

## **AFGHANISTAN: PARALLELS AND ANTI-PARALLELS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

On 19 September last year, the International Crisis Group (ICG) published a report on Central Asia and Afghanistan which emphasised that the region had been a continuing source of concern for some time before the 11 September attacks. The following overview of the humanitarian issues in Afghanistan today is prompted partly by my own membership of the ICG, but chiefly by my concerns for regional development and co-operation within the ‘arc of crisis’ and for the implementation of international humanitarian norms and codes of conduct.(1)

Afghanistan’s geography is unique, situated as it is between Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and China and on the periphery of the Arab world. It may justifiably be described as a hub or pivotal area: anything that happens in Afghanistan is influential elsewhere in Central Asia and, therefore, further afield too. It is also a multiethnic country, with a population composed of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras; this raises further questions, for the Muslim world in particular, about intra-cultural as well as intercultural conflicts. It is timely to ask whether, in their own interests, the Afghani and international political community can begin to make the changeover to what I would call ‘anthropolitics’ – government and foreign policy centred on human welfare and the notion of preventing, rather than attempting to cure, terrorist activity.

Afghanistan was, before the anti-terrorist bombings, the poorest or second-poorest country in Asia. Throughout its long history, invaders have been attracted to the area from the west, north and south. Alexander the Great, Genghiz Khan, the Russian Tzars and the Viceroys of British India, either led their own armies or sent their officers to take control of the country. Nonetheless, they all failed to impose their rule over the rebellious Afghan tribes. The last attempt before today’s conflict, conducted by the Soviets, met the same fate as its predecessors.

### **RECENT BACKGROUND**

To understand current events in Afghanistan, the events of the nineteenth century may stand as a clear example of the politics of modern empires. In that century, Great Britain, from its base in India, went through two wars: the first in 1839-42 and the second in 1878-80, both were intended to extend its control and hinder Russian attempts to influence the rulers of Kabul. Rivalry between Russia and Great Britain in Central Asia – the struggle better known as the ‘Great Game’ – culminated in the encounter between British and Russian officers on the northern borders of Afghanistan, on the Amu Darya River. Generals from different

empires reported to their superiors a strikingly similar postulate: it is easy to overrun Afghanistan, but difficult to hold it. Convinced of this fact, the British left the country, but maintained control of its foreign relations until Afghanistan won its independence in 1921.(2)

With the deposition in 1973 of Zahir Shah, the king of Afghanistan, the country entered a vicious cycle of chaos. The anarchy reached an even higher degree with Nur Muhammad Taraki's seizure of power in 1978. The kidnapping and killing of the American ambassador during his period of rule added an explosive element to the Afghan ferment, coupled with Soviet designs to influence, if not control, Kabul. The next president, Hafizullah Amin, was assassinated, and the Soviets succeeded in putting Babrak Karmal in control of Kabul. The US government was, at that time, obsessed by the hostage crisis in Tehran. However, it balanced relations by co-ordinating and reinforcing efforts with Pakistan to assist Afghani military resistance. The Mujahidin fighting against Soviet occupation won the sympathy of the US, Europe, Muslims and the Arab world.

The resistance of the Mujahidin provoked severe Soviet retaliations and contributed to unbearable living conditions, pushing more than five million Afghans into exile as refugees. The question of how to manage the return or formal settlement of these earlier refugees, along with provision of a sustainable way of life, now constitutes one of the major challenges facing the international community in any efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and its immediate neighbours.

During the second half of the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev started a course of disengagement, describing Afghan affairs as a "bleeding wound". However, replacing Karmal by Muhammad Najibullah, a former police chief, added fuel to the fire. An end-game situation loomed after the Mujahidin won a series of military encounters with Soviet forces.

Gorbachev's perestroika contributed to curbing the war. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Mujahidin movement remained strong at home and attracted more radicals during the 1990s. The triumph of the Mujahidin reached its zenith with the storming of Kabul in 1992 and the killing of Najibullah. The Arab volunteers remained in Afghanistan, but began to be influenced by radicals who called upon them to partake in so-called jihad against their own governments.

