

A Very Brief History of Afghanistan

Abstract This chapter surveys Afghanistan's political history from 1748 to NATO's military intervention in 2001. The chapter describes the regional, geopolitical and social factors underlying the country's lack of a stable, inclusive central government and concludes with a discussion of factors which have impeded efforts at Western type nation-building within the country.

Keywords Afghanistan • State • Military invasion • Culture • Tribe

The state of Afghanistan is generally acknowledged to have been founded in 1748. In that year, Amir Ahmed Shah Durrani won sole dominion over the various tribes dwelling among the territories that today constitute the boundaries of Afghanistan (Dupree 2006, p. xix).

Durrani's dominion was not like that of a modern political leader, and his power over these tribal micro-societies was not based on institutional structures. Also, he did not exert authority over how tribes functioned or what rules of law they followed. What Durrani was able to accomplish, however, was the establishment of a strong confederation of the tribal leaders that would recognize him as their leader, and he was able to lead these diverse and independent groups through a mixture of charisma, force and the dispensation of patronage (Dupree 2006, p. 334). His successors were less successful, and after Durrani's death, this node of central rule was quickly eroded.

This happened, in large part, because the individual tribes of Afghanistan were self-sufficient politically, legally, economically, and militarily and so saw little need for an overall governing authority. Even under Durrani, the tribal view was that the role of state was to administer conquered lands only, and that in all matters internal, the state was believed to be redundant and unnecessary (Roy 1990, p. 13). This persistent view would make all future attempts to centrally control Afghanistan through an institutional government extraordinarily difficult.

The story of how Afghanistan came to be comprised of such diverse and independent peoples is itself unique and interesting. Although home to some of the harshest and unforgiving geography on the planet, Afghanistan has always had high strategic value for parties wishing to control routes of human and commercial traffic between the Far East and the Western Europe. As a result, through the millennia this land has seen frequent war and foreign invasion as outside interests have struggled to control these trade routes. These outside interests have included, naming only a few, the Macedonian Empire, the Indian Maurya Empire, the Muslim Arab Empire, the Mongol Empire, and the Persian Empire. This frequent exposure to foreign invaders has resulted in the dramatic ethnic diversity that is present today. In fact, Afghanistan is home to nine different ethnic groups which have individual populations of over 50,000 people, the largest of which are the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and the Hazaras (Dorransoro 2005, p. 15). But the internal and external geographic isolation that grants these tribes their independence has also served to create a largely agricultural, subsistence-level, tribal, immobile, and illiterate society (Dupree 2006, p. 248), that has very little in common with the Western societies.

Afghanistan's strategically important geography has continued to influence its history even into the present day. Following the death of Durrani, this region was heavily influenced by the 'Great Game,' which was defined by the competing British–Russian attempts at supremacy in Central Asia. Both Britain and Russia attempted to control Afghanistan throughout this period via means familiar within their own country, that is, by a central and institutional governing power. In order to do this, Britain and Russia each created a cadre of local political elites, who were sponsored and educated abroad, so that these new elites could return and be used in a new Afghan government, and who would also, hopefully, remain sympathetic toward the sponsoring partner after returning. However, the creation of a well-educated central government had no effect on the rural society outside of the capital of Kabul, and so, in turn, no real effect on the nation as a

whole. The real political power remained vested in the tribal leadership, and so even with a central governing body, it was found to be impossible to gather the necessary local resources to build the network of institutions required to transform this unstable tribal confederation into an effective, modern, and functional state (Rubin 1995, p. 20).

Afghanistan remained in this stasis of a central government of foreign educated elites, largely ignored by a diverse and uneducated tribal population base, until October 1978. Within the heretofore ignored central government of Afghanistan, the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) had recently come to power and held, as its primary aim, the goal of destroying all rivals of the state, so that their government could finally achieve genuine social and political control of the country (Rubin 1995, p. 115). They accomplished this by slaughtering approximately 100,000 people, including most village elders, religious leaders, and other significant power brokers, and thus destroyed nearly all of the intermediaries between the state and the society (Maley 1987, p. 712). As a consequence of the destruction of these traditional bases of power, a new and significantly more violent breed of power broker developed, one whose immediate concern was to defeat the PDPA. The PDPA was seen to be an extension of the atheistic communist regime of the Soviet Union, a point that was clearly reinforced when the Soviets entered and occupied Afghanistan in support of the PDPA, and so this new insurgent force was comprised of increasingly Islamist fundamentalist youth. These insurgents were then able to source weapons and financial support through the many religious parties receiving international aid in Pakistan, who were opposed to an atheist regime ruling Afghanistan, as well as through the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who wished to fight a proxy war with the Soviets (Rubin 1995, p. 115).

Following the defeat of the PDPA and the retreat of Soviet forces, Afghanistan disintegrated into pockets of hyper-armed networks of power, and these groups became networked similarly to the independent tribal communities that existed previously. They too were independent and did not recognize an overall governing body, but they also had a very different basis of authority. Instead of ruling through an authority generated by communal ties, cultural respect for elders, and the deference offered to religious teachers, these Warlords ruled by fear. Making matters worse, the economic resources that were previously available from Afghani agrarian commerce had been destroyed during the fighting against the PDPA and Soviets, so the Warlords instead resorted to the drug trade, crime,

extortion, and violence to pay their foot soldiers, control their followers, and maintain or increase their power (Matinuddin 1999, pp. 22–23).

This political and social crisis eventually spawned a new group, the Taliban¹. From their beginnings in 1994, the Taliban rapidly expanded and were able to take control of Kabul by September 1996. The twofold reasons behind their success were simple: popular support and military power. With goals of stability, security, and religious purity, tailored as they were to the situation at the time, the Taliban enjoyed popular and vigorous support from a nation exhausted by war and Warlord rule. The dominance of zealot religious elites within the Taliban made them fearless in battle, immune to bribes and gave them the ability to unite Afghanistan through the only unifying force that existed—Islam (Matinuddin 1999, pp. 30–35). With the universal negative image of the Taliban in the media today, it is difficult to remember how relatively positive a force they once were in Afghanistan. Also, that they were able to overthrow a Warlord-run state in such a short time is a testament to a remarkable ability that is easily forgotten. Whatever violations of human rights the Taliban were guilty of, they rescued Afghanistan from criminal rule and gave the population a life relatively better—in terms of level of violence—than they had had in a very long time.

Afghanistan remained under the relatively stable Islamist regime of the Taliban until the coalition intervention following the attacks of September 11, 2001. By the time of this event, support for the Taliban had waned because, as the memories of Warlord rule began to fade, the new reality of strict Islamist law became increasingly difficult. The catalyst for the Coalition intervention² in Afghanistan was the Taliban's refusal to surrender Osama Bin Laden, whom the USA blamed for these attacks, and this shaped the overall initial objectives of this operation. These included a desire to capture or kill Al-Qaeda leaders, punishment of the Taliban for harboring Al-Qaeda, prevention of terrorist organizations from operating in Afghanistan, and the provision of humanitarian relief to the Afghani population. As events on the ground evolved, these original goals also evolved and coalesced into two overall aims: the reconstruction of the Afghan state and the prevention of Taliban resurgence (Maloney 2005, p. 36).

The response of the Afghan population to the coalition intervention has also evolved, and it has evolved dramatically. Initially, the response of the population in general was one of widespread support because the intervention brought relief from the strict Islamist Taliban rule as well as

humanitarian aid, but the sentiment of the populace has become increasingly angry and hostile the longer that this operation continued. By way of example, in the first three years of the intervention there were only 195 Coalition fatalities. That number reached a peak in 2010 with 711 fatalities, but has diminished ever since with a record of only eight fatalities in 2016 at the time of this writing (iCasualties.org 2016). The reasons for this change are unclear, but the large majority of recent defense literature on this subject focuses on the subject of culture, and how it must be understood and manipulated in order to regain the support of the population and ultimately, to bring success to this region. Let us now turn our attention to these works.

NOTES

1. See previous footnote on the relatively recent origin of the Taliban, who identify themselves as ‘students’ of the Koranic schools which were established in Afghanistan and Pakistan and throughout the world with the financial assistance of wealthy devout Saudis beginning in the late 1980s and taught a very traditionalistic, conservative, and rigoristic version of Sunni Islam under the supervision of mullahs who tended toward wahabbism, i.e., the version of Islam that is practiced and strictly applied in Saudi Arabia, including forms of punishment that are considered medieval and ‘barbaric’ in the West such as beheading, stoning of women convicted of adultery, the amputation of a hand for thieves, the whipping of those professing doubt about the truth revealed in the Koran, and the death penalty for apostates, the most glaring violation of the freedom of conscience and religion that is in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which is tied to the Charter of the United Nations. Osama Bin Laden, himself a Saudi, as were most of the perpetrators of 9/11 (15 out of 19), believed that his homeland, which is the birthplace of Islam, i.e., the Saudi royal family, had betrayed the Faith by inviting or allowing the Americans, considered to be not only ‘unfaithful,’ but the leaders of the ‘Unfaithful,’ to establish military bases in the ‘Holy Land’ of Islam, though this settlement had been agreed to in order to protect Saudi Arabia against a possible aggression by Saddam Hussein following Iraq’s invasion of Koweit in 1990. A literal ‘interpretation’ of the Koran was thus invoked to justify 9/11, although further motivations were certainly at play. What is still an issue of some speculation is how far the Taliban share in Al-Qaeda’s ideology. What is not so much at issue any more is how much of a threat the Taliban pose not only to the security of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but also to that of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a country, traditionally allied with

the USA, with the second largest Muslim majority in the world, after Indonesia.

2. From the onset of 9/11, the attack on the USA was considered as an attack on a member state of NATO, and this triggered the participation of NATO forces and assets in the overthrow of the Taliban government, not by the USA and other NATO members, but mainly by the Islamic Army of Afghanistan, a.k.a. the Northern League, which had begun in 1996 under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, assassinated by Al-Qaeda by suicide bombing on the September 9, 2001, two days before the attack on the USA. Of course, the overthrow of the Taliban regime was achieved with the air support of NATO and US Special Forces, and would not have been achieved so promptly without this support. That said, the stationing of NATO forces in Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban government was not the result of an unconditional surrender of this government to NATO, but occurred on the request of the interim government that was set up following the retreat of the Taliban to Pakistan and pending a nationwide election to be held later. Thus, the circumstances of the stationing of NATO forces in Afghanistan, and their mission to maintain the peace there, do not warrant its characterization as an 'occupation'. Germany and Japan were 'occupied' after WW2, until 1949, i.e., until these countries elected a government that did not stand under the control of the occupying forces to which the previous government had surrendered without conditions. Similarly, it can be said that Israel occupies parts of Palestine and the Golan Heights since 1967, i.e., in the wake of a preemptive attack, stretches of land that have since not yet been returned to their rightful owners. The same can be said of Russian occupation of Northern Ossetia and of the Crimea. But it cannot be said that NATO forces 'occupied' Afghanistan nor that the US 'occupy' Saudi Arabia or Japan because it has troops stationed in those countries. To say otherwise would be to undermine the meaning this term has in international law.

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