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From Identity Crisis to Identity in Crisis in Afghanistan

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In this Policy Brief, the author traces the evolution of Afghanistan's "identity crisis" from its origins during the Soviet occupation to its present day manifestations. The roles and histories of Afghanistan's diverse ethnic communities in this crisis are described, and linkages made between these groups and the outside states, communities, and actors who shared or opposed their interests. Recommendations for transcending this recent history of crisis and division are offered.

When social order is politically disturbed in a society like Afghanistan, inter- and intra-group dynamics set forces in motion that cannot be harnessed once unleashed. While group dynamics dictate, for instance, that majorities behave as an integrative and cohesive force as their sense of loyalty lies in the wellbeing of the collective whole, a minority's interests may on occasion diverge in the pursuit of greener pastures across the fence, allowing themselves to be used as vulnerable pawns by others.

When political conflicts are deemed to be irresolvable, existing social frictions are manipulated and exacerbated, calling into question the identities as defined by the *status quo ante*. In an identity power struggle, defining is empowerment, but being defined by others inherently implies disenfranchisement and vilification. Once a group is identified as "the other," the designation is often carried over from social attitude to political platform and eventually it becomes a military strategy, resulting in the phases of social alienation, political disenfranchisement, ethnic cleansing, and ultimately in civil war.

Soviet strategic miscalculations led to their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Realizing that the war was unwinnable, the Soviets engineered a civil war in Afghanistan in order to mitigate the ripple effects of their defeat. The start of the civil war in Afghanistan coincided with the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, creating opportunities for the neighboring states to exploit the situation. This external involvement intensified the conflict in Afghanistan. As the civil war drew to a close on September 9, 2001, destiny rolled the dice: There followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the commencement of another war less than one month later which turned allies into adversaries.

This analysis is not intended to incriminate one ethnic group and glorify another, but rather is an attempt to suggest where events may have taken a wrong turn, thereby hopefully drawing some meaningful conclusions from a history that need not repeat itself.

I: IDENTITY CRISIS

A CIVIL WAR MADE TO ORDER: POST-SOVIET AFGHANISTAN

Diplomatically shunned by the world community and ideologically stunned by the Afghan rejection of Communism, the Soviet Union contemplated an exit strategy early in its occupation of Afghanistan. Once this strategy was adopted, the Soviets spent the remaining years of their occupation laying the groundwork for a civil war that they claimed was the reason for their intervention in the first place. The Soviets succeeded in fueling civil war in Afghanistan to the point that the prospect for political stability has remained bleak ever since.

The roots of this chronic instability lie mainly in the nature of the Soviet strategy, which encouraged minority ethnic politics to supersede national politics. The years of Soviet occupation (1979-89) were characterized not simply by an assault on the Afghan state, but more importantly by an attack on Afghan identity. With the realization that Communist ideology was no match for the solid front of Islamic resistance in



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Afghanistan, the Soviets redefined Afghanistan as a country of diverse and distinct ethnicities, rather than as a unitary state with a single religious belief system. Their goal was to weaken potentially the most resistant of the ethnic groups, the Pashtun majority — the traditionally dominant group in the Afghan armed forces, a majority among the Afghan resistance groups, and the cultural core of Afghanistan’s “national” identity.¹

The first tactic was to weaken the Pashtuns politically. While the Communist government in Kabul still had a Pashtun face, the makeup of the government became increasingly non-Pashtun. Simultaneously, the Soviets began to advocate Communism’s egalitarian virtues and organize, arm, and financially support the formation of various ethnic minority militias, touting them as defenders of the rights of the “toiling brotherly nations.” The inter-ethnic strife was exacerbated by the deployment of Red Army-supported militias across ethnic lines. A trial run of this campaign was launched by employing certain Pashtun tribesmen to fight a Hazara uprising in central Afghanistan as a proof of their loyalty to the government in Kabul. Soon after that, the notorious Soviet agent-turned warlord-turned politician, Abdul Rashid Dostom, and his Uzbek militia were let loose on the Pashtun resistance in the south of the country.

