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The Long Torment Of Afghanistan

By JONATHAN NEALE; From Issue 93 of INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISM JOURNAL
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'Afghanistan, Zulumistan' It Was A Proverb: 'The Land Of The Afghans, The Land Of Tyrants'

Over the last 30 years the great and small powers of this world have made a hell of Afghanistan. [1]

In the summer of 1972 I was an anthropologist doing fieldwork in Afghanistan.

I went to visit a friend from a poor nomad family in the TB sanatorium in Kabul. It was the only such facility in Afghanistan, and I had used what influence I had to get him admitted. We chatted with the other patients.

He asked me for money to pay bribes to the hospital cooks so they would give him meals. I expressed surprise that he had to pay bribes even for that.

'Afghanistan, Zulumistan,' another patient said. It was a proverb: 'The land of the Afghans, the land of tyrants.'

We all laughed. It was an angry laugh.

His aunt Miriam had lost her husband a few years before. A man had been robbed and killed near their small camp of nomad tents on the outskirts of Kabul.

The police took Miriam's husband away on suspicion, because he was a poor man and a stranger.

The next day they delivered him back to the camp, his body black from beating, his stomach split open, dead.

The police told Miriam he had died from eating bad watermelon. What outraged her more than their little joke was that when the police brought the body to her, they dropped it on the ground rather than putting it down gently. There was nothing she could do.

“The Time Of King Zahir Shah”

That was in the time of King Zahir Shah.

He ruled with the support of money and arms from both the US and the Soviet Union, trying to play them off against each other and stay neutral. At times under Zahir Shah

there was brutal repression, with death squads coming for political opponents in the night. At times there was a form of limited democracy, without free elections and with political prisoners, but not with widespread killings. Miriam's husband was killed during a democratic period.

Power in Afghanistan then lay in the countryside, with big feudal landowners. [2] In each village one or a few families owned much of the land. Then there was a minority of families who farmed their own land, and perhaps employed one sharecropper. The majority in the countryside worked as sharecroppers. In the poorer lands around Kandahar the sharecropper got a third of the crop and the landowner two thirds. On the richer irrigated land around Jalalabad, the sharecropper got a fifth of the crop, or food for one person while working plus one ninth of the crop.

Whatever the share, the income of a shepherd, a sharecropper or a manual worker in the city usually worked out at enough to buy five pounds of wheat flour a day--2,400 calories each for two adults and 1,600 calories each for two children--and nothing else.

Roughly 2 percent of the land could be farmed (all statistics on Afghanistan, then and now, are guesses). Much of the rest of the country was desert or barren mountains, although parts of that were suitable for grazing sheep.

Since 1838 the power of the king had rested on two pillars. One was the support of the feudal lords, the men who owned a large part of one village or several villages. These men ruled by force, with armed retinues. Traditionally they paid little tax, and by 1972 they paid none. The king could not insist they pay, so the other pillar of the regime was always a subsidy from abroad. [3]

“In The Early 19th Century Afghanistan Had Ruled The Fertile Plains Of Peshawar And Kashmir, In What Are Now India And Pakistan”

In the early 19th century Afghanistan had ruled the fertile plains of Peshawar and Kashmir, in what are now India and Pakistan. [4] After they lost these to the Sikh kingdom, the Afghan state could never again support itself.

The British Indian army invaded Afghanistan in 1838. The feudal lords took bribes to hand power to Britain. The people, deserted by their leaders, rose under the banner of Islam and drove the British out. Britain then put the old ruler, Dost Mohammed, back in power with a British subsidy.

In 1878 the British invaded again. This time too the feudal lords sold themselves and the people rose.

Britain put a new and particularly brutal ruler, Abdur Rahman, in power. He used British money and British rifles to conquer the northern half of what is now Afghanistan, the central mountains of the Hazarajat, and the independent regions of Nuristan and Pakhtia along the Pakistani border.

The modern Afghan state and its borders are the result of these conquests.

In 1919 a new ruler, Amanullah, took advantage of the unrest in India to go to war with British India in the Third Afghan War, and won full independence.

The British cut off his subsidy. Amanullah, unable to break the feudal lords, had to try to raise taxes from the peasantry. They rose, again under the banner of Islam.

Amanullah was driven from Kabul in 1929. Nine months later Nadir Shah, one of his relatives, retook Kabul with British money and British arms. Britain continued to subsidise Nadir, and his son Zahir Shah, until 1947.

After that the Soviet Union and the US competed to subsidise the Afghan government.

The Afghans had fought three holy wars against the British invaders, and one holy war against Amanullah.

“The Pashtuns Along The Other Side Of The Border Had Resisted The British In Innumerable Small Wars”

The Pashtuns along the other side of the border had resisted the British in innumerable small wars. There had also been a non-violent mass movement, the Servants of God, allied with Gandhi's congress and based on poor peasants and workers, that dominated Pashtun resistance in India from 1919 to 1947.

When the British first invaded Afghanistan in 1838, the Pashtuns there had a reputation in South Asia for being very relaxed about their Islam.

By 1939 Afghanistan had a tradition that when the kings and feudal lords failed the common people they would resist under the banner of Islam.

In 1838 the drawings of Pashtuns show men with glorious long hair hanging down their backs. By 1972 Pashtun men wore their hair cropped almost to the head, and eastern and southern Afghanistan were strongly Islamic areas.

There was nothing Pashtun or Afghan about this--it was the result of fighting the British.

Somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of Afghans are Pashtuns, who speak the Pashtu language.

There are several large minorities.

The Tajiks in the east, north and west speak Farsi (Persian). The Uzbeks in the north speak a Turkish language. The Hazaras, the poorest of all, live in the central mountains and migrate to work in the cities. They speak Farsi. There are also smaller minorities--Nuristani, Khirgiz, Turkmen, Baluch, Pashai, and many more.

“Only After The Afghan People Had Been Comprehensively Betrayed And Abused, First By The Lords, Then By The Communists And Then By The Islamists, That People Turned To Ethnicity To Organise”

In 2001 much of Afghan politics is conventionally explained in ethnic terms. But until 1988 there were the Islamists on the right, the feudal powers led by the king, and the communists.

Afghan politics was about class.

It was only after the Afghan people had been comprehensively betrayed and abused, first by the lords, then by the Communists and then by the Islamists, that people turned to ethnicity to organise.

The government of Zahir Shah did not develop the country. Cities, industry and workers would have destroyed the regime, and they knew it. [5] In 1972 there were only 30,000 industrial workers and miners in the whole country.

But the government did spend money on schools, and on the university in Kabul. These schools produced a new class. Because there were so few people in the feudal families, most of the newly educated were the children of small farmers and shopkeepers, people with their own land and a sharecropper or two. These boys and girls took with them to school their parents' hatred of the feudal lords and the regime.

In the cities, and particularly at Kabul University, they also learned to despise the old ways of the countryside. After education they took jobs as teachers in the schools, officers in the army, health professionals and civil servants. There they were paid three or four times the income of a manual worker or sharecropper, but in most cases little or no more than their fathers earned in the village.

Both the communists and the Islamists come from this new class.

The Communists were brave men and women, the flower of their generation. In the autumn of 1971 I stood on a street in Lashkargah, in the south, and watched a demonstration of high school students. They took turns standing on a box and giving speeches.

