied by heady optimism. Just as many Iranian opponents of the Islamic Republic freely admit to having initially supported Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a wide variety of Afghans from various social classes and cities told me in March 2000 that they too were initially willing to give the Taliban a chance, even though few still supported the movement at the time of my travel through the Islamic Emirate. Teachers, merchants, teachers, and

gravediggers all said that the Taliban promised two things: Security and an end to the conflict between rival mujahidin groups that continued to wrack Afghanistan through the 1990s and, indeed, until the ultimate victory of the Northern Alliance with U.S. air support in December 2001.

Following the 1989 withdrawal of the Soviet military, Afghan president Najibullah managed to maintain power for three years without his patrons. In 1992, ethnic Tajik mujahidin forces captured Kabul and unseated the communist president. However, Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Masud, and ethnic Uzbek commander General Rashid Dostum could not control the prize. Hikmatyar immediately contested the new government that, for the first time in more than three centuries (except for a ten-month interlude in 1929), had put Tajiks in a predominant position. Hikatyar's forces took up positions in the mountains surrounding Kabul preceded to shell the city mercilessly. Meanwhile, Ismail Khan controlled Herat and much of Western Afghanistan, while several Pushtun commanders held sway over eastern Afghanistan.

Kandahar and southern Afghanistan was in a state of chaos, with numerous warlords and other "barons" dividing not only the south, but also Kandahar city itself into numerous fiefdoms. Human Rights Watch labeled the situation in Kandahar "particularly precarious," and noted that, "civilians had little security from murder, rape, looting, or extortion. Humanitarian agencies frequently found their offices stripped of all equipment, their vehicles hijacked, and their staff threatened."(45) Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid argued that the internecine fighting, especially in Kandahar, had virtually eliminated the traditional leadership, leaving the door open to the Taliban.(46)

Afghanistan became a maelstrom of shifting alliances. Dostum defected from his alliance with Rabbani and Masud, and joined Himatyar in shelling the capital. The southern Pushtun warlords and bandits continued to fight each other for territory, while continuing to sell off Afghanistan's machinery, property, and even entire factories to Pakistani traders. Kidnappings, murders, rapes, and robberies were frequent as Afghan civilians found themselves in the crossfire.

It was in the backdrop to this fighting that the Taliban arose, not only in Afghanistan, but also among Afghan refugees and former mujahidin studying in the madaris (religious colleges) of Pakistan. Ahmed Rashid conducted interviews with many of the founders of the movement in which they openly discussed their distress at the chaos afflicting Afghanistan. After much discussion, they created their movement based on a platform of restoration of peace, disarmament of the population, strict enforcement of the shari'a, and defense of the "Islamic character" of Afghanistan.(47) Mullah Muhammad Umar, an Afghan Pushtun of the Ghilzai clan and Hotak tribe who had been wounded toward the end of the conflict with the Soviet army, became the movement's leader.

The beginning of the Taliban's activity in Afghanistan is shrouded in myth. Ahmed Rashid recounted what he deemed the most credible: Neighbors of two girls kidnapped and raped by Kandahar warlords asked the Taliban's help in freeing the teenagers. The Taliban attacked a military camp, freed the girls, and executed the commander. Later, another squad of Taliban freed a young boy over whom two warlords were fighting for the right to sodomize. A Robin Hood myth grew up around Mullah Umar resulting in victimized Afghans increasingly appealing to the Taliban for help against local oppressors.(48)

Territorial conquest began on October 12, 1994, when 200 Taliban seized the Afghan border post of Spin Baldak. Less than a month later, on November 3, the Taliban attacked Kandahar, the second-largest city in Afghanistan. Within 48 hours, the city was theirs. Each conquest brought the Taliban new equipment and munitions -- from rifles and bullets to tanks and MiG fighters, for their continued advance.(49) The Taliban maintained their momentum and quickly seized large swathes of Afghanistan. By February 11, 1995, they controlled 9 of Afghanistan's 30 provinces. On September 5, 1995, the Taliban seized Herat, sending Ismail Khan into an Iranian exile. Just over one year later, Jalalabad fell, and just 15 days later, on September 26, 1996, the Taliban took Kabul.

A stalemate ensued for almost eight months, but shattered when General Malik rebelled against Dostum, allowing Taliban forces into the north. On May 24, 1997, the Taliban seized Mazar-i Sharif, the last major city held by the mujahidin. However, after just 18 hours, a rebellion forced the Taliban from the city. When the Taliban again took the refugee-swollen city in August 1998, they took no chances, brutally massacring thousands. With Dostum in an Uzbek exile, the only major mujahidin commander remaining was Ahmad Shah Masud, nicknamed 'the Lion of the Panjshir' for his heroism during the war against the Soviets.(50)

While supported materially by Pakistan, the Taliban relied heavily upon momentum in its near-complete conquest of Afghanistan. Following the fall of Kandahar, thousands of Afghan refugees, madrasa students, and Pakistani Jamiat-i Ulama supporters rushed to join the movement. Ahmed Rashid estimates that by December 1994, more than 12,000 recruits joined the Taliban.(51) Each subsequent Taliban victory resulted in thousands of new recruits. Often these victories were less a result of military prowess than cooption of opposing warlords into the Taliban movement.