While the non-Pashtun commanders were the beneficiaries of positive publicity spins, the Pashtun resistance leaders were frequently victims of character assassination and charges of treason, which portrayed them as Pakistani puppets. (This trend carried over into the post-2001 American occupation.) Pashtun leaders were either eliminated or were considered fugitives and terrorists, while the non-Pashtun leaders became parliamentarians and high-ranking government officials, regardless of their record of complicity with the Soviets. Others, such as Ahmad Shah Massoud — who singlehandedly could have prevented the Russians from crossing the Hindu Kush, yet became an accomplice of the Soviets² — have become national heroes whose true identity hides behind the 50-foot-high portraits that pierce the gazes of starving children in Kabul.

The only non-Pashtun commander the Soviets wanted dead was Zabihullah Mujahed, whose uncompromising stance may have done him in. The Soviets conveniently filled that power vacuum with a very Russian-friendly Dostom. Ismail Khan of Herat also might have received “camouflaged” preferential treatment as a non-Pashtun leader enjoying the patronage of the anti-American Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second Soviet tactic was to reduce the numerical strength of the Pashtuns. Using Pakistani and American support for the resistance as an excuse, the Soviets drastically increased their military operations and aerial bombing of the Pashtuns in the south, driving over five million refugees into Pakistan. By contrast, the non-Pashtun areas of the country lived in relative calm and in some cases remained virtually intact. In fact, at one point, the Soviets were considering moving the capital from Kabul to the safety of Mazar-i Sharif in the north, which had become the second largest Afghan city, replacing Kandahar, which lay in ruins.

The Red Army retreated beyond the borders of Afghanistan only after making sure that the Pashtuns had been weakened sufficiently and isolated and after receiving American assurance that they would not be pursued into Cen-

1. Nationalism, national identity, and nation-state are uniquely European concepts that may be defined as state-endorsed racism, often coupled with linguistic chauvinism, achieved through ethnic cleansing and/or coercion of minorities to assimilate so that ethnically homogenous societies can be tailored to legitimize the political ideology of a nation-state. The great majority of the ethnically diverse non-European societies claim, or pay lip service to, nationalism and nation-statehood either in imitation of the Europeans as a sign of progress in political development or as a point of cross reference, as nation-statehood has become the currency, criterion, and organizational unit of analysis in modern political discourse. For this reason I use the terms nation, national, and nationalism in quotation marks in reference to Afghanistan.

2. See Bruce Richardson on General Gramov’s revelations regarding Ahmad Shah Massoud’s agreement in complicity signing an agreement with the Soviets to ensure “safe passage of Russian army through the dangerous Salang and Panjsher valleys.” The Soviet general adds that “Masoud sometimes used to stage sham skirmishes with the Russians to put off chances of suspicions about his activities among other Mujahideen groups.” Bruce Richardson, “Intimidation, Subversion and Pacification: Russian Policy in Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Afghanistan” March 1996.

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tral Asia. The Kabul regime did not unravel as quickly as predicted due to the public uneasiness about the heightened ethnic tensions and US withdrawal of support for the *mujahiddin* under George H.W. Bush,³ who sought a *rapprochement* with a kinder and gentler declining Soviet Russia.

By 1992, the Northern Coalition (later renamed Alliance) was formed, in which the prominent ethnic minorities in the north were united against the Pashtuns. Thus on the eve of the centennial of the Durand Line that had divided Afghanistan in 1893, a deep chasm was created in the ethno-linguistic mosaic of Afghanistan.

The Northern Alliance's first mission was to bring down the Communist government in Kabul. The plot called for heavily armed military units from the central command in Kabul to be deployed to Mazar-i Sharif to ward off a rumored planned uprising during the Afghan New Year celebrations on March 21, 1992. Upon their return, these forces, headed by non-Pashtun generals, assaulted the palace and killed the generals loyal to the President, who took refuge in the UNDP compound. Communist collaborators aligned with the Northern Alliance moved in on the capital from the north, as the *mujahiddin* forces arrived from Pakistan. The victory, however, was not claimed in the name of all Afghans, but in the name of the Northern Alliance.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the Pashtun *mujahiddin* leaders, considered the conspiracy treason and remained behind in Pakistan. His supporters in the ranks of the civil service claimed the key posts of the Ministry of the Interior and the Policy Academy for him; however, they were dragged away and beaten by Northern Alliance forces, which were implementing the new "anybody-but-Pashtun" agenda. Ahmad Shah Massoud's private army and the Supervisory Council (Shura-i Nazar) spearheaded the Northern Alliance's policies. Operating under the motto, "Tajik above all," they forced President Sebghatullah Mujadidi, a figurehead, out of office after only two months and replaced him with Barnhuddin Rabbani.