The speeches were all slogans, and the main slogan was 'Death to the khans'. The khans were the local landlords. This was not an abstract slogan. The boys meant death to certain specific men they all knew, whose supporters watched the demonstration. On the edges of the street, peasant men watched, silent, their faces blank, for if they supported those boys they could easily be taken away in the night.

The Communists wanted to take the land from the khans. They wanted freedom and equality for women. They wanted a modern developed economy and an end to corruption. In the countryside, even in Lashkargah, the Communists could build support in the secondary schools. But in the villages the mullahs said the Communists were godless, which was true. The khans terrified those sharecroppers who might join the communists. Under Zahir Shah a man could easily die for speaking out of turn in the village. The Communists won some respect, but they could not organise in the villages strongly enough to win the argument against the mullahs and khans.

In Kabul it was different.

In the early 1950s, and again in the 1960s, there were relatively free elections. In the rural areas, and most cities, no one opposed to the local rich could stand, but in Kabul the Communists could.

That is important--50 years ago, in 1951, the Communists won seats in Kabul. Afghanistan is a sink of reaction now not because it always has been, but because of what has happened since.

At Kabul University in 1971 the Communists came up against the Islamists.

These were not traditional Muslims. [6] Traditional Afghan Islam leant heavily towards Sufi mysticism and worship at the graves of saints. The Islamists despised this village Islam. They took their politics from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the ideas coming from the Al Azhar mosque and university in Cairo. They looked forward to a deeply changed Afghanistan, even as they said it would be like the time of the prophet.

They, like the Communists, were a modern movement of the newly educated.

Of their two most important young leaders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud, both studied engineering at Kabul University. They were not mullahs.

The Communists and Islamists both hated the royal government and the stink of corruption, but they differed on three things.

The Communists wanted to share out the land, while the Islamists defended property. The Communists wanted equality for women, and the Islamists were against it (women joined both groups, but they played a far larger and braver part in the communist movement). And the Communists looked to Russia, while the Islamists looked to support from Saudi Arabia, and later the US. In 1972 the Communists and Islamists fought with guns on the campus of Kabul University, and the Islamists won. The Communists took the fighting to the secondary schools.

There the students were poorer and fought with hatchets. The Communists had more support in the secondary schools because they were poorer.

In 1972 there was drought in the centre and north of the country. The nomads lost their sheep, and then the harvest failed.

The US sent grain in aid. In towns in the north the district officers put the grain in piles in the centre of the town, guarded by soldiers. The local merchants then sold that grain at ten times the usual rate. Small farmers sold their fields at much below the usual rate to pay for that grain.

Sharecroppers, shepherds and their families starved. A French journalist passing through asked starving people why they did not simply storm the piles of grain. 'The king has planes,' they explained. 'If we do, the government will bomb us'. [7] Those planes were Russian MIGs. The pilots were trained in Texas. Afghanistan was neutral. No one knows how many died in that famine, but it meant that when a coup ousted King Zahir the next year no one came to his defence.

Daoud, the uncle of King Zahir Shah, led the 1973 coup. Daoud's government leaned toward the Soviet Union in foreign policy.

The Communists were now split into two factions. The more moderate Parcham (Flag) supported Daoud. Parcham were particularly strong in Kabul, and among the upper reaches of the middle class. The more radical faction, Khalk (People), opposed Daoud and went underground. They were stronger among the educated children of small peasants, and in the small towns. The Khalk were more Pashtun, the Parcham more Farsi speaking.

This was because of their different class bases, not because of ethnicity.

Daoud used the Parcham Communists to break the Islamists, whose leaders were driven into exile in Pakistan in 1975. Then one night in April 1978 Daoud sent his police to arrest and either kill or imprison all the leading Communists in Kabul. [8] Daoud's coup in 1973 had been based on the army. The Communists had also been building support, and secret organisation, in the armed forces. The younger army officers were from the same educated new class as the Communists. The night that Daoud turned on the Communists they replied with a coup.

Only around Jalalabad was there any fighting. For the rest, nobody supported Daoud, as nobody had supported his nephew Zahir Shah. But the Communists had not won the political argument in the villages.

“Instead Of Organising Those Conscripts Against Their Officers, The Communists Had Organised A Coup By The Officers”

Afghanistan had a conscript army. There were men from every village in Afghanistan in that army, most of them poor men who felt like the men in that TB hospital--'The land of the Afghans, the land of tyrants.'

But instead of organising those conscripts against their officers, the Communists had organised a coup by the officers.

It's not hard to understand why they chose a revolution from the top. That was the prevailing radical politics of the time. Communists and radicals all over the world looked to the dictatorships of Russia, China, Vietnam and Cuba, all of them run from the top down.

All over the Middle East radicals had tried to come to power through coups. In 1972 the idea of a revolution for democratic workers' power was a small enough tendency that few, if any, people in Afghanistan had heard of it. This was not only true in Kabul. Of the three leaders of the revolution, Karmal learned his politics in Afghanistan, Taraki in Bombay and Amin in New York. In each case the ideas available to them were those of Stalin, Mao and Castro.

When the Communists took power in 1978 their first two acts were to decree land reform and abolish the payment of bride price at a marriage. Both were symbolic statements. They had to be enforced in the villages.

When the Communists came to the village with their new policies they came in the jeeps of the old government, in the uniforms of officers and the Western clothes of the old ruling class.

Soon they faced rebellion, beginning in Pakhtia and Nuristan along the Pakistani border.

These were areas where people could remember freedom from any central government. From there the revolt spread across the rural areas. It is difficult to tell who led this revolt, but the banner was Islam.

The historical tradition was that a people whose feudal leaders had deserted them fought on as Muslims. The mullahs now said that the Communists were puppets of the Russians.

The Communists turned to arrests and torture because they had not won the argument in the villages.

That made more enemies. And when the Communists lost control of an area they fell back on the methods of the old government--guns and bombs. It is not possible to wage class war by bombing a village. The bombs hit everyone, and unite them. In one area after another the Communists found themselves fighting the people they had meant to free.

By late 1979, a year and a half after coming to power, the Communist regime was clearly about to fall.

Desperate, the Parcham and Khalk factions began to kill and imprison each other.

At this point the Soviet Union invaded to keep the Communists in power.

It did not do so for the sake of the Afghans. The Soviet Union had four Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan--what are now the countries of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kirghizstan. The majority in these countries was at least nominally Muslim, [9] and there was a growing Islamist feeling against Russian rule. If Afghanistan fell to Muslim insurrection, they might follow. And Soviet Central Asia contained much of Russia's oil and gas.

When the Russian tanks rolled in and the planes landed, the Communists accepted their support. They did not welcome it. The Russians had to kill President Amin, the leader of the Khalk, and replace him with Karmal, the Parchami leader. Many Communists deserted to the resistance or went into exile. Many Khalkis continued in government but told those close to them how much they resented the Russians. Many Khalkis were imprisoned by Karmal. But as an organised force, both the Khalki and Parchami Communists served under the Russians and fought alongside them.

Quite rapidly, though, most of the people who had supported the Communists turned against them.

The Islamists, the village mullahs and the old landlords had said the Communists were just tools of the Russians. Now people could see they were right.

The base of the Communists had been in the cities.

In the spring of 1980 people went up onto the roofs of their houses at night in Herat, Afghanistan's third city. From the roofs they all shouted 'God is great' into the darkness. It was calculated defiance--the army and the Russians could not attack a whole city for shouting that. T

he protest spread to Kandahar, the second city, and then to Kabul, the capital. [10] There, the civil servants, who had been the Communists' strongest supporters, went on strike in protest at the Russians.

For years the students at the girls' high school had led the campaign against the veil, marching through the streets, braving the mullahs who threw acid at their legs. Now the girls at the high school demonstrated in the schoolyard, calling on the men of Afghanistan to fight the invader, as women had done against the British invaders.

There were eight years of bitter war. Because the resistance had the support of the people, the Russians could only fight back with firepower. They used bombers, strafing planes, hundreds of thousands of land mines, helicopter gunships and napalm. No one knows how many people died in the war. Nobody was counting.

Some Islamists say 2 million people out of a population of 15 or 20 million. They probably exaggerate. The more usually accepted figure is 1 million, though that too is only a guess. Perhaps it was only half a million.

About 6 million villagers became refugees. Two million went to Pakistan, where they lived on handouts in mud and tent camps. Two million went to Iran, where there were no camps and no relief, but where many found jobs as casual building labourers and the like. A million or so took refuge in Kabul, whose population swelled from half a million to 2 million. Many internal refugees went to other cities, and many people lost arms, legs or eyes to landmines.

This Russian war destroyed Communism and socialism in the hearts of Afghans.

If we take the figure of 1 million dead, that is 200 times the number killed on 11 September 2001 in New York. Afghanistan's population is less than a tenth of the US's.

That means the impact of the Russian war was 2,000 times the impact of New York on Americans.

If we take the lowest possible figure, half a million dead, that is still 100 times the number dead in New York, in less than a tenth of the population, for 1,000 times the impact.

This is not to diminish in any way the carnage or the grief in New York. It is only to make concrete what that same carnage and grief, on a far greater scale, must have felt like in Afghanistan.

It also suggests what the return of the bombers must feel like to Afghans now.

The resistance to the Russian invasion was quite unlike that in the guerrilla wars in Vietnam, Algeria, Yemen, Zimbabwe or Malaysia. In all those places the guerrillas were united under one political and military leadership.

“In Afghanistan The Building Blocks Of The Resistance Were The Local Qaums”

In Afghanistan the building blocks of the resistance were the local qaums. [11]

The best translation of qaum into English is community. It can mean a small tribe, an ethnic group, a linguistic group, a religious sect, three hamlets or the followers of one landlord.

Sometimes a small valley can be a qaum. More usually, there are several qaums in a valley. In Dar-e-Nur, in Ningrahar, for instance, in 1972 there were several qaums. Three small settlements of Pashtu-speaking nomads formed three different qaums. There were other Pashtun farmers of the Safi tribe, living in the lower part of the valley, and several communities of Pashai speakers living in the centre and higher reaches of the valley. In the largest village the people were split between hamlets loyal to one political leader and those loyal to another. [12]

During the resistance to the Russians, some of these qaums combined together to fight, and some did not. When the Russians came, the men of the qaum, or several qaums, would fight. But when the Russians left, nobody pursued them. A qaum who lived near a road would venture out to ambush a Russian column and then run away. But beyond that there was no co-ordinated military action. [13]

The resistance of the qaums inside Afghanistan called themselves the Mujahadeen, the people of the jihad. They were consciously continuing the tradition of holy war against the British invaders.

The formal leadership of the Mujahadeen fell to seven different Islamist political parties, all based in Peshawar in Pakistan. The governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US supported the Peshawar parties.

Inter Services Intelligence, the secret police of the Pakistani army, did most of the organising on the ground. Pakistan was a military dictatorship under General Zia in these years, and the ISI grew to become one of the great powers in the land. Saudi Arabia provided much of the money for the resistance. The US provided some of the money, and many of the weapons were arms from the Arab countries and Israel, paid for by the US. The CIA organised US support for the Mujahadeen in Pakistan.

US policy in the early 1980s was to use the resistance to harry and destabilise Russia as part of the Cold War. It was not that they particularly favoured the Islamists in the

resistance. Rather, they were using the stick to hand to beat Russia. Much of the Pakistani military, and the Saudi government, were more committed to Islamic reaction.

The money and guns were paid out to the leaders of the seven Islamist parties in Peshawar. Some of the weapons and money were then sent on to the local Mujahadeen resistance groups inside Afghanistan. In return, the leader of the local groups would declare his allegiance to that Peshawar party, while the leaders of rival local groups would ally themselves with other parties.

Local leaders often changed parties, taking their following with them. The Peshawar party did not give orders to the local group, did not control the whole of any one area, and did not co-ordinate the resistance.

The leaders of the Peshawar Islamist parties all kept a considerable proportion of the foreign money for themselves. Within four years both the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the fighters inside the country were deeply cynical about the Peshawar Islamists.

These local leaders were usually not the old feudal lords of the valleys. Most of those people had fled to Pakistan, and often eventually to the US to begin new lives. It is difficult to tell who now controlled the land. I have not been back to Afghanistan since 1973.

No reporter, no academic and no Afghan source I can find seems to have asked who controlled the land. In a peasant society this is an astonishing omission. So we have to guess.

My guess for the period of resistance to the Russians is that much of the land formerly controlled by the old feudal lords, and by other refugees, fell under the control of the new local leaders of the Mujahadeen resistance. They were opposed to land reform, and so there was probably little sharing out. At the same time, the only way to back up their new land ownership was force. The old feudal lords had effectively ruled through retinues of local gunmen. The new lords would have done the same, and handed some of the land to these gunmen.

“With The New Resistance Came A New Crop—Opium”

With the new resistance came a new crop--opium.

Afghanistan had for many years exported opium on a small scale. In 1972 I had seen it growing in small amounts on the American irrigation project in Helmand and the Russian irrigation project near Jalalabad, and in large amounts along the Pakistani border. Now opium growing exploded, and heroin processing plants were built in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

This was possible because in most rural areas there was now no central government to stop poppy growing. On irrigated land the same constant sunlight that makes Afghanistan ideal for growing grapes and melons also makes it ideal for poppies.

But the real change was in Pakistan.

There the Pakistani military and the CIA now allowed, and increasingly encouraged, the opium trade.

They did so for several reasons. The peasant fighters of the resistance had to make a living in conditions where farming was difficult, and much of the land was mined.

The CIA had done much the same in Indochina during the Vietnam War. It had encouraged opium cultivation by its client troops in Laos, and helped with the export of heroin through Vietnam. In South Vietnam President Thieu and Vice-President Ky had been central figures in the heroin trade. So the CIA was used to doing this. [14]

Also, the CIA was smuggling guns and arms on a large scale, though without an official budget to do so. The money had to come from somewhere. And wherever there are conduits for black money to aid rebels, the same lines of finance and money-washing are easily available to move drugs in the opposite direction.

The Pakistani military, and particularly the ISI, also had an increasing stake in the heroin trade. Many generals became fabulously rich. This deep corruption in the military has degraded social life in Pakistan.

To be ruled by people who take bribes and steal from the public purse is one thing. To be ruled by an army full of narcotics criminals is quite another.

“The CIA's Man In Charge Of This Was Osama Bin Laden. He Was Paid, And Funded, By The US”

In the 1980s the CIA and the Saudis were also looking for ways to bring some order among the political parties, and some degree of control over them. One strand in this strategy was for the CIA to build up an organisation of Islamist volunteers, called al-Qaida, many of them from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. The CIA's man in charge of this was Osama Bin Laden. He was paid, and funded, by the US.

The son of a prominent Saudi construction magnate, Bin Laden came to Afghanistan originally at the urging of Saudi intelligence. But he was not simply an American puppet, any more than the Islamists in Peshawar were. For the moment his goals were the same as the US's, and he worked for them. Like the leaders of the Islamist parties, he ran his operation from Peshawar. [15]

Opinion was divided in the US government on how to support the resistance.

The CIA, with a good idea of what was happening on the ground, was against giving too many weapons to the Mujahadeen resistance. It wanted to hurt Russia, but was worried about the consequences if the Islamist parties actually won. The Iranian Revolution and the rise to power of an Islamist government there had shaken the US government. In Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi and North Africa, Islamist oppositions now appeared to be the main threat to the dictatorships of the Middle East and the US power that stood behind them. So the CIA did not want responsibility for a victorious and very right wing Islamist regime in Kabul.

Other power centres in Washington, and particularly the State Department, did want to arm the Afghan resistance heavily. Their thinking was that the damage to Russian power would outweigh any threat to US interests. In 1986 this wing of the US government won the argument, and the CIA began supplying large numbers of surface to air Stinger missiles to the resistance inside Afghanistan. These handheld Stingers could shoot down planes and helicopters.

“In 1988 The Russian Government Under Gorbachev Decided To Leave Afghanistan”

From 1986 on, Russia began to lose hundreds of aircraft and helicopters each year. The loss of life was important to the Russian government. More important was the stunning cost of replacing the aircraft. A large modern helicopter, let alone a bomber, costs millions. The war was now costing the Russian economy many billions.

In 1988 the Russian government under Gorbachev decided to leave Afghanistan. This was partly because Gorbachev was trying to rescue an imploding Soviet economy, and partly because it could not win against the considerable heroism of the Afghan people.

The government in Kabul was still led by the Communists. The Russians had replaced President Babrak with Najibullah, the former head of the secret police. Najibullah's enemies said that he personally presided over the death of 80,000 political prisoners in Kabul--Islamists, Communists, and many just caught up in the repression. I think this is probably a grossly inflated figure. But it is beyond doubt that Najibullah was a hands-on torturer and in charge of the deaths of tens of thousands.

It was an index of the corruption of Afghan Communism that such a man could become leader. What made it even more macabre was that he was a doctor by profession.

In 1988 I expected that Najibullah's government would quickly fall to the Islamist resistance, and then the Islamists would fall out among themselves. In fact they fell out before they could take Kabul. [16] When the Russians left, the Peshawar Islamist parties combined for an assault on Kabul. Their first target was Jalalabad, the small Afghan city on the road from Peshawar to Kabul. They met unexpectedly fierce resistance from the Communist-led garrison there. Just as important, the local Mujahadeen resistance troops were now reluctant to fight.

For at least the previous two centuries, internal warfare in Afghanistan had been relatively limited.

Where the forces of the central government confronted much smaller local forces, they had simply smashed them. But in civil wars Afghan armies mostly avoided large-scale battle.

The war against Russia had been different. Here issues of principle, of religion, and of what class would own the land were dominant. The Afghan peasants had been willing to die in large numbers for what they believed in. But even then they had still not been prepared to attack outside their local areas.

The local Mujahadeen also had no respect for the Peshawar parties and the Islamists.

They regarded the leaders of the parties as corrupt cowards who stole foreign aid while other people died for them. Now, in front of Jalalabad and then Kabul, the people who had been prepared to die against the Russians were not prepared to die for the Islamists.

They had fought for the freedom of their valley, not for rule by new gangsters in Kabul.

The local leaders of the Mujahadeen probably had little interest in a strong central government. If I am right about them seizing much of the land, the establishment of central government in Kabul might well have meant the return of the old feudal landlords who would reclaim their land.

The Peshawar parties were falling out among themselves. Kabul, and all Afghanistan, was now the prize to reward whichever gangster could out-manoeuvre the others. The various parties began to shoot each other.

The people of Kabul, and to a lesser extent Jalalabad and Mazar in the north, had once supported the Communists. They had turned against them after the Russian invasion.

With the invaders gone, however, the Communists now looked like a better bet than the corrupt Peshawar parties, themselves obviously the clients of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US.

So the Jalalabad garrison held on tenaciously, and the Mujahadeen assault failed. Kabul and much of the north remained in the hands of Najibullah. He began to present himself as a Muslim ruler, and made alliances with many of the old tribal lords and some of the new Mujahadeen landlords. Critically, he still had some Russian money and support.

With the Soviet army gone, the CIA had won what it wanted, and cut off almost all its support to the Islamist parties. In 1988 Washington had no particular interest in an Islamist government in Kabul, but the Islamist parties still enjoyed Pakistani and Saudi backing though on nothing like the same scale. However, Najibullah's support slowly bled away.

Najibullah's single most important force was the Uzbek militia led by the Communist General Dostum.

The majority Uzbek areas in the north of the country had come under Pashtun control in the 1880s. Uzbek peasants and lords had lost a considerable part of their land to Pashtun settlers who were planted there by the rulers in Kabul. This had been a running sore in the politics of northern Afghanistan, and under Dostum the Uzbeks got some of that land back.

But Dostum could tell which way the wind was blowing. In 1992 he deserted Najibullah, and entered into an alliance with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Islamist who controlled the Tajik, Persian-speaking valley of Panjshir just to the north of

Kabul. Without the support of Dostum, Najibullah fell and Massoud's Panjshiri troops swept into Kabul.

Afghan politics was now divided along ethnic lines.

There was nothing primordial or Afghan about this.

Under the old regime the king, the commander of the army and the minister of the interior had always been Pashtuns.

But the government had rested on an alliance of all the big landlords--Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and even Hazara.

Significantly, the language of government, the university and the army had always been Persian, not Pashtu.

Under the Communists, the presidents, army commanders and ministers of the interior had also been Pashtuns. [17] Again, however, the Communist base depended on a real alliance of Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks. The Islamists, too, had been an alliance of all the main ethnic groups.

From 1950 to 1988 ethnicity had never ceased to matter. But national politics had been organised along lines of class and religion.

Now the Communists were utterly discredited. The Islamists were losing support. There was certainly no principled religious reason to support one Islamist group over another.

More and more, the only basis left for political organising was ethnicity.

The worst example of this was the degradation of the Khalkis. They had been the more radical of the Communist factions, more fiercely devoted to land reform and equality for women. As Najibullah fell, many of the Khalki army officers reinvented themselves as Pashtun chauvinists. Tajik and Uzbek Islamists now controlled Kabul.

Many of the Khalkis went over to the side of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the most extreme Islamist party, and a Pashtun.

The hard right and the hard left had joined forces as Pashtun chauvinists.

