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Afghanistan: a historical note

This paper is to give a historical background to a country which is currently the centre of world attention following the attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001.

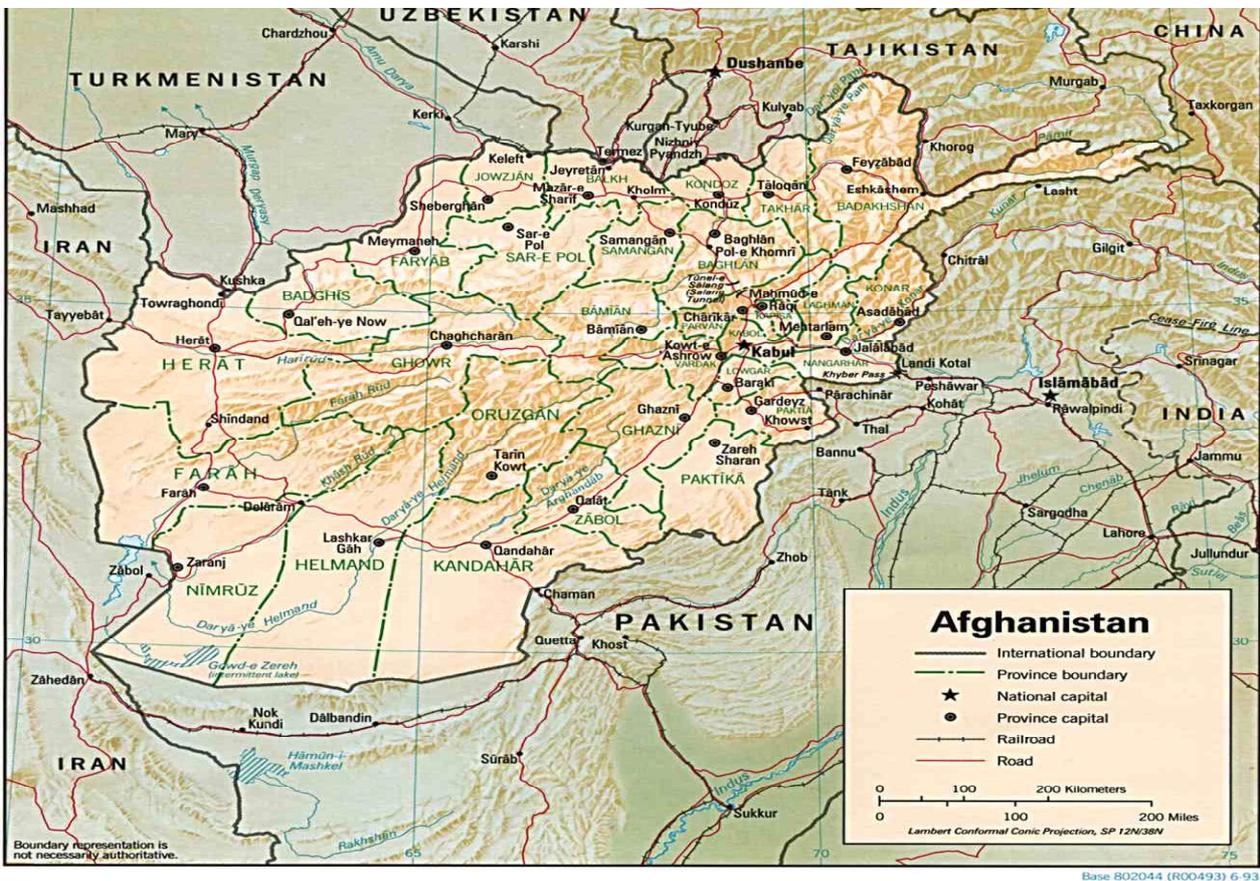


Fig 1: Map of Afghanistan, Central Intelligence Agency, 2001

Introduction¹

Located to the north-west of India, bordered primarily by Pakistan, Iran, and by the former Soviet states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Afghanistan has long been the gateway to India. Various Indian emperors have ruled the area over the past three thousand years; geographically the Hindukush mountains and the Himalayas in the north and north-east have served as India's borders.

Being a gateway has meant that the country has seen conquerors of many nationalities; Alexander the Great passed through in 328 BC, followed in successive centuries by Huns and Turks. During the 7th century AD, Arabs invaded the entire region, bringing with them their religion, Islam.