In the shifting sands of civil war, the Tajiks purged Pashtuns from the military and higher levels of government civil service. Through deliberate bureaucratic fraud and coercion, some Pashtuns were given new national identity cards that identified them as Tajiks.⁴ Hazara forces evicted Pashtuns from their homes, particularly in the 3rd and 4th districts of Kabul. Meanwhile, the Uzbek militia looted homes in the predominantly Pashtun districts of the city. At the "national" level, ethnic cleansing campaigns began in the north. Dari Persian became the *de facto* official language of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan through a campaign to replace culturally standardized terminologies into Dari and Iranian Persian in the government-controlled media, school texts, and office correspondence.⁵ Several local government districts in the non-Pashtun north were elevated to the provincial level to reflect the diminishing Pashtun population.

The government produced a new census with a breakdown that reduced the nearly 60% Pashtun majority to 38% and increased the proportion of Tajiks from 12% to 25%. Because these figures were disseminated to international organizations as official government data, they were soon reflected in the *National Geographic World Atlas*⁶ and the *World Almanac*, among other publications. (See Table 1.)

3. See Part III, "Identifying Crisis," regarding US involvement in the sell-out.

4. Tajik is not an ethnic identity, but a linguistic one that has traditionally been used as a "default identity," i.e. when one's identity was not categorically identifiable, traditionally it would be stated as "Tajik," a tradition that has lingered on from the days of the Arabization of Sughdiana in what is now northern Afghanistan when Tajik meant an Arab or Arabized native of the region.

5. The Turkmen and Uzbek languages were raised to national/regional level in some northern provinces in 2002, courtesy of US support for a new constitution to create a more "unified" Afghanistan.

6. The 2003 edition of the *National Geographic World Atlas* (for young explorers) identifies "Afghan Persian" as the national language of Afghanistan, without mentioning Pashto. Other examples of this trend are "View from a Grain of Sand," a recent PBS documentary on the plight of Afghan women that devotes less than one minute out of its nearly 90-minute footage to a single Pashtun woman's miseries while the entire film is devoted to Tajik women. This is particularly tragic, since Pashtun women bore the brunt of the suffering of the Soviet invasion, occupation, "civil war," and US bombing.

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Table 1

Title	Author	Date and Place of Publication	Percentage of Major Ethnic Groups			
			Pashtun	Tajik	Hazara	Uzbek
Afghanistan	Prof. M. Ali	1955 Kabul	60	20		
Afghanistan	Max Clumborg	1960	60	30	3	3
The National Languages of Afghanistan	Prof. Aslanov	1964 USSR	60			
The World of Geoethnology	M. Mahjub Yawari	1987 (5 th Ed.) Iran	60	20	5	5
World's Largest Languages	McKenzie	1987 Europe	55-65			
History and Establishment of Afghanistan	Abdul Azim Walyan	1987 Iran	70	13		
Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban	William Maley	1998 London	62.73	12.4	9	6
Afghanistan Federal System	M. Enam Wak	2000 Pakistan	62	12	9	6
The World Almanac	Primedia	2000 USA	38	25	19	6

Source: Statistics presented by the late academician Abdul Shakur Rashad on the ethnic composition of the people of Afghanistan.

Before long, a struggle ensued among the newly empowered minorities. Realizing that their infighting would result in Pashtuns gaining strength, they tried to drag the Pashtuns into the melee. Dostom's Uzbek militia began attacking and harassing the predominantly Pashtun districts of Kabul. Hekmatyar threatened to attack Dostom's forces unless they withdrew from Kabul. Dostom's eventual departure raised Hekmatyar's prestige. Once drawn into the political arena, his presence and power could no longer be ignored by the regime. Massoud attacked Hekmatyar, who retreated to a military base in Rishkhor on the southern hilltop dominating western Kabul. The political impasse was resolved through Pakistani mediation. However, the power-sharing arrangement — whereby Hekmatyar would become Prime Minister under Rabbani — did not have Massoud's blessing. The latter continued to attack Hekmatyar.⁷ Thus the Soviet-orchestrated civil war came to full fruition, as sporadic attacks gave way to an all-out civil war that took the lives of an estimated 65,000 civilian residents of Kabul and turned the city to rubble.