I was in Mazar-i Sharif in 1997, when the Taliban first marched on the city. Their advance was surprisingly fast (leaving foreigners in the city scrambling to evacuate). The reason was they had simply coopted General Dostum's deputy Malik, who was in command of the neighboring province. Rather than fighting their way through more than 100 kilometers, the Taliban force suddenly found themselves with free passage to within a dozen kilometers of the city.

Stalemate ensued as the Taliban were unable to gain significant ground against Masud, who retained control of between 5 and 10 percent of Afghan territory. The fight between the mujahidin forces commanded by Masud and the Taliban became a fight between those who had been beneficiaries of American assistance in the 1980s, and those who had sprung to prominence in the aftermath of American withdrawal from Afghan affairs.

PAKISTANI SUPPORT FOR THE TALIBAN

The Taliban became the latest incarnation of Pakistan's desire to support Islamist rather than nationalist rule in neighboring Afghanistan. The Taliban arose in madaris on Pakistani territory. Upon the capture of Spin Baldak, mujahidin commanders in Kandahar immediately accused Pakistan of supporting the new group. In late October 1994, the local mujahidin warlords intercepted a convoy containing arms, senior ISI commanders, and Taliban.(52) The men and material in this transport proved crucial in the seizure of Kandahar.

Even after the stalemate ensued between the Taliban and Ahmad Shah Masud, Pakistan provided the Taliban with a constant flow of new recruits. Rumors spread throughout the city while I was there that 5,000 new 'Punjabis' were on their way into Afghanistan to supplement the fight against Masud. Former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst Julie Sirrs gained access to Taliban prisoners held by Ahmed Shah Masud; among them were several Pakistani mercenaries.

Merchants in the book market in central Kabul talked about seeing many Pakistanis "here for jihad." In Rish Khor, on the outskirts of Kabul, operated a training camp for the Harakat ul-Mujahidin, a Pakistani-supported terrorist group waging a separatist campaign against India.(53) It was members of this group that hijacked an Air India flight from Nepal to Kandahar in December 1999, eventually releasing the hostages after Taliban mediation and escaping. Afghanistan provided a useful base not only to train pro-Pakistani militants and terrorists, but also to give them field experience.

While politicians in Islamabad repeatedly denied that Pakistan supported the Taliban, the reality was quite the opposite.(54) While some Taliban trade occurred with Turkmenistan and even Iran, and the Taliban benefited from the supply of opium to all of its neighbors, Pakistan remained the effective diplomatic and economic lifeline for the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. Senior ISI veterans like Colonel "Imam" Sultan Amir functioned as district advisors to the

regional Taliban leadership. Pakistan also supplied a constant flow of munitions and recruits for the Taliban's war with the Northern Alliance, and provided crucial technical infrastructure support to allow the Taliban state to function.(55)

This did not represent a radical change in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. Rather, Islamabad's support of the Taliban was simply a continuation of a pattern to support Islamist rather than nationalist factions inside its neighbor. Nor was the ISI the only supporter of the Taliban within the Pakistan government. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's interior minister Nasrullah Babar also staunchly supported the group. Robert Kaplan, correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly went so far as to argue that Bhutto and Babar "conceived of the Taliban as the solution to Pakistan's problems."(56) Ahmed Rashid commented, "The Taliban were not beholden to any single Pakistani lobby such as the ISI. In contrast the Taliban had access to more influential lobbies and groups in Pakistan than most Pakistanis."(57)

Taliban volunteers, interviewed by Human Rights Watch, described Pakistani instructors at Rish Khor which, according to Afghans I interviewed, also served as a training camp for the Harakat ul-Mujahidin, the violent Kashmiri separatist group engaged in terrorist operations against India.(58) Citizens of Kabul derisively spoke of "Punjabis," volunteers from Pakistan. Guarding ministries in Kabul in March 2000 were Taliban officials who only spoke Urdu, and did not speak any Afghan language. The Pakistani government did not dispute reports that thousands of trained Pakistani volunteers serving with the Taliban.(59)

While the Pakistani government was directly complicit in some forms of support for the Taliban, just as important was its indirect support. In 1971, there were only 900 madaris (religious seminaries) in Pakistan, but by the end of President Zia ul Haq's administration in 1988, there were over 8,000 official madaris, and more than 25,000 unregistered religious schools.(60) By January 2000, these religious seminaries were educating at least one-half million children according to Pakistan's own estimates.(61) The most prominent of the seminaries -- the Dar al-Ulum Haqqania from which the Taliban leadership was disproportionately drawn -- reportedly had 15,000 applications for only 400 spots in 1999.(62)