In the meantime, Afghanistan entered a new era marked by ethnic discrimination. A lack of strong government and the stirring-up of ethnic hatred opened the door wide to a sadistic civil war. This atmosphere of violence and disorder brought the Taliban to power in Kabul in 1996 with the promise of security and a new social order. With Pakistani endorsement, the Taliban was not regarded as a threat in the mid-90s, but rather as an asset in the planning of north-south Caspian oil pipelines, i.e. from the Central Asian republics through Afghanistan to Pakistan's ports on the Arabian Sea.

However, the despotic rule of the Taliban did not bring peace. Rather, it produced distorted images of Islam and politics, and an appalling human rights record, including harsh treatment of women and the banning of girls from schools. The resulting situation in Afghanistan did not, therefore, secure the expected results in terms of the stability needed to execute regional projects. Meanwhile, the Taliban's distorted images, scorned by the majority of Muslims, began to emerge and be propagated further afield.

Isolationism, extremist fundamentalism and brutality were the products of the Taliban government in Kabul. Separate organisations, whose vision of governance chimed with that of

the Taliban, began to emerge. The despotic milieu bred a strong prejudice against the US and some Arab governments. At this time, al-Qaeda was accused of bombing the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the USS Cole in Aden. Such hostile inclinations culminated in the 11 September tragedy and the launch of a US-led war against terrorism. The 'first war of the 21st century' has created new and well-known facts on the ground in Afghanistan. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were uprooted and the Northern Alliance gained the upper hand with US and Western assistance and world consent.

The preceding outline of Afghanistan's recent past is intended to clarify two important questions now under international scrutiny. First, what does Afghanistan face in the immediate post-Taliban future? Second, what is the Central Asian region as a whole now facing after 11 September?

Of course, Afghanistan cannot be considered entirely separately from Central Asia. Afghani refugees have long been a broader regional issue; Pakistan is dealing with the largest group – perhaps around five million – while Iran is also receiving a substantial number. Moreover, in many respects, the problem of potentially conflicting ethnic, political and religious affiliations is very similar in both Afghanistan and its larger surroundings. Although the country's population is almost entirely Muslim, it is a mixture of Shia and Sunni, making wider Islamic 'intrafaith' dialogue an important issue. The fighting between rival Muslim groups underlines questions throughout the Muslim world concerning the proper relationships between political, cultural and religious loyalties. Indeed, Afghanistan's central position and recent history make its future a vital factor in the future of Central Asia as a whole. However, some aspects of Afghanistan's present position deserve separate consideration.

#### AFGHANISTAN'S IMMEDIATE FUTURE

Afghanistan was, as indicated above, a source of trouble in the region before the 11 September bombings. As observers of the area reported, it supported the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which caused religious and political trouble in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. I understand from conversations that, by pursuing this policy and inciting religious movements against the governmental systems in Central Asia, Afghanistan has pushed the new republics closer to Russia in search of financial aid and security or military support. Whereas, if it had helped the new republics, they might well have moved to consolidate their independence in partnership or greater understanding with Afghanistan.

It remains to be seen what Russia will do after the current storm has blown over. Russia's interests in Central Asia as a useful resource and ex-Soviet region are considerable. Full-blown economic development, social and educational reform, and politics prospering in their independence may not be on the cards just yet. There is the constant danger that pressure towards unilateral or bilateral arrangements will swamp any potential for multilateral agreements that could strengthen the self-determination of the region.

From a humanitarian perspective, the problem of Afghanistan's refugees provides the overwhelming burden of conscience at this moment. These refugees have travelled huge distances in harsh conditions after many years of severe hardship. They are not only refugees from the current war, but from the series of wars that has been continuing since the Soviet invasion.