II: IDENTITY IN CRISIS

COMPETING REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS IN POST-SOVIET AFGHAN POLITICS

As Soviet influence faded and the possibility of Afghanistan's disintegration seemed increasingly likely, regional competition for influence in Afghanistan intensified. Afghanistan's neighbors thus began to support their ethnic/religious allies in Afghanistan more openly, turning Afghanistan into fiefdoms headed by pliant warlords.

IRAN

Iran entertained thoughts of a Persianate super state that would link it to Tajikistan via a corridor through northern Afghanistan. An expansive Persian language — linking Iran with Hazaras, Tajiks, and the Ismailis of Farghana — would cement this gerrymandered polity. Ironically, Iran supported the very people it considers its cultural nemesis

7. Massoud's strategic strength and his adamant rejection of compromise and power-sharing prompted Hekmatyar to resort to Massoud's own tactic and form an alliance against him. In this respect Hekmatyar did the unthinkable, i.e. forming a coalition with Dostom, his ideological nemesis, to fight Massoud, his political nemesis.

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(i.e. the “Arabized” Tajiks⁸ and the Mongol Hazaras) while it undermined its “natural allies,” the Aryan Pashtuns.

Iran supported several parties with overlapping identities for different reasons in the Afghan conflict. Because of its irredentist aspirations, it supported Ismail Khan, the Governor of Herat; as a matter of Shi’a solidarity, Iran backed the Hazaras; because of the Persian-Tajik linguistic affiliation, it supported Massoud; and recognizing a bond of fraternity with the Islamic Party, Iran supported Rabbani.

Consequently, Iran’s support for ethno-linguistic and religious minorities manifested itself as sub-cultural identities clashed with shifting loyalties forged by crisscrossing battlefield realities. Somehow, Herati irredentism met Badakhshani Tajik expansionism in the midst of the Afghan civil war where Hazara Twelver Shi’ism played a tug of war with Pamiri Ismaili Imamism as Pan-Persian Panjshiri chauvinism looked on with a self-satisfied smirk.

TAJIKISTAN

The Tajiks were the most resistant to Russian and Soviet incursions; as a result, they were suppressed and severely punished by Moscow for decades. Denied their own republic, Tajiks were instead incorporated into the Uzbek Republic in 1926. When they were allowed to form their own republic two years later, major Tajik cities and cultural icons such as Samarkand and Bukhara were absorbed into the Uzbek Republic through Russian complicity; further, Khujand was renamed Leninabad. Over the years, the Tajik alphabet was changed several times from Arabic, to Cyrillic, to Latin and back to Cyrillic in a deliberate attempt to detach people from their cultural heritage and foster Russification. Even in the post-Soviet era, Moscow retained Communist leaders in power and supported them against liberation movements.

As a state whose *raison d’être* is its religious identity, Pakistan viewed the possible disintegration of Afghanistan with great ambivalence.

In ethno-linguistic and religious terms, these frustrations increased Tajik interests in the Afghan civil war. Tajiks tried to compensate for their losses to the Uzbeks in the north by attempting to make gains from the Afghans in the south. Iran played the role of an enabler and supporter of Tajik aspirations, as these converged with Iran’s own grander designs in the region.

UZBEKISTAN/TURKMENISTAN

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan may not have wished for the disintegration of Afghanistan, but both would have benefited from such an eventuality by incorporating the Afghan Uzbeks and Turkmen into their respective territories. While the role of Dostom and his militia could have been instrumental for the Uzbeks, the Turkmen lacked comparable numbers, visibility, and viable leadership. Uzbeks and Turkmen have no territorial claims in Afghanistan, as the majority of them were refugees of the Czarist and Soviet expansions into Central Asia. Afghans not only welcomed the large influx of these refugees well into the late 1920s, but Kabul was also the home of the exiled last Uzbek monarch.