For the moment, the US government cared little about what happened. The Pakistani government still did. It was now an elected government led by Benazir Bhutto. A faction in the Pakistani army had blown up a plane containing the dictator, Zia, and several generals loyal to him, and handed power back to civilians. The army and the ISI, however, were still the power behind the parliamentary government. In Afghanistan they now supported Hekmatyar and his party.

Hekmatyar's forces occupied the hills above Kabul, trying to take power from the alliance of the Tajik Islamist Massoud and the Uzbek former Communist Dostum. The Russians had almost destroyed Kandahar, the second city, in the war. But Kabul still stood, unbombed.

Now Hekmatyar unleashed Saudi and Pakistani supplied artillery on the houses of Kabul. Over four years he destroyed much of the city and killed an estimated 50,000 civilians.

Within Kabul, Massoud's Tajik forces now fought it out with the Islamists who controlled the Hazara neighbourhoods.

The Hazaras had always been the most despised of Afghan minorities. They were Shias, unlike most Afghans. More important, their central mountain homeland, the Hazarajat, had the poorest land in Afghanistan. Many of them had to migrate to Kabul for work, where they were porters in the bazaar, servants and construction workers. But they had fought bravely, probably more bravely than anybody else, against the Russians.

Now Massoud moved against them. He was beginning to get Russian money, and Iran supported the Hazara Islamists.

“The Ordinary People Of Afghanistan Had Expected Peace When The Russians Left. Now They Had Unending War Between Unprincipled Gangsters”

The ordinary people of Afghanistan had expected peace when the Russians left. Now they had unending war between unprincipled gangsters.

Cynicism and a bitter hatred towards all their leaders became common currency.

The local leaders of the resistance also earned people's hatred.

They, and their armed retainers, abused people and stole. It was also alleged that in some areas they took the daughters of weaker people whenever they felt like it. I am not sure if this is true. In any case, if I am right that they had seized other people's land, their new holdings rested upon armed force, not legitimacy. They could only hold that land by obvious shows of their power.

“In 1995, Three Years After Massoud Swept Into Kabul, A New Force Arose In The Pashtun South, Around Kandahar, The Second City--The Taliban”

In 1995, three years after Massoud swept into Kabul, a new force arose in the Pashtun south, around Kandahar, the second city--the Taliban.

The Taliban said that all the Islamists and the local Mujahadeen leaders were corrupt. Most people agreed with that.

The Taliban took their name from the talib students at the many small religious schools that trained mullahs. These schools had multiplied in Afghanistan, and even more around the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, with support from the Saudis. The Islam

they taught was not the Islamism of the Peshawar parties, which had looked to Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Taliban ideology mixed three traditions--the old village Islam of Afghanistan, the 18th century Wahabi reformism of Saudi Arabia, and the 19th century Indian Deobandi anti-colonial Islam. Massoud, Hekmatyar and the like had been university students. The talib students and the mullahs had a few years of schooling at most, and most of that in religious texts in Arabic. They seemed to represent a return to the Islamic practices under Zahir Shah in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the actual talib students were mostly boys from poor families, and many of them had only known the privation of the refugee camps.

These religious students formed the core of the Taliban troops.

Most of them were too young to have fought in the war against the Russians. The leader of the Taliban was Mullah Omar, who had been a commander in the local Mujahadeen near Kandahar during the war against the Russians. He was a village mullah, from a poor family, with little education, blind in one eye from a war wound.

His followers said he had founded the Taliban when two Mujahadeen commanders near Kandahar fought a tank battle over who would have sex with one particular boy. Mullah Omar had led the local rising against them.

The royal regime had been based on the landlords. The Communists and the Islamists were both led by the state petty bourgeoisie.

Mullah Omar, it seemed, finally, was one of the people, leading an army of poor boys. He was heir to the old tradition of village religious resistance to the British.

The Taliban started at the Pakistani border, just south of Kandahar, and then swept north to take that city.

Their base secure, they then attacked the Helmand valley to the west. This was the centre of opium poppy growing, controlled by the Akhundzada family. Fighting was heavy--poppies mattered. Then the Taliban took Herat, and the west. That base secure, the Taliban went north to the outskirts of Kabul. As they advanced, local resistance commanders came over to them without a shot fired. The Taliban had considerable legitimacy.

It looked like the Taliban might be a force for honesty.

They were also well armed and officered, and everybody knew they had the support of the Americans. The Taliban might bring what almost everybody now desperately wanted--peace.

Clinton's American government was supporting the Taliban because it too now wanted peace in Afghanistan--and a pipeline.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet provinces of Central Asia, just to the north of Afghanistan, had become independent countries. Some of the old Soviet

oilfields were now in four of those new countries--Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakstan. Two of these bordered Afghanistan, all had at least nominally Muslim majorities, and all were ruled by former Communist politicians who had reinvented themselves as ethnic dictators.

In the early 1990s the American oil companies began to move in, and it became clear that the Central Asian oil and gas reserves were far larger than had been thought. The figures are not reliable. Some sources say half of the world's oil reserves are in Central Asia, and some say a quarter or a fifth. The important thing was that it was not clear which oil powers would end up controlling the Central Asian reserves. The leading contenders were Russia, China, the US, Iran and, just possibly, Turkey.

The crucial issue was pipelines. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union all the pipelines had been built to carry the oil north to Russia. They are still there. In Soviet times the central government had paid far less than the world price for this oil. Now the new Russian government was still paying, in most cases, less than half the world price. The Central Asian regimes were looking for new pipelines that could carry their newly discovered resources to market for a better rate.

The US oil companies had problems with almost all the proposed pipelines. One way out ran through China. Then China would control the oil, and China was already becoming a competitor with US capital. Another proposed pipeline would run under the Caspian Sea north of Iran and then down through Chechnya, Georgia and Turkish Kurdistan to the Mediterranean. This was preferable to the US, but Russia would still control it if it ran Chechnya. An alternative could run across the Black Sea and down through Macedonia, quite near to Kosovo. Not entirely by coincidence, there were wars in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Chechnya, Turkish Kurdistan, Macedonia and Kosovo in the 1990s.

The Turkish and Black Sea pipelines, however, were going to be very expensive to build, and would run through many competing jurisdictions. The obvious alternative was a pipeline from Turkmenistan down through Iran to the Persian Gulf. This would be much shorter than the others, easy and much cheaper to build. Iran was politically stable, and already had tanker ports, refineries and a developed oil industry.

But Iran had been the US's enemy since 1980. The idea of Iran controlling Central Asian oil, or controlling it in alliance with the Central Asian countries, gave the US government fits. So it favoured another short, easy to build route through Afghanistan. That would run from Turkmenistan down through Herat in western Afghanistan to the coast of Pakistan. It was effectively the same route as the proposed Iranian pipeline, just 100 miles or so to the west. Technically it would be easy. An Argentinian oil company already had a contract with the government of Turkmenistan to build it. A US oil and gas company, UNOCAL, bribed the Turkmen government to give it the pipeline contract instead. Now the US corporations had their own proposed pipeline, and in time the possibility of becoming the major oil and gas power in Central Asia.

The problem was that there was no peace in Afghanistan.

Nobody in their right mind would build a pipeline through all those competing Islamist warlords.

The US needed a stable government, allied to it and to Pakistan, in control of Afghanistan. The Pakistani army and the ISI suggested the Taliban could provide this, and the American government decided they were the best option. The Pakistani army had concluded that there was no way Hekmatyar, its man up to that time, was going to win power. The Taliban might. With luck, this would give Pakistan a hand in Central Asian oil. Even without that, it would open new trade routes from Central Asia through Herat to Pakistan. For this reason, the Pakistani trucking companies were early supporters of the Taliban.

When the Pakistani army withdrew its support from Hekmatyar, he joined forces with Massoud in Kabul. It was regarded by all as a deeply unprincipled alliance. The man who had shelled Kabul for four years was now to be its saviour. Cynicism towards the Islamists reached new heights.

The pipeline and trade made Herat more important to the Pakistani and US governments than Kabul. So the Taliban took Herat first. Then they launched a serious assault on Kabul. Their army was a unity of several forces. Many of the rank and file were young talib students. The guns and ammunition came from Pakistan. The Taliban also had a large fleet of Datsun pickup trucks they used for mobile fighting in the western plains on the road to Herat, a bit like tank warfare. These pickups came from Saudi Arabia, and were effective against Islamist ground troops.

The Taliban also fought with the discipline not of inexperienced boys, but of an army with officers experienced in conventional warfare. Some of these officers were Pakistani army men. Others were Khalkis, Pashtun former Communists, busy changing their names from Major Watandar to Mullah Mohammed (all Taliban commanders are Mullahs so and so, but not all were mullahs before). Massoud later said there were 6,000 Khalkis with the Taliban army. This is a wild exaggeration, but that there were many Khalkis with the advancing forces nobody but the Taliban disputes.

The Taliban also had large amounts of money. It was assumed in Afghanistan that this came from the Saudis and the US. This money was used to bribe key local leaders as their army swept north. In 1996 they drove Massoud and the Tajik Islamists out of Kabul, and pushed north.

Everywhere the Taliban took power they disarmed the population. This was new.

Even under the king, many rural households had been armed. Since then the country had become awash with guns. The Taliban were promising the people the roads would be safe, and clear for Pakistani truckers. There would be no more roadblocks every few miles, levying tolls.

The Mujahadeen leaders would no longer be able to seize land or use the sons and daughters of the peasantry for their sexual pleasures. (There is considerable question whether the Mujahadeen were in fact doing this. The war against the Russians, and the civil war that followed, had seen almost no military rape, by Afghans or Russians. This is in stark contrast to most wars.)

It seems that in many parts of Afghanistan people held their breath and hoped. Certainly no one seemed prepared to fight for the Islamists or the local Mujahadeen leaders.

Even a bad peace can look better than 20 years of war.

The last city the Taliban had to take was Mazar-e-Sharif in the north. Again they did it without firing a shot. Dostum's second in command was bribed into handing over control of the city.

For a day the Taliban ruled all but a few pockets of Afghanistan. It looked as if the Pakistani army had got its way, and the US government would recognise the Taliban.

Like Kabul, Mazar is a multi-ethnic city--Uzbek, Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara.

The young Taliban soldiers now moved to disarm the population, as they had in other parts of the country. According to one report, the Taliban went armed into a Hazara mosque. The Hazaras there, appalled, refused to give up their guns. However the fighting started, the Hazaras of Mazar rose.

As they fought the Taliban, the Tajiks and Uzbeks of Mazar rose with them. When they saw what was happening, so did the Pashtuns of Mazar.

The Hazaras had good reasons not to give up their guns. Pashtun nomad khans and government officials had long oppressed the Hazaras in their mountain homeland. For decades they had been the bottom of the hierarchy in Kabul and Mazar--manual workers. In the war against the Russians they had finally organised to control the central mountains, the Hazarajat, and win some dignity in the cities. Now all this was threatened.

In Kabul the year before the leader of the Hazaras there had deserted Massoud and made an alliance with the Taliban. Taliban soldiers had taken him away and pushed him out of a helicopter to his death.

Whatever the public face of the Taliban as strict Muslims, their main ideology was Pashtun chauvinism. So the Hazaras of Mazar rose.

The Taliban had battled in the west against Islamist forces. They had never met with, and could not comprehend, an urban working class rising.

The Taliban fled, but many did not escape. Hundreds of Taliban boys were killed on the streets. Others were left in truck containers in the desert until they died of asphyxiation and heat.

The Taliban replied with pogroms in the Hazara neighbourhoods of Kabul. Afghanistan had finally reached the depths of ethnic cruelty so long familiar in Europe and India.

In 1996 the Taliban finally retook Mazar. This time they murdered civilians in large numbers. And this time they raped.

But they had lost US support. It was clear to the US government that the Taliban could not deliver permanent peace in Afghanistan. The pipeline was dead. The US government now leaned toward the Turkish pipeline, but also began to try to re-establish relations with Iran.

The Taliban, however, still had the support of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

An opposition alliance held small parts of the north and east. This opposition is usually called the Northern Alliance, a name they would not use for themselves, since they claim to be the legitimate rulers of all Afghanistan. This alliance held perhaps 5 or 10 percent of the country.

The Tajik Islamist Massoud and the Uzbek former Communist Dostum led them. Massoud had money and guns from Iran, Russia and India. Dostum was backed by the government of former Soviet Uzbekistan. India was on board as a way to make trouble for Pakistan, and because many of the militant guerrillas who faced the Indian army in Kashmir were allied to the Taliban and supported by the Pakistani army.

But it is a measure of how discredited the Islamists had become that, even with all this money behind them, the Northern Alliance could only attract 5,000 fighters to their side.

The Taliban held most of Afghanistan. But in many ways foreign NGOs and aid agencies were the real government.

The Islamists, Dostum's militia and the Taliban had controlled armies and the police. But to a certain extent after 1988, and to a very large extent after 1992, Western NGOs, mostly from the European Union and the United Nations, had delivered the other functions of government. The cities in particular were still full of refugees from the war, who had little prospect of going home. The Islamists and the Taliban did not raise taxes to feed the people. So the NGOs and the United Nations fed the poor. They also ran and funded the schools and hospitals.

All the things for which people might be grateful they owed to these outsiders. All the things they might hate a government for--guns and bombs--they owed to the Islamists and the Taliban.

This goes some way to explaining the deeply reactionary version of Islam propounded by the Taliban in power.

Everyone knew they had begun as clients of the non-Muslim US government, the corrupt Muslim state of Saudi Arabia, and the Pakistani army. Large sections of the Pakistani officer class may be right wing Islamists in a political sense, but no one thinks they are good Muslims.

“The Taliban Were Doing Nothing For People, And Beholden To Bad Muslims Or Enemies Of Islam”

The Taliban were doing nothing for people, and beholden to bad Muslims or enemies of Islam. The only thing they had going for them ideologically was the rhetoric of Islam. And because they were so compromised, they emphasised that Islam by being more reactionary and more brutal than the Islamists.

Part of their version of Islam was sending women back to the home.

Before explaining this, we need to clear away some lies. It is said now, on all sides, that the Taliban force all girls to leave school. They force all women to wear the burqa, the full body veil that makes a woman look like a ghost, seeing the world through a small mesh in front of her eyes. And it is said that this is done because it is traditional Pashtun village custom, and the Taliban are ignorant, medieval men who have taken their customs to the city.

None of these things are true, though each builds on a partial truth. [18]

In the past, Pashtun women were no more likely to wear the full veil than other Afghan women.

I lived in Pashtun villages from 1971 to 1973, both in the south near Kandahar and the east near Jalalabad.

In both regions the women of a few rich families in each village lived in seclusion, covering their heads and bodies in public places, but rarely wearing a burqa. Some of these were big landlords, and some smaller peasants with their own land. In all cases, these were families rich enough that the women did not have to work. Poor people, they said, let their wives wander the village without shame. We, who are modest, keep ours locked up.

The ideology of the Taliban is an ideology of a new rural elite, rich peasants who aspire to seclude their women.

In the large majority of peasant households, and in all nomad households, women had to work in the fields or with the animals. They might turn away or pull their headscarves across their faces when strangers approached. But the male strangers would turn away as a courtesy too, so as not to intrude on the women.

In the cities more people were able to depend only on the labour of men, and the full veil was more common among working class women. But the streets were full of working class women whose faces you could see, and many middle and upper class women in Western styles and trouser suits like their counterparts in the West.

In 2001 the Taliban enforced the veil in the cities. They did not enforce it in the Pashtun villages. There women still had to work. More important, the Taliban did not control the villages. They ruled over them but were not strong enough to impose their values. Had they done so, the villagers would have risen. In many Pashtun villages girls continued to go to school.

I write this in the third week of the fifth Afghan war. The US and British governments are bombing Kandahar. We are told that this is 'the spiritual home of the Taliban', because bombing that sounds better than bombing a city of a quarter of a million people. I watch the refugees coming to the Pakistani border from Kandahar on my television. They are mostly women and children, and the women are rarely fully veiled.

The oppression of women was real in the 1950s and 1960s. But there was space for resistance.

At weddings, the men and women separately sang songs of illicit love. And older women could walk through the village freely, sniffing tobacco like a man, discussing local politics and talking back with biting wit.

These were people, not walking ideologies. There was an ideology of gender inequality not unlike that in many feudal societies. A man was supposed to be able to control the women of his family.

If he could not, if other men could look at them, tease them or have sex with them, he ate shame.

Shame was dangerous for the whole family. A man without honour was a man who could not defend himself. And when a man could not defend himself or his family then powerful men would come and take his land or his sheep.

The whole family would be left with nothing. So every one tried to claim they were honourable. But in practice the gender ideology of honour and shame punished poor men and poor women together.

Women were not men's equals in 1972. But they were not medieval slaves.

One of the greatest virtues of the Communists, men and women, was that they wanted women's liberation. The Communists had women activists, women fighters with guns and women in government. They saw that the oppression of women was part and parcel of the exploitation and oppression that permeated all of Afghan society.

Yet they ended up bombing women and children alongside their men.

Through the Communists, the liberation of women became identified with the torturers, the invaders, the helicopter gunships and the napalm.

That is the logic which allows the Taliban today to identify beating unveiled women in the cities with opposition to imperialism.

None of this is to deny that the Taliban are reactionary. They are enemies of most women, as they are enemies of most ordinary Afghan people.

But their ideas are not traditional, essentially Afghan or Pashtun. In the eyes of most Muslims they are a repellent, heretical interpretation of Islam. Their ideas are new, the product of 20 years of war, betrayal and suffering.

Many of the ideas the Taliban learned in the religious schools came from Saudi Arabia.

Saudi is not some backwater. It is at the centre of world capitalism. The US government and the oil corporations have always been the allies and masters of the Saudi royal family.

The ideology of the Saudi royal family, too, is one of oppressing women in the name of Islam. The Saudi princes talk of forbidding drink, amputating the hands of thieves and punishing the immodesty of women.

Then they go to Beirut, Bahrain, Cairo and London to use prostitutes and drink themselves into stupors. They steal the public purse blind, export the money to London, and yet every Saudi prince still has both hands.

The worse their corruption and lying, the more the Saudi people hate them. And the more they are hated, the more hypocritical and vicious they become in their prating about what they imagine Islam to be.

In Kabul, a police unit called the Society for the Propagation of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice patrols the streets and beats women who are 'improperly dressed'.

In Saudi a police unit called the Society for the Propagation of Virtue and the Oppression of Vice has long done the same.

And yet we do not see Tony Blair on our TV screens calling for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Nor does George Bush call for elections and freedom there.

The Saudi state keeps the oil safe for US corporations. What is revolting about the Taliban comes not from Afghan tradition, but from the needs and deeds of the centre of the world system.

In 2000 the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan. The US had turned decisively against them, and so, more recently, had the Saudis.

Bin Laden Returns

The reason was Osama Bin Laden, once the CIA's man in the Afghan resistance. When the Russians left, Bin Laden went home to Saudi Arabia, some say appalled by the corruption and faction fighting of the Islamists. There the Gulf War turned him against the Saudi government. Bin Laden approved of the US and Saudi alliance against Iraq. What he could not stomach was the stationing of US planes and troops in Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War.

Everyone in Saudi, not just Bin Laden, knew the US forces remained in case the Saudi people rose against their rulers. He had fought the Western (Russian) occupation in Afghanistan. Now the US was occupying his own country, the land of the holy places. He made the connection between the Russian bombing of Afghanistan and the US bombing of Iraq.

Because Bin Laden was a rich man, because he was right wing, and because he did not believe that ordinary people could or should rule the world, Bin Laden identified the people of the US with their government.

It was the same mistake that many Americans have made recently, believing that the ordinary people of Afghanistan should suffer for the sins of the dictators who oppress them.

Bin Laden took refuge first in Sudan, and then in Afghanistan. There the Taliban welcomed him as an old comrade from the war. From there he led his organisation, now directed against US power and its Saudi clients.

It still had the old name it had had when the US paid and ran him--al-Qaida. Now it was an embarrassment, and a danger, for the Saudi royal family.

The US asked the Taliban to turn over Bin Laden. The Taliban said they would only do it through a proper extradition process, and the US would have to present evidence. The US government refused, perhaps because it did not have the evidence, but more likely because it did not recognise the Taliban. In any case, the Taliban could not turn him over. Their whole legitimacy, such as it was, relied upon being more Muslim than thou. If they turned over Bin Laden they would lose what support they had.

Then came 11 September in New York and at the Pentagon. Bin Laden praised that. I don't know if he personally organised it or not. But that was not really the point. US imperial power had been grievously wounded. The attack on the World Trade Centre was a blow. The easy destruction of part of the Pentagon, that home and symbol of US military might, was a worse blow to imperial power. There are large parts of the Middle East that Washington dominates only through fear. If US power looks weak, the ugly dictatorships there may defy it. More seriously, the workers in the cities might rise up and take control of the oil from the US corporations. And most Muslims in the world live in cities.

The first instinct of Bush, Cheney and Powell was that US power had to be stamped on the Middle East anew. The terrorists, all of them, all over the Middle East, had to be hunted down like animals. Something had to be done so crushing that the humiliation of the Pentagon would be forgotten.

So they turned to the weakest, least defended, most friendless and desperate place they could find to punish--Afghanistan.

I was born in New York and have lived in Afghanistan. I've seen people cry for their dead in both countries. The pain looks the same.

Yet there is one difference--the Afghans have had 23 years of war.

“They, The Rulers Of Russia And The U.S., But Also Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, Iran, Uzbekistan And Now Britain, Are The True Tyrants”

Thirty years ago many Afghans put their faith in the Communists, and were utterly betrayed. Then many put their faith in the Islamists, and were betrayed again. Some of those who could still hope hoped the Taliban would be better, and were betrayed again.

They have lost over 1 million dead in those wars, perhaps another million maimed by bombs. Again, as in 1972, there is the threat of famine. In three years of drought many of the nomads have lost their animals. This time, unlike 1972, they will starve in the eyes of the world. But this time the planes and the war machines will not allow the food through. Now the grain harvest has failed, and many peasants have no cash to buy

food. Meanwhile, opium production has increased massively in the areas controlled by the Northern Alliance. Most of it goes, of course, to the West. But it has also created an estimated 3 million heroin addicts in Pakistan, and a similar number in Iran.

There will be no hope in the Middle East if the left there cannot understand that the Islamists now lead the resistance not because ordinary people are stupid or reactionary, but because the Islamists have seemed to be the only people fighting imperialism.

The Islamists have served those people badly, and betrayed them when in power. But ordinary people can only be won from the Islamists by joining them in resistance to imperialism.

This does not mean terrorism.

That is another form of a small minority trying to impose their will on the world. It means mass demonstrations on the streets, and general strikes to back them up. This is now possible in several countries in the Middle East.

In Pakistan the Islamists now demonstrate carrying pictures of Bin Laden. The left demonstrates separately, carrying signs saying 'No to the Taliban, no to George Bush'. Both kinds of demonstrations are small.

Ordinary workers in Pakistan do not by and large support the Islamists or the Taliban. But in their guts, day by day, they feel that George Bush is far more of an enemy than Mullah Omar. It would not be easy for the left and the Islamists to march together in Karachi. But if they did hundreds of thousands who support neither would fall in behind them.

It matters, too, what happens beyond the Middle East. The arguments about the way to human liberation always happen around the world.

The Communists in Afghanistan made the mistakes they did because the ideas of revolution from above, of socialism as dictatorship, were the dominant ideas among revolutionaries over most of the world. The Soviet Union is gone now, and with that there is a space to build a new democratic socialist revolutionary movement.

'The land of the Afghans, the land of tyrants,' the patient in the TB hospital said, and we all gave an angry laugh.

The tyrants are worse now.

There has been no lack of dreams and idealism in Afghanistan these last 30 years. Ordinary Afghans, both Communists and Mujahadeen, have fought with great courage over many years.

Their leaders have betrayed their ideals utterly.

Worse than that have been the outside powers that have played the Great Game with the arms and legs and skulls of Afghans.

They, the rulers of Russia and the US, but also Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, Iran, Uzbekistan and now Britain, are the true tyrants.

They have taken a poor and desperate place, and made it a hell.

Bush and Blair are cruel men, without shame. It is time we had a world where no one ever again spends \$10 million to incinerate a child.

Notes

1. The analysis of Afghan history in this article is set out in more detail in J Neale, 'The Afghan Tragedy', *International Socialism* 12 (Spring 1981), and J Neale, 'Afghanistan: The Horse Changes Riders', *Capital and Class* 35 (1998).
2. I use feudal not in the narrow European and Japanese sense of a system of feudal allegiance and a tied peasantry. I use it in the more general sense of a social system where national power lies in the hands of large landowners who live in the countryside. In this sense, Afghanistan and Ethiopia in the 1970s were the last two feudal countries, and now there are none.
3. Two books by Barnett Rubin are very useful on the importance of subsidies from abroad: *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, 1995), and *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan* (New Haven, 1995).
4. The best books on Afghan history from 1838 to 1929 are J Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan* (London, 1878), still one of the masterpieces of the historian's art; C Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys* (London, 1842); J Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-1842* (Cambridge, 1967); S Mohammed, *The Life of the Amir Abdul Rahman* (London, 1900); M H Kakar, *Afghanistan: A Study in Internal Political Developments, 1880-1896* (Kabul, 1971); L Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929* (Ithica, 1973); V Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization 1880-1946* (Stanford, 1969); D Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, 1996).
5. For the ways in which the regime systematically thwarted economic development see M Fry, *The Afghan Economy* (Leiden, 1974).
6. For Afghan Islamists the best source is O Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, 1986).
7. M Barry, *Afghanistan* (Paris, 1974).
8. The best account of Afghan Communism in these years is R Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan* (London, 1988). Anwar, a Pakistani, was a socialist political prisoner in Kabul in the 1980s. Many dissident Communists talked openly with him because lies no longer mattered. A good account from the point of view of the US government is H Bradshaw, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham, NC, 1985).
9. That is to say, most people in Central Asia belonged to ethnic groups that had once been overwhelmingly Muslim. In 1980 they were, by and large, not active worshippers, and many were not believers, but the possibility of organising politically under the banner of Islam remained.
10. There is a good account of this in the very useful book by M H Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley, 1995). Kakar is sometimes a Pashtun chauvinist, but an honest and very well informed man.
11. The best sources on the Mujahadeen inside Afghanistan are A Bonner, *Among the Afghans* (Durham, NC, 1987), and O Roy, op cit.
12. This is taken from my own field research. For an excellent account of the system of *qaums* in another part of Afghanistan before the war, see R Canfield, 'Faction and Conversion in a Plural Society: Religious Alignments in the Hindu Kush', University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology Papers 50 (1973).

13. I know of two exceptions to this localism. In the long valley of Panjshir, north of Kabul, the Islamist leader Ahmed Shah Massoud was able to unite the whole region into one *qaum*, and sometimes able to lead his fighters out of the valley towards the road from Kabul to the north. And in the mountains in the centre of the country, it seems that the Hazara people were for a time able to combine into one force. But in general there were only small local groups.
14. On the CIA and drugs in many places, see A McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drugs Trade* (New York, 1991). For an interesting discussion of why drugs and covert war so often go together, see R Naylor, *Hot Money and the Politics of Debt* (London, 1987).
15. For Bin Laden see particularly Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London, 2001). J Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (London, 2000) is also full of information, though his pro-imperialist and anti-Muslim sentiments can be irritating.
16. The best book on Afghanistan after 1988 is A Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London, 2000). Also very useful is M Griffin, op cit, and the articles by Amin Saikal, Ahmed Rashid, Richard Mackenzie, Anthony Hyman, Anwar-ul-Haq, and especially Anthony Davis, 'How the Taliban Became a Military Force', all in W Maley (ed), *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London, 1998).
17. There is some question about Babrak Karmal, who always said he was a Pashtun, but was regarded by many Pashtuns as belonging to another, Farsi-speaking, group.
18. The best book on the relationship between gender inequality and the more general system of inequality in Afghanistan is N Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society* (Cambridge, 1991). Also very useful for thinking about gender in the Middle East more generally are, by the same author under a different surname, N Lindisfarne, 'Variant Masculinities, Variant Virginites: Rethinking "Honour and Shame"', in A Cornwall and N Lindisfarne (eds), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (London, 1994); and N Lindisfarne, *Thank God We're Secular* (Ankara, 2001). See also the very readable V Doubleday, *Three Women of Herat* (London, 1988).

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