Related to the refugee problem, and with equally broad implications, is the question of the

Arab minority that remains in Afghanistan. These are citizens of a large number of nations, some of them settled in Afghanistan after entering as Mujahidin, some having fled their own countries. Issues of repatriation are likely to cause problems for many of the Arab settlers and their home governments. It must be borne in mind that the Taliban was an international military force and a number of non-Afghan combatants were killed in November and December.(3) If the phrase ‘war on terror’ clarifies the nature of the conflict as ideological rather than national, it still remains for an international definition of ‘terror’ to be agreed and then acted upon responsibly by all parties.

A further significant problem is that of unnecessary logistical obstacles within the country. Rivalry between local warlords or political barriers to the passage of convoys or people have, in some cases, prevented the distribution of food, clothing and medical supplies. Continuing attention to the refugees and co-operation and compliance in the interests of the Afghani population’s basic welfare are vital in order to save the lives and the goodwill that will be very necessary during the rebuilding period which is to follow. Humanitarian agencies are expected to carry out their mission according to the strict understanding that they remain uninvolved in Afghanistan’s own development of political self-determination.

‘First aid’ from donors should be balanced against longer-term investments to help restore communications, water supply, agricultural programmes and housing in Afghanistan, so that there is something for the various refugee populations to move back to. Maintaining internal stability alongside continuing international support, whilst at the same time restoring the basic infrastructure, will be a major challenge. If the various players can succeed in creating a viable peace, longer-term agricultural and urban redevelopment become possible and, from there, sustainable industry, commerce and trading partnerships with other countries. Constructive ideas for a happier future and successful examples from the past have been cited in all manner of forums, from academic journals to the US daily press.

All of this depends on stability and the objective goodwill of Afghanistan’s neighbours. There is all the more reason to pay close attention to the tense relations between Pakistan and India, on the one hand, and the ex-Soviet states and Russia, on the other. Relations with Western Asia and the Arab world will bear upon these other relationships. The question of priorities looms large for all players, but perhaps especially in relation to the US as its forces settle in to longer-term military occupation of key Afghani areas. As one recent commentator analysed it: will it be ‘pipelines, poppies or peace’ at the top of the list?(4)

Not only on the immediately pressing topics of refugees and economic sustainability, but at all times, Afghanistan will face the challenge of how to balance relations with neighbouring states. Success in this challenge will contribute significantly to success in reconstructing Afghanistan and would be an important encouragement for Arab assistance – a necessary element in the rebuilding exercise. The most important task for Hamid Karzai’s interim government will be to cultivate the political long-sightedness and sure-footedness necessary to negotiate relations abroad.

At the same time, as I understand from regional observers, the current government in Afghanistan will probably meet with undeclared opposition and unusual behaviour from some of its own constituents – who accept the existence of the government but perhaps desire a larger share of power.

The Taliban is no longer a ruling power in Afghanistan, but its name continues to influence

opinion abroad, whether because of its exclusion from the present government or because of the alleged ill-treatment of prisoners in Cuba. Previous pro-Taliban players will surely re-emerge in political life as time goes on. So far as unity of vision is concerned amongst the current players, there is (not surprisingly) still cause for concern. In the case of Abdul Rashid Dostum, the current Deputy Defence Minister under Karzai, a grievance concerning the current governmental set-up has already been aired publicly in Bonn. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Tajik-supported president during the Taliban era – who has diplomatically accepted the international declaration in Bonn and the Afghanistan postings to foreign minister, interior minister and defence minister – nevertheless noted that the UN did not take account of the remaining former Mujahidin. Thus, the support of a significant disaffected group may well fall to Rabbani at the same time that he is supported by elements in the current government. Political infighting will remain a serious risk under these sorts of circumstances.