Like other Turkic societies in Central Asia, Uzbeks and Turkmen do not have the fervor of Tajik nationalism. They are more submissive toward authoritarian rule. Due to such acquiescence, the Soviets established their eastern capital in Tashkent in Uzbekistan. This also may explain why no one in Afghan politics served the Soviets more faithfully, more ruthlessly, or more viciously than Dostom, who in the service of the Red Army took *guilam jam* (one who will roll up the carpet of Islam from Afghanistan) as his *nom de guerre*.

PAKISTAN

As a state whose *raison d’être* is its religious identity, Pakistan viewed the possible disintegration of Afghanistan with great ambivalence. While Pakistan would have benefited from annexing the largest portion of Afghanistan in-

8. See note 6 in Part I, “Identity Crisis,” for a definition of Tajik identity.

habited by the Pashtun majority, such a convergence of Pashtuns would have seriously challenged the Punjabi monopoly on Pakistan's inter-ethnic power politics, possibly resulting in the disintegration of Pakistan itself.

Consequently, Pakistan's survival has always been linked to Afghanistan's stability. That is why Pakistan has promoted religious identity among the Afghan resistance parties at the cost of ethnic ones since 1979, if not earlier. Afghanistan's stability became even more significant in the post-Soviet era, when it also could serve as a bridge to Central Asian economic opportunities. Pakistan competed fiercely to exploit these opportunities.

REGIONAL POWER PLAY

Those who might have wished for Afghanistan's stability surely recognized that a strong central government in Afghanistan could be a key player in the newly independent republics in Central Asia. Iran and Tajikistan drew closer as the benefactors of an eventual disintegration of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were indifferent, while Pakistan opposed any boundary modification at all cost. Economically too, Pakistan, the country with a more skilled and experienced labor force and the greatest potential to provide low-cost assistance to the newly independent countries in Central Asia, was poised to gain the most from stability.

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This may explain why Massoud and other Northern Alliance leaders whose agenda leaned towards the country's disintegration were the most vocal critics of Pakistan's policy of playing the transnational Islamic identity card instead of the ethnic one in Afghan politics. For all intended purposes, Moscow's Northern Alliance had now become Tehran's "Northern Corridor" Alliance. Kulab, Tajikistan served as a supply station for Massoud's forces. Iran, which essentially ran the cultural affairs in Herat, ferried military supplies by plane into and out of Bamiyan. Meanwhile, the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-i Sharif coordinated plans aimed at achieving the grand Pan-Persian design discussed earlier.⁹ Russia and Pakistan's archrival, India — which felt threatened by Islamic revivalism and Pakistan's rising prestige — suppressed Islamic independence movements in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Kashmir.¹⁰

The lingering civil war made stability in Afghanistan nearly impossible. With the tacit approval of Washington, Pakistan decided to end the political impasse by abandoning its traditional allies and instead supporting an ethnically diverse, but Pashtun-dominated, student movement, the Taliban.¹¹ The Taliban owed most of its initial success and subsequent appeal to an uncompromising stance against the warlords. Through a combination of battle-hardened leadership, sophisticated military strategy (courtesy of the US and Pakistani military), puritanical discipline, and the war-time expedient of curtailing civil liberties, the Taliban ended the Northern Alliance reign of terror¹² and achieved

9. When the Taliban successfully interrupted these operations and captured eight Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i Sharif, it was not surprising that Tehran mobilized some 250,000 troops across the Afghan border. It was the Taliban who met the challenge. When the war of words heated up there was no shortage of claims of bravado. Some suggested that the Iranians were avenging the Safavid loss to the Afghans in Gulnabad in 1709 with the appointment of Safavi as the commander of the Iranian forces. That suspicion received a boost and the Iranians began to ridicule the smaller forces of the Afghans who had come to the challenge across the border. The Taliban replied to this by saying that the Afghans had beaten the Persians against numerical odds before and that they were ready to do it again. Some religious fanatics were even drawing the names of 'Ali and Omar into the controversy as the often-perceived rival Caliphs whose namesakes were leaders of the Iran and Afghanistan at this point.

10. Regional powers such as India, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey played roles in the Afghan civil war mainly to counter-balance their rivals. While India's desire not to be excluded from Central Asia economically partly explains its involvement in Afghanistan, rivalry with Pakistan was an even more powerful determinant. That is why India always supported any party in Afghanistan that the Pakistanis opposed. Saudi Arabia's support of Afghanistan's territorial integrity was as much in opposition to Iran's interests as on the basis of its claim to the leadership of Sunni Islam. But Saudi Arabia, along with Pakistan, acted as a proxy for US interests, whether to oppose Iran or Soviet Russia. Turkey played a proxy role similar to that of Saudi Arabia, but it also had its own interest in the Turkic minorities in Afghanistan.

11. The Taliban reflected more of the majority Pashtuns because the larger number of disenfranchised Pashtuns related to their frustration better and because most of politically active non-Pashtuns already have been absorbed and employed by the parties within the Northern Alliance which called them Pakistanis when they wanted to externalize their threat, and called them Pashtuns when the Taliban took over the government.

12. The general consensus among Afghans is that the days under the rule of the Northern Alliance were the most dreaded in their lives, particularly in Kabul. Not just because 65,000 civilians were killed in Kabul, but also those who survived were frequently subjected to extortion, looting, torture, rape, and more. The government could not rein in the warlords who were making their own laws, had their own torture chambers, and were undermining the

the nearly impossible task of unifying Afghanistan.

Up to that point, Afghanistan had ceased to be a political entity; it existed only as a geographic necessity by default. What the people of Afghanistan owe the Taliban is the reintegration and reunification of the country.¹³

III: IDENTIFYING CRISIS

FROM JUSTIFICATION TO VILIFICATION: A WAR CAMPAIGN GONE AWRY

The US intervention in Afghanistan may seem justified in the aftermath of 9/11, but in view of the broader historical context and Afghan domestic politics, the US military campaign was headed in the wrong direction from the start, as it followed in the footsteps of two empires that had previously been defeated in Afghanistan — the British Empire in the 19th century and Soviet Russia in the 20th century. The United States adopted the colonial tactics of the British and the Russians by targeting those who resisted the most.

The current Afghan crisis is neither correctly identified nor adequately addressed. Pashtuns, who constitute the cohesive core of the otherwise ethnically diverse Afghan society, have earned the distinction of the most resistant for a reason. Like any other majority in any other state, they shoulder a heavier responsibility. The alienation of the majority will neither win hearts and minds nor will it help build institutions for a viable democracy.

In the history of the Cold War, the Afghan-American alliance brought down the Soviet empire. So, what went wrong? Those who question the trust, reliability, and loyalty of the Afghans in that alliance are quick to assign blame, but slow to reason. When pressed, they deliberately or unintentionally skip critical periods in the history of Afghan-American relations to prove their point. Perhaps the most critical period occurred on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. With their gentlemen's agreement in Lake Baikal in 1988, US Secretary of State James Baker and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze heralded "the new world order."¹⁴ According to the agreement, the Soviet Union would save face by signing a peace treaty not with the Afghan *mujahiddin*, but with the Kabul regime — with the United States and Pakistan serving as observers. Not only were the *mujahiddin* sidelined, but the United States was complicit in linking the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan with the US withdrawal of support for the Afghan resistance. This betrayal became a consistent pattern of behavior on the part of the United States.

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In order to reciprocate Moscow's withdrawal from Afghanistan, at the urging and direction of the US Ambassador in Islamabad, a major *mujahiddin* attack was launched against a military base near the Jalalabad Airport, which was cordoned off with three minefields. The US "policy shift" thus resulted in the deaths of nearly 2,000 of the best Afghan resistance fighters. It also slowed the eventual downfall of the Communist regime in Kabul and disheartened both the Afghan resistance and other liberation movements throughout Central Asia.¹⁵ When the Afghan *mujahiddin* finally

authority of the central government by collecting taxes, including import duties at the national border checkpoints.

13. The Taliban are known for their unconventional approach to governance and diplomacy, in which they didn't have any experience. What they have been made known for, especially after 9/11, was the violation of civil liberties of which many graphic examples became prominent in the media. What is often overlooked, particularly during the media blackout on Afghanistan, is that the corruption, ineptness, and atrocities of the Northern Alliance drove the people to the arms of the Taliban — an indication of how much worse the *status quo ante* must have been.

14. From then on Russia and the United States pretty much supported each other in their campaigns in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, and elsewhere. Even in the case of India and Pakistan, where for decades the two enjoyed the patronage of Soviet Russia and the United States respectively, the United States drew closer to former Soviet Russia's ally India instead of the traditional US ally, Pakistan. In the traditional battlegrounds like Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, the once diametrically opposed political stances of Moscow and Washington also began to shift to a thaw, if not outright convergence.

15. This also slowed the momentum of the formation of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), which was resisted by Russia, as it politically challenged the latter's domination of the economies and resources of Central Asia. The United States was similarly concerned about Iran's role in the ECO.

took power in Kabul, the United States did not extend diplomatic recognition.¹⁶ Notwithstanding their stubborn resistance to Communism and foreign domination, the loss of 1.5 million lives and nearly 6 million refugees, Afghans faded quickly from the Free World's media, which focused instead on Central and Eastern Europeans' euphoric emergence from 70 years of Soviet imperialism.

The United States did not show any interest in Afghanistan until the prospects of a Unocal gas pipeline were under consideration. Even then, the US' main objective was to sideline Iran from becoming an active partner in Turkmen natural gas projects. The United States also wanted to keep Russia, which was reasserting itself in Central Asia, in check.

As there was no possibility of building a pipeline during the civil war, the United States, through its proxy Pakistan, threw its full support behind the Taliban in an attempt to end the civil war. The US government courted the Taliban in spite of their ultra-fundamentalist reputation, and tried to polish up their image in an effort to lure them into granting Unocal the contract for the natural gas pipeline project. Only after an Argentinean company outbid Unocal¹⁷ and the Taliban went along with the process did Washington's relations with Kabul deteriorate.

When plans for Afghanistan's invasion were in the offing, the United States sought the assistance and endorsement of Britain, Russia, and the brainchild of its imperial quest, the Northern Alliance ground forces. The "coalition of the willing" was essentially a coalition of failures: Britain and Russia, as superpowers in their time, had failed in their invasions and occupations of Afghanistan, and the Northern Alliance had failed in its governance of Afghanistan.

In deliberately ignoring the failures of its allies and not learning from history, Washington was preparing the ground for its own failure. US officials appeared to believe that by using the Northern Alliance as an instrument to depose the Taliban and as a medium to create the façade of a seemingly legitimate government, the people of Afghanistan would forget the involvement of the Northern Alliance in the bloodiest civil war in Afghan history — whose atrocities led people to essentially take refuge with the Taliban in 1995.¹⁸

Stability is a prerequisite to a state of normalcy and the establishment of governance. It has been particularly critical in Afghanistan where it had been achieved as a result of the sacrifice of countless civil liberties and harsh draconian measures. Through naïveté, the United States destroyed any semblance of stability as it proceeded to establish the institutions of democratic governance. Even politically, instead of manipulating the rift between the hard-line and moderate factions of the Taliban and using incentives to strengthen stability, the United States deliberately turned power over to the very same clique of warlords who had fragmented the country less than a decade earlier. Furthermore, Washington allowed those same warlords to pocket billions of dollars of American and international aid to Afghanistan of which there is no trace.

Whether the Americans saw this as Beowulf's combat with the dragon or were caught in the Russian bear trap, it is obvious that Washington allowed others to define the enemy for them. Because of this, the US agenda became subser-

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16. Due to this new Moscow-Washington alliance, the United States also withheld recognition from Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, where liberation movements spearheaded by Islamists came under attack by former Communists or Communist-affiliated factions. Instead it recognized the 'newly independent' states ruled by Communist era apparatchiks who held on to power with the blessings of Moscow. When the Communists eventually won in Baku, Azerbaijan's Communist head of state received a red carpet welcome in Washington, the seat of Jeffersonian democracy.

