

# Conflict in Afghanistan: Ethnicity, Religion and Neighbours

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## Abstract

This article surveys the current situation in Afghanistan against the developments of the last decade after the winding down of the Cold War. The Afghan people have paid a heavy price for their successful resistance to the strategic aims in the region of the former Soviet Union. The Afghan civil war has not merely grown more complex in time, but has also accumulated all the elements of a deadly mix—ethnicity, sectarianism, religious extremism and external intervention. Afghanistan has also lost all its vital institutions, the structure of the state and the historical consensus that the country once had. The rise and success of the Taliban which is dealt with in great detail here has added to the complexity of the Afghan civil war. While the regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan and some of the Central Asian states share some of the responsibility for the destruction of the Afghan state, the major powers particularly the western countries have not fulfilled their part of the responsibility to the people of Afghanistan in the wake of the end of the Cold War.

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## I Ethnicity and War

The agony of Afghanistan did not end with the retreat of the Soviet forces that coincided with the winding down of the Cold War in 1990. A new phase of conflict began among the Afghan groups, which has been no less destructive than the Soviet military intervention. The structure and dynamics of the new phase are different and present greater difficulties in resolving the conflict than ever before. Many of these dynamics have their roots in the political, ideological and ethnic polarisation that the Soviet war has caused. With each successive year, the Afghan civil war has grown more complex, entangled as it is in so many domestic and international webs of power politics. The war has

accumulated all the elements of a deadly mix—ethnicity, sectarianism, religious extremism and external intervention. The basic argument of this article is that Afghanistan has lost all vital institutions, the structure of the state and the historical consensus that it once had. The civil war symbolises the two opposite struggles in Afghanistan, one by the Pashtuns to re-establish their dominance, and the second by the Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek minorities to seek adequate representation in political power at the centre and autonomy of their respective areas. The rise of the Taliban, a Pashtun religious movement, has added to the complexity of the Afghan war. Their interpretation of Islam, imposition of a harsh Islamic rule, degradation of women and use of war as an instrument of national unification and political consolidation have served to widen the gulf among various Afghan groups and rendered illusive the quest for peace.

Afghanistan is ethnically a very diverse country that has been dominated by the Pashtun majority at the top level as all the kings came from this group. However, ethnicity was never a very strong factor in Afghan politics before the Saur revolution of 1978. A sort of political balance evolved among the various groups and all of them had allocated spaces within the hierarchical system. Since the system was also authoritarian both under the monarchy and Sardar Daoud's republic (1973-78), grievances, demands, and legitimate aspirations of the various minority ethnic groups remained under control. An undemocratic and controlled system did not provide the opportunity for political expression of ethnicity; it remained confined to identity.

The war in Afghanistan has vastly changed the traditional balance of power among the ethnic groups. Non-Pashtun minorities are more powerful today than they were 20 years back. Three factors have contributed to their empowerment. First was the Soviet policy of divide and rule. Most of the resistance to the Kabul-Soviet forces came from the Pashtun areas. Therefore, they remained the main targets of the Soviet policy of eviction, bombardment and destruction of infrastructure. They adopted a different approach in the non-Pashtun areas, particularly in the Uzbek region. The Soviets launched development projects and kept pouring in aid to reward the co-operation of Uzbeks. They accepted some degree of autonomy and trained them to fight against the Mujahideen if they intruded into their areas. Their militia was also used in different war related activities.

For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, save during periods of anarchy and rebellion, the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras exercised full administrative and political autonomy. The Uzbeks negotiated their autonomy implicit in their overall relationship with the Kabul regime. The Tajiks under Ahmad Shah Masud had liberated large parts of their territory. The Hazaras were left alone in the central region of the country. There is no evidence of the Soviets physically entering their areas or conducting aerial bombardment. There are two reasons for this. The Hazaras did not venture out of their strongholds to attack the Kabul-Soviet forces. Second, it is believed, that on their behalf, Iran negotiated a deal with the Soviets, which left them free on the condition that they would stay cool. With Iranian money and advice the Hazaras built their own local political institutions.

The second important factor is the territoriality of ethnic groups and their raising of separate militias. The militias primarily support the general political objectives of the populations they come from. Unfortunately, the separate command and control structures of the resistance, although good enough to raise the costs of the Soviet occupation, has proved to be too rigid to coalesce. In the post-communist phase, ethnic groups have further strengthened their military capabilities to keep their territories free from political and ethnic rivals. At the present stage of civil war, the ethnic factor has become more pronounced as it produces opposite demands and expectations about political power. The northern minorities have become vocal about their demands for greater autonomy, to the extent of changing the name of the country, Afghanistan, which they see as synonymous with the Pashtuns.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Taliban see in these demands, including autonomy, a threat to the very existence of their country. Two things still work in the interest of Afghanistan. First, the ethnic demands have not

gone to the extreme of secession. Second, the risk of establishing micro-states makes the regional states more cautious about redrawing Afghanistan's boundaries.

#### Population of Main Ethnic Groups, 1979

|                   |           |  |
|-------------------|-----------|--|
| Pashtun           | 7,000,000 | Concentrated in South and Southeast, but settled in most regions |
| Tajiks            | 3,500,000 | North, Northeast and Kabul region                                |
| Hazaras           | 1,500,000 | Centre (Hazarajat) and Kabul                                     |
| Uzbeks            | 