Agreement on an overarching goal and practical successes on the ground could overcome such obstacles. Europe took its first steps towards economic and legislative unity with the European Coal and Steel Community after the Second World War. The same suggestion was recently made for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who between them have the appropriate mineral resources. When I proposed last year a Community of Water and Energy for the ‘arc of crisis’, and a regional initiative along the lines of Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSC) or Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) to help with conflict avoidance, the Caspian region was an important consideration because of its oil. Central Asian oil could travel through cheap countries – i.e. Afghanistan and Pakistan – to reach the Arabian Sea and thence the international market in Europe or Japan. Stability and independence, both within Afghanistan and in its relations with its neighbours, are therefore set to be topics of considerable international interest in terms of both economics and politics.

The reconciliation of the four major factions – Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras – will be a very important task for the government to undertake. Guaranteeing equality among all citizens and ethnic groups must be a priority. Equally, the increasingly urgent issue of the rise of small-arms ownership demands attention. The proliferation of guns and other personal weapons is alarming and threatens a deterioration of even the current situation unless it is rapidly and effectively addressed through programmes for the disarmament and demilitarisation of Afghan society.

It is not only to be hoped, but worked for, that the interim government in Afghanistan should rise above internal differences to ensure peace and the prospect of a better future for the Afghani people in all their diversity. Human rights and human welfare for all sectors of the population, including minority groups not represented in government, should be at the centre of policymaking and in the forefront of international awareness of the country. Visible security for day to day activities is one of the foremost issues and may define the major role to be played by foreign forces in the country. As noted above, the present lack of security in the country at large and the spread of violence in the absence of trustworthy law-enforcement institutions, is making it considerably more difficult and even, particularly in some rural areas, impossible for humanitarian organisations to get aid and rebuilding measures to the people who need them.

Transparency and accountability are issues that it is necessary for the international community to address. Justice must be seen to be done if members of the Afghan communities are to feel any faith in the new governmental arrangements. Neglecting to bring war criminals to justice in an international setting will lead only to disillusionment, suspicion and further fear and anger among those who see them walking free and at large among the populations they had

previously harmed. Further conflict then becomes highly probable. As membership of the ICG has taught me, this pattern is well known from Chile, Angola, Sierra Leone and Kampuchea and should not be allowed to be repeated in Afghanistan.

Alongside the promotion and practice of humanitarian norms, one also therefore needs to implement the legal framework for an international 'culture of compliance'. Countries of the developed world do not always give a convincing impression of upholding the ideals that they exhort other nations to implement. This is not to say that the ideals should be discarded. Rather, it is time for all to examine the declarations and commitments to which they are signatories and to take serious steps either to implement them or to reconsider their content. If the disparity between ideal and action is truly too great to be surmounted in the foreseeable future, some means of guaranteeing basic human needs, civil rights, civil liberties and a viable future to all will still have to be developed. This will be a matter for international dialogue at all levels and, no less importantly, dialogue within nations. There is no border today within which we find ethnic, cultural, religious or political 'purity'. We are all diverse and we must learn how to live and think as diversities at the micro-levels of family, community, nation and region as well as the global macro-level.

#### CENTRAL ASIA AFTER 11 SEPTEMBER

Much change faces Central Asia in relation to the 'war against terrorism'. Afghanistan's stability is very important to the region for economic and political reasons, locally and also, of course, as a matter of international security. Afghanistan has an important role to play, as already outlined, in order to lessen overpowering influences from nearby major powers, particularly ex-Soviet influence upon the whole Central Asian region. Nearby nations should therefore be prepared to play their own role in securing Afghanistan's stability and combating terrorism in their own interests. The larger powers would be ill-advised to dismiss such 'local support', since it includes both local expertise and promotes common regional acknowledgement of the universally desirable values and liberties that are threatened by conflict and terrorism.(5)

Human-rights issues must not become political loose change. Central Asian airspace has been opened up to the US and the expected trade off would be for the US to wink at misuse of authority in the area against political opponents and civil freedoms. Progressive-sounding terminology and rhetorical invocations of liberty, democratic involvement and freedom of speech will have to be carefully matched to analogous practice in the legislative and policing arenas. Evidence should be taken from the welfare and lifestyle of all sectors of the population, not only from official reports. Old habits die hard and the habit in Central Asia has been one of cultivating extremely strong central authority and control. It would probably not be going too far to say that the notion of democracy in the region is highly distorted (not forgetting that it would be difficult to point to anywhere in the world in which an ideal democracy exists). It is not so long ago that (President) Askar Akayev won admiration for being a 'democrat' in Kyrgyzstan. The progress of civil society in the region will be an interesting barometer of change to watch – and is to be encouraged.