17. The two other contenders were a Saudi oil exploration company and an Argentinean one.

18. The atrocities of the Northern Alliance were committed conveniently behind a media blackout on Afghanistan. When the light was turned back on Afghanistan, the Western media showed the Taliban on a bloody stage and considered them the culprit. The Taliban's own medieval mind-set and sensitivity to modernity did not help.

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vient to that of others, namely the Northern Alliance. It is at the behest of the Northern Alliance that the Pentagon has essentially declared a “not so civil” war on the entire Pashtun population of Afghanistan, which already has suffered from ethnic cleansings, forced evictions, and political disenfranchisement. The United States has repeated the folly of the British and the Russians, fighting those who resist the American presence the most and conveniently identifying — if only subconsciously — any and all resistance as the Taliban.

CONCLUSION

A maxim of warrior culture says that in order to win a war, one must know the enemy. US forces will never win the war in Afghanistan as long as those with ulterior motives define the enemy for them. Speaking through the barrel of a gun doesn’t qualify as communication let alone understanding. Fighting fire with fire will not shorten the distance necessary to know those whom we fight.¹⁹ Those implementing US policies in Afghanistan need to understand through a reversed perspective that the current situation is a showcase of deception that has been described as a government of warlords where minorities rule, the NGOs steal, and the Americans bomb.

US policy amounts to literally walking in the footsteps of empires that have fallen in these barren hills — like the British who thought it necessary to divide the cohesive core of Afghan society by imposing on them an arbitrary line of demarcation, the so-called Durand Line, as a boundary between British India and Afghanistan, and like the Soviets who organized the minorities as the Northern Alliance, arming them against the Pashtun majority to divide the country once more.

In retrospect the American mistakes in the first nine years are worse than those of the British and the Russians, amounting to failing military strategies, inherently contradictory political propositions, and conflicting regional interests that run counter to every lesson history has taught us. Afghans, like any other nation, resent occupation. The US military presence is the cause, not the solution. Protecting the façade of an illegitimate government represents the tyranny of the minority rather than the will of the majority. Identifying the Taliban ideologically, but fighting them ethnically amounts to American participation in a civil war by another name. Expanding the Afghan security forces beyond a level of sustainability and affordability is an unnecessary militarization that could easily trigger an even more disastrous civil war amidst existing ethnic tensions.

Considering the odds, can the United States avoid the perilous path of previous invaders and prevent the Afghan crisis from further escalation? One solution requires a transformation of the American political psyche and the enabling of the Afghans to do the same in order to rethink their strategies. As warring parties, they have fallen into roles determined by political and historical circumstances and defined by cultural values. As a result, neither is able or willing to walk in the other’s shoes. In this manner, they could pursue a peaceful alternative based on trust and sincerity to show that Americans are a “helping hand” and not an “occupying force” — united against their common enemies: hunger, poverty, political disenfranchisement, religious manipulation, and social alienation.

At *Shayrdarwaza*, “the Lion’s Gate” of Kabul, they watch their perceptions projected on the rocky precipice. Between biting sarcasm and irking irony they stare at the logic of skewed perspective that glares at its own image etched in the fog of ignorance and deliberate self-deception. A modern adaptation of the Great Game of Central Asia renamed the *Buzkashi*, is being played against the backdrop of tangled and twisted heads of bulls, beasts, horses, and horsemen. *Guernica* painted in ash gray and phosphorous white come to life as a death-defying human drama depicts scenes of struggles for survival. Familiar-looking actors fake accents of deception in its perpetuity as the silhouette of a daunted woman dies a third death, but refuses to be mourned.

19. Inasmuch as Afghanistan is the keystone to regional stability, Pashtun enfranchisement is a prerequisite for achieving political stability. The Pashtuns alone — the country’s cohesive core — can hold Afghanistan together. Yet, the beneficiaries of the post-9/11 crisis have been the non-Pashtuns in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely the Tajiks and the Punjabis. “They get the dollars, and we get the bullets,” is the common refrain among Pashtuns. “Dollars” refers to the economic enrichment of the Tajiks and allied minority ethnic groups through an inside track on aid contracts. The “bullets” are the anti-Taliban air strikes and ground operations in Pashtun areas in the south and east of the country. Both parties have served as collaborators in the US intervention and thereby have effectively disenfranchised the Pashtuns.