Arab rule quickly gave way to the Persians, who controlled the area until the Turkic conquest in 998 AD. The Mongol invasion in 1219, led by Genghis Khan, resulted in the destruction of many cities, including Herat, Ghazni and Balkh, and the despoliation of fertile agricultural land. Following Genghis Khan's death in 1227, a succession of tribal leaders struggled for supremacy until Tamerlane, a descendant of the Khan, incorporated Afghanistan into his empire. Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane and the founder of India's Moghul (Islamic) dynasty, made Kabul the capital of an Afghan principality, a state which continued more or less uninterrupted until the nineteenth century. Most of the rulers during this era were from the Durrani family's confederation of Pashtun tribal groups.

The British in Afghanistan

British concern over a growing Russian empire culminated in two Anglo-Afghan wars during the nineteenth century. The first, from 1839-42, saw the destruction of the British Army, and is still remembered as an example of the ferocity of Afghan resistance to foreign rule. The second, 1878-80, arose from Afghan refusal to accept a British mission in Kabul. However, following this war, the British and Russians officially established the boundaries of what would become modern Afghanistan and Britain retained its role in foreign policy decision making.

The Afghan King's policy of neutrality during the First World War was not regarded with favour in the country, being seen as another example of British imperialism at work. After the murder of the King's son and heir by anti-British factions in 1919, the King's third son launched an attack on India, leading to a short-lived third Anglo-Afghan war. The British finally relinquished their control over Afghan foreign affairs on August 19, 1919, a day still marked as Independence Day throughout the country.

An experiment in democracy

From then until 1973, various rulers sought to end the country's traditional isolation and promulgate a more liberal constitution, including the abolition of the veil for Muslim women and the opening of some coeducational schools. In 1964, a new constitution provided for a two chamber legislature to which the King appointed a third of the members. The people elected another third, and provincial assemblies the rest. Although this "experiment in democracy" provided few lasting reforms, it permitted the growth of unofficial extremist parties of both left and right, including the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had close ideological ties with the Soviet Union.

Charges of corruption and poor governance by the royal family, and a severe drought in 1971-2 culminated in a military coup in July 1973, led by former Prime Minister Sardar Mohammed Daoud. He abolished the monarchy, abrogated the 1964 constitution and declared Afghanistan a republic with himself the first President and prime minister. His attempts to carry out economic and social reforms met with little success. The PDPA regrouped, with the support of Moscow, and overthrew Daoud in a bloody coup in April 1978, where he and most of his immediate family were killed.

The Marxist style 'reform' programme which was then instituted ran counter to deeply held Islamic traditions - for example the abolition of usury, changes to marriage laws and land reform were fiercely resisted by a highly conservative population. In addition, thousands of members of the traditional elite, the intelligentsia and religious leaders were tortured, imprisoned or murdered. Internal divisions within the PDPA resurfaced. In December 1979, Russia, following the signing of a friendship treaty with Afghan leaders, invaded the country.

The war against Soviet occupation

On December 24 1979 large numbers of Soviet airborne forces, joining thousands of Soviet troops already on the ground, began to land in Kabul under the pretext of a field exercise. Two days later, these troops killed the President, Hafizullah Amin, and installed Babrak Karmal, the exiled leader of one of the PDPA factions, as the new leader of the country. Despite the presence of over 100,000 Soviet troops to maintain his power base, Karmal was unable to establish his authority outside the main centres. Up to 80 per cent of the country, including parts of the major cities of Herat and Kandahar eluded effective government control.

An overwhelming number of Afghans opposed the Soviet regime. Afghan 'mujaheddin' or 'holy warriors' - President Reagan alluded to them as "freedom fighters"² - ensured that it was impossible for the regime to maintain a system of local government outside the main centres. Islamic insurgency became inextricably linked with national liberation. At first poorly armed with British Lee Enfield rifles, from 1985 they began to receive arms, primarily from the United States and Saudi Arabia. The weapons, originally sourced from China, then directly from the US, ranged from rockets and mortars to more sophisticated surface-to-air Stinger missiles. Weapons were channelled through Pakistan, and also came by horse and mule (including Tennessee mules airlifted from the USA to Pakistan) from the north. This CIA sponsored programme was carried out by the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which used its influence to benefit the radical Islamic fundamentalist party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Pushtun ethnic groups, who live on both sides of the Afghan/Pakistan border.

At first, US aid to the mujaheddin was relatively modest ³- \$50 million a year, increasing to \$122 million in fiscal year (FY)1984. However, in 1985, under National Security Decision Directive 166, signed by President Reagan in April, annual military aid for the mujaheddin rose to \$470 million in FY 1986 and \$630 million in FY 1987. There was additional funding of 'non-lethal' aid under the United States Agency for International Development programme which rose to \$40 million in 1988. (Also, a five year civil and military aid package was agreed for Pakistan of \$4.02 billion in 1987, ostensibly to head off the threat of Soviet invasion of the country).

Saudi Arabia's role

Saudi Arabia had been helping the mujaheddin since 1979, but its reason had shifted from opposing the Soviet invasion, to counteracting Iranian (Shi'a Moslem) influence in the region. A complicating factor in its national policy was its intermingling with religious imperatives, in particular the goals of Sunni Moslem fundamentalist groups, including the Muslim Brethren based in Egypt. Officially, the money funding the Afghan organisations was private, but amongst the donors were senior Saudi and Kuwaiti businessmen, and members of the Saudi royal family. The alliance between Saudi Arabia and the Afghan resistance groups broke apart when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990 - many of the mujaheddin, including Hekmatyar, supported Saddam Hussein, while others more moderate travelled to Saudi Arabia to fight Iraq. However, by the end of 1991, Hekmatyar was apparently forgiven for this lapse, and welcomed once again into the Saudi fold.

The end of the war with Russia

In just over nine years of fighting, despite regular offensives, aerial bombardments and hundreds of thousands of mainly civilian Afghan casualties, the Soviet army failed to strike any decisive blows against the mujaheddin. None of the prominent mujaheddin commanders were taken prisoner or killed as part of an offensive. The few who died in action were victims of random bombings and shellings, usually while they were on the move, or of assassination. Soviet casualties amounted to about 14,500. By the summer of 1987, Soviet superiority in the air, thanks to the Stinger missiles, was effectively over. Afghan resistance forces secured their own bases, and communication lines with Pakistan were strengthened, allowing over 90% of arms to reach their

destinations. By March 1988, Soviet forces had begun to withdraw. Following the Geneva Accords of that year, which neglected any negotiations with the mujaheddin, the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, together with the US and Russia as guarantors, agreed a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the return of up to three million refugees from Pakistan without fear of reprisal. The last Soviet troops returned home in February 1989.

And then?

Contrary to most expectations, the Soviet supported regime did not collapse following the retreat of Soviet troops. This was partly due to US policy, which stopped the supply of weapons from December 1988, and also instigated a 'buy back' of the Stinger missiles, in the expectation that the mujaheddin would easily defeat the Kabul regime following the retreat of Soviet troops. However, this retreat allowed inter factional rivalries to erupt within the besieging mujaheddin - no longer were they fighting a jihad or holy war against the foreign infidel. There was also resistance from within the cities, following Soviet modernisation and education efforts. It took until March 1992 for the mujaheddin to enter Kabul, only to factionalise into ethnic and religious groupings once they were inside the city.

Several attempts were made to try and resolve violent differences between the factions. Accords were signed, but stable government remained elusive. In late 1994, an extreme Sunni fundamentalist group called the Taliban, ("seekers of religious knowledge") consisting mainly of Pashtun from Pakistan refugee camps, came to the fore, under the leadership of the mullah Mohammed Omar. It systematically eliminated all other factions and gradually took control of the provincial areas. Initially, many Afghans welcomed the Taliban as a uniting force. Opinions changed as the regime has shown itself to be Islam fundamentalist at its harshest, with gross violations of human rights, and increasing numbers of executions, floggings and torture as its hallmarks.⁴ However, the ban on opium poppy growing (see below) is a very positive step forward in the war against illegal drugs worldwide.

Afghanistan has been further isolated from the international community with its protection of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi funder of the war against the Soviets, but also implicated, through his umbrella organisation, Al-Qaida, in several bomb attacks against US and other targets. The Clinton administration planned an attempt to capture him in 1997, but abandoned the venture when bin Laden heard of it and moved to Kandahar, where the Taliban has its headquarters. After attacks on American embassies in Africa in 1998, the US fired over 70 cruise missiles on training camps run by bin Laden in Afghanistan. Fourteen foreign Muslims, mostly Pakistanis and 20 Afghans were killed, but bin Laden was unhurt. Further negotiations with the Taliban for his extradition proved fruitless.

In 1999, UN sanctions were imposed on the Taliban. These included the freezing of Afghan assets abroad and a prohibition on flights operated by the national air carrier, Ariana. Earlier US sanctions prohibit investment in Taliban held territory. In December 2000 the UN Security Council extended UN sanctions, following a resolution giving the Taliban 30 days to hand over bin Laden and to close all training camps. The extension includes a ban on all arms sales to the Taliban (although not to the opposition groups) from UN member states, including technical advice, assistance and training. The comment from the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, was that this resolution "is not going to help peace efforts nor facilitate humanitarian aid".

Currently, the Taliban regime is recognised by only three countries, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Other countries, and the UN, recognise the anti-Taliban alliance headed by ex-President Burhanuddin Rabbani as the legitimate government of the country.

Afghanistan today - the people

Because of Afghanistan's location in Central Asia, the population is ethnically diverse. (See Fig 2.) Pushtun (Afghani) peoples are the largest ethnic group, based primarily along the Pakistan border (and beyond, into Pakistan itself) and across the central part of the country to the west. The Tadjiks, a Sunni, Persian speaking group, are the next largest, in the north, and west, but also including the areas around major cities, especially Kabul. Other major groups are linked with former Russian states, such as Uzbeks and Turkmenis. Currently, life expectancy at birth is 47 years for males and 46 years for females. In terms of literacy, 15% of the female population and 47% of the male population age 15 and over, can read and write. Women are no longer allowed to work outside the home, and are also not able to attend school, hence the sharp difference in literacy between the sexes. During 2000, borders have been intermittently closed with Iran, Tajikistan and Pakistan to deter thousands of refugees fleeing internal conflict as opposition to the Taliban regime continues.

Afghanistan today - the economy

Over two decades of war have turned the country into one of the world's most impoverished nations. The war against Soviet occupation saw the devastation of civilian infrastructure, both physical and institutional. Over six million refugees departed for Iran and Pakistan, although most of these have now returned. The economy is primarily subsistence farming, and cross border trade, including until very recently a major drug growing and trading industry. Per capita income in 2000 has dropped to US\$704 per annum (in U.S.1995 prices) due to lack of employment opportunities. (New Zealand's per capita income for the same year was US\$16,196).

Agriculture improved in 1997 and 1998, with sufficient rainfall and a replenishment of livestock herds. However, a major lack of rainfall during the autumn rainy seasons in 1999 and 2000 has led to widespread failure of crops, and a large reduction in the harvest in irrigated areas, including those newly planted with wheat in substitution for poppies. The UN started emergency food drops in June 2000 to prevent imminent loss of life.⁵

The Taliban's mid-2000 ban on opium poppy production, widely discounted outside the country, appears to have been adhered to, with wheat displacing poppies in 2000/1. The 80,000 hectares of opium poppies not planted last year has had a major negative impact on the country's economy. Conservatively, this has been estimated at \$US108 million at farm gate prices, plus up to US\$11 million lost revenue to the Taliban authorities. This also excludes loss of revenue to traders, transporters and processors of the drug. At the same time it has taken over 3,500 tonnes of opium and its derivatives off the world market – equivalent to 75% of all world heroin supplies for a year.⁶ However, large stockpiles of opium are still suspected to exist within the country and poppy cultivation may well return if no new economic initiatives are forthcoming.

Afghanistan is a country with much economic potential, with considerable mineral wealth, in particular oil, gas and gemstones. It is also a major staging post on the route for Central Asia oil and gas to the Arabian Sea, although it is currently in contention with Iran for the new oil and gas pipelines from these fields.

Currently, the economy is crucially dependent on its relationship with Pakistan, the only country locally with which it is on good terms. Cross border trade is predominantly with Pakistan, primarily along the main route from Kabul to Peshawar and Islamabad, but also along the considerable length of the border between the two countries. There is little reliable data concerning the trade between the two countries. Its global ranking is 39th in terms of population (in 2000, 26 million people) and 183rd in terms of GDP per capita: US\$704 in 2000, down from US\$830 in 1996. New Zealand in comparison ranks 32nd in per capita GDP (US\$16,196), all in US\$ 1995 prices.

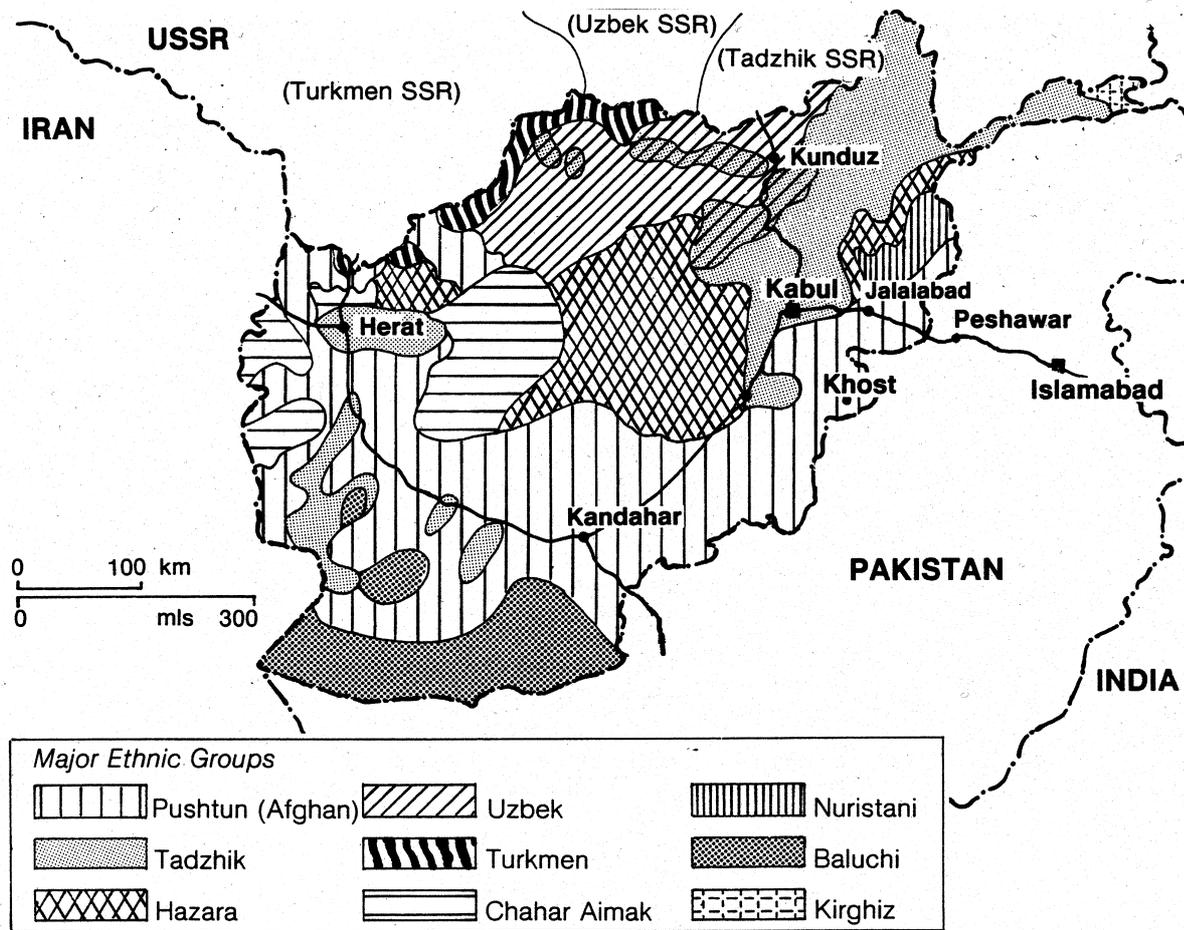


Fig.2 Ethnic distribution in Afghanistan, Institute of Strategic Studies, 1991

Other useful sources

1. Blowback, Mary Anne Weaver, Atlantic Monthly, May 1996, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/96may/blowback.htm>
2. Afghanistan: Ending the policy quagmire, Ahmed Rashid, Journal of International Affairs, Spring 2001
3. War at the top of the world, Eric S. Margolis, Routledge, 2000.

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¹ Material for this paper is primarily sourced from: The lessons of the Soviet/Afghan war, Olivier Roy, International Institute for Strategic studies, 1991, Adelphi Paper 288: Creating new states in Central Asia, Roland Dannreuther, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994, and <http://www.countrywatch.com/>

² The lessons of the Soviet/Afghan war, p.34

³ Figures from: Contra Aid and the Reagan Doctrine, Congressional Research Service Review vol.8,no.3, March 1987, p.3, quoted *ibid.* p35

⁴ <http://web.amnesty.org/web/ar2001.nsf/webasacountries/AFGHANISTAN?OpenDocument>

⁵ UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report, FAO/WFP Crop and food supply assessment mission to Afghanistan, 7 June 2001. More details at <http://www.pcpafq.org>

⁶ *ibid.* p.5