Balancing various ethnicities and cultures in Central Asia, as in Afghanistan, will be central to the discussion of all other agenda. The progress of internal ethnic relations will have profound effects upon international involvement in the area and will have to be considered with a steady eye on international oil and gas interests in the Caspian region. Economic ambition and military expediency must not be allowed to take precedence over human welfare. In the

example of Nigeria, we have seen how cross-border ethnic and religious disputes, poorly handled in relation to an oil economy and aggravated by a government which has failed to reinvest (even to the extent of leaving its own local employees unpaid), continue to play havoc with the lives and health of entire communities. The danger in such cases is always that political or religious minorities will bear the brunt of adverse conditions and even get blamed for them.

Centrist Islam, with its emphasis upon diversity and toleration of cultures and religions, rights for women and opportunity for change, is a highly important educational tool in this respect. In Jordan, the loyalty of the Arab Christian communities to the Hashemite throne has resulted from the strong interest the monarchy takes in preserving the identity and culture of religious minorities; and Jordanian culture is correspondingly enriched. As a Hashemite, I wish similar success to the Afghan leadership, present and future, in maintaining diversity, equal rights, tolerance and pluralism as central values in the rebuilt society and I hope that these values will come to characterise the region as a whole.

Among the minority groups not usually taken into account in Central Asia are substantial Russian minorities. Russian forces are also present on the Tajikistan border. The long history of Soviet domination is not yet over if only because it is so fresh in the memories of those who lived and ruled according to its precepts. Relations with Russia will continue to be a dominating factor. Accords with the US are no longer precluded by close ties with Russia – who can easily destabilise the whole area at this stage.

Though I have not visited those involved in person, it seems as though regional arrangements will prove to be something of a headache for both Russia and the regional governments. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is not in total harmony and is not yet functioning with the common welfare of all its members as its aim. Central Asian governments want relations outside the CIS too, such as membership of GUUAM,(6) or the Shanghai Group. The CIS countries of Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan will be obliged to cultivate ‘outside’ relationships in addition to those extant. A healthy culture of multiple international arrangements for communication and co-operation will perhaps be the best guarantee for stability in the whole region.

Terrorism is a form of attack which seems to seek a sense of importance and acknowledgement of its power through public attention after the events have happened, whilst giving no indication of when or where the next attack may take place. Outright war, as witnessed in Afghanistan, may in some cases make the physical territory too inhospitable for an organisation easily to survive. However, this is a grievous action to undertake in terms of the millions unhoused, destabilised, forced to flee, killed, maimed or otherwise traumatised by the event. It is also plainly not possible in the highly developed urban areas such as Hamburg, London or the cities of Arizona in which members of al-Qaeda, for example, are supposed to have undertaken training and received funding.

Members of terrorist cells – most notoriously, sleeper cells – are known for their ability to melt invisibly into the background during such periods of high publicity. Quiet, dedicated, persistent campaigns over time will be most effective against terrorist organisations. It is understandable that open warfare against identified terrorist supporters should be an attractive option. But it must be remembered that it is precisely the chaotic aftermath of warfare that provides opportunities for a society to be rebuilt in the image of the rebuilders. Therefore, deconstructing the platform that extremists can command also involves reversing or

overbuilding the economic and cultural degradations that engender poverty and despair among disaffected populations.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As my late brother, His Majesty King Hussein, said of terrorism in 1996: “The murder and torture of innocent people is not exclusive to one race or nation or to followers of any one religion. It is vital, therefore, that terrorism is tackled at the international level in a multilateral way. In order to eliminate terrorism, we have to establish an international mechanism of co-operation and understanding. This involves a major shift in our ideological positions as well as a reassessment of our contemporary relations.”