Ahmed Rashid comments that the mullahs running most of the religious schools were but semi-literate themselves, and blindly preached the religious philosophy adopted by the Taliban. Visiting one such religious seminary in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, students told a Western reporter that, "We are happy many kaffirs [infidels] were killed in the World Trade Center." Regarding Muslim casualties in the World Trade Center, one student responded, "If they were faithful to Islam, they will be martyred and go to paradise. If they were not good Muslims, they will go to hell." The seminary students generally learn only Islam, tainted with strong strain of anti-Westernism and anti-Semitism.(63)

TALIBAN SUPPORT USAMA BIN LADIN

Where does Usama bin Ladin fit into the picture? The Taliban and Usama bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida network retained distinct identities. Indeed, only in 1996 did Usama bin Ladin relocate from refuge with the Sudanese government to the Taliban's Afghanistan. Bin Ladin caused a seeming paradox for Afghanistan watchers. On one hand, the Taliban, recognized as the government of Afghanistan by only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, sought to break its isolation. On the other hand, the Taliban continued to shelter Usama bin Ladin, even after his involvement in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

As the media turned its attention to Afghanistan after September 11, many commentators sought answers as to why the Taliban continued to host Usama bin Ladin, despite the international ire that he brought to the regime. CNN's correspondent even went so far as to postulate that the Taliban could not turn over Usama bin Ladin because of Afghanistan's tradition of hospitality (something which did not stop the Afghans from killing nearly 17,000 British

men, women, and children evacuating Kabul under a truce during the First Afghan War in 1842.)

The answer to the paradox is actually much more mundane, and also a result of the discrepancy in the fighting ability of the Taliban versus the mujahidin commanders like Ahmad Shah Masud who had received U.S. support and training in the 1980s. Masud remained undefeated against the Red Army and, lacking both men and material, he managed to stubbornly hold back the Taliban from the last five percent of Afghanistan not under their control. Masud's secret was superior training and a fiercely loyal cadre of fighters. While the Taliban's rank-and-file may have talked jihad, more often than not they would flee or hide when the bullets began to fly. Unlike Masud's men, the Taliban simply were incapable of fighting at night.

Bin Ladin brought with him to Afghanistan a well-equipped and fiercely loyal division of fighters-perhaps numbering only 2,000. While many of these trained in al-Qa'ida's camps for terrorism abroad or protected bin Ladin and his associates at their various safe-houses, bin Ladin made available several hundred for duty on the Taliban's frontline with Masud, where they assured the Taliban of at a minimum continued balance and stalemate. While the Taliban suffered a high international cost for hosting bin Ladin, this was offset by the domestic benefits the regime gained. The war with the Northern Alliance-not recognition by Washington or even the Islamic World-was the Taliban's chief priority.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

In hindsight, and especially after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, it is easy to criticize Washington's shortsightedness. But American policymakers had a very stark choice in the 1980s: Either the United States could support an Afghan opposition, or they could simply cede Afghanistan to Soviet domination, an option that might result in an extension of Soviet influence into Pakistan.

Contrary to the beliefs of many critics of American foreign policy, the United States is not able to dictate its desires even to foreign clients. Washington needed Pakistan's cooperation, but Pakistan was very mindful of its own interests. Chief among these, especially following the secession of Bangladesh in 1971, was minimizing the nationalist threat to Pakistani integrity. Islamabad considered Afghanistan, especially with successive Afghan government's Pushtunistan claims, to pose a direct challenge to Pakistani national security. Accordingly, Islamabad only allowed religiously based rather than nationalist opposition groups to operate on Pakistani territory. If American policymakers wanted to oppose Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan, then they simply would have to accede to Pakistani interests.

The United States is not without fault, however. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Washington could have more effectively pressured Pakistan to tone down the support for Islamic fundamentalism, especially after the rise of the Taliban. Instead, Washington ceded her responsibility and gave Pakistan a sphere of influence in Afghanistan unlimited by any other foreign pressure.

NOTES

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http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html . (After more than two decades of war, any statistics regarding Afghan demographics must be considered only approximations.)

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20. Barnett Rubin, p.99.

21. Alan J. Kuperman, "The Stinger missile and U.S. intervention in Afghanistan," *Political Science Quarterly*, No. 2, Vol. 114, June 1999.

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23. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil, and the New Great Ga e in Central Asia* . (London and New York: I.B. Tauris and Company, 2000,) p.18.

24. Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2001.

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29. Kuperman, "The Stinger missile and U.S. intervention in Afghanistan"

30. Interview with former CIA operative, November 1998.

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33. Pamela Constable, "Pakistani Agency Seeks to Allay U.S. on Terrorism," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2000, p.A17.

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36. Amin Saikal. "The Regional Politics of the Afghan Crisis," p.59.

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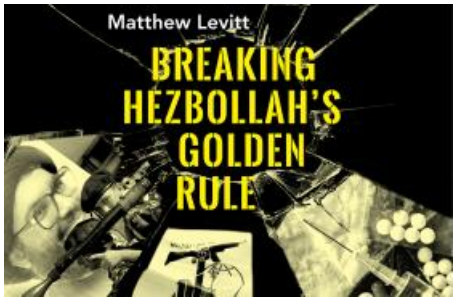

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