Calling for governments and foreign-policy advisors to invoke higher overarching principles in their dealings is not new. It appears, however, that the stakes are higher than previously supposed. The law of ‘unintended consequences’ seems to have emerged on an interconnected and global scale. Unintended consequences from the history of intervention in Afghanistan and Central Asia will, over the next year at least, test all governments’ ability to manage the future co-operatively – not only in terms of their own welfare but also that of other nations’ populations, civil societies and cultural security.

If we take into account the human suffering in the ‘arc of crisis’ in light of events in Afghanistan, we will surely conclude with a gloomy image. The human suffering is great. The violence in the Palestinian territories, random or planned, has reached an alarming level. We call, therefore, for respect of civil rights and civil dignity in any conflict.

In Afghanistan the continuing instability and absence of safety in rural and remote areas is apparent. Stability in Afghanistan depends mainly on state success in improving the living standard of its citizens, on the one hand, and maintenance of social tranquillity, on the other. These conditions will constitute the best defence against any new rise of terrorism in the area.

An efficient and orderly team has to conduct reconstruction. Success will come from deploying aid funds in the fields of civilian development, and not in channelling them to finance the military and security apparatus. The development of these latter institutions is certainly necessary for stability and sustained development; however, it should be financed separately. It is important to assist the transitional government headed by Hamid Karzai to develop the education and health systems, deal with the Afghani ethnicities on an equal footing, and use international aid efficiently for the production of food and restoration of infrastructure.

Donors as well as the transitional government have to give women a new role in society. Any international presence and international attention should be committed to confronting Afghanistan’s long-term predicaments such as rehabilitation of refugees, disarmament and removal of landmines. The current government of Afghanistan will find itself pressured to deal with political, economic, military and social issues at the same time that it can deploy only limited numbers of trained cadres. The Islamic and the Arab world must play their own essential role in helping to fill this gap with responsible and long-term humanitarian assistance, with the clear goal of putting Afghanistan back on its own feet.

“I stand before you today as a citizen of a country that has had nothing but disaster, war, brutality and deprivation against its people for so many years”, said Mr Karzai at the Tokyo meeting for international pledges of funding in January. Effective help must look to the long-standing humanitarian problems caused by political and military infighting among

Afghanistan's leaders, and to the lack of concern shown in the past to the people of the country. The farmers, engineers, teachers and parents of Afghanistan need their own share of opportunity, self-determination, resources and backing from their own government and civil society. Until the structure and function of Afghanistan's society change in their favour – which will only be as a result of continued pressure and support from the outside world – there cannot be stability, there cannot be justice, there cannot be peace and there will not be security. I join with many well-wishers in desiring a safe and peaceful future for the Afghani people and their leaders. It is up to all of us to make sure that future comes about.

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1 The 'arc of crisis' extends from the northwestern corner of Africa to Central Asia, passing through the Congo, the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Subcontinent. This large region includes right at its crest the 'energy ellipse' (containing 70 and 40 percent, respectively, of the world's oil and gas reserves). It is plagued by a score of ongoing disputes and a broad range of causes of conflict, but (as yet) does not have any mechanism for conflict avoidance, prevention or resolution.

2 Milton Bearden, 'Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 6, November-December 2001, pp. 17-19.

3 Michael Jansen, 'Who are the Arabs?', *Middle East International*, December 2001, p. 16.

4 Bill Hayton, *Middle East International*, No. 660, October 2001, pp. 26-8.

5 As Milton Bearden recently commented in his analysis of post-September Afghanistan and the international effort against terrorism: "If the terror network is to be dismantled, it will be with help from the security services of Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, and a few others, not from the exclusive efforts of the United States or its European allies", 'Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 6, November-December 2001, p. 29.

6 The sub-regional arrangement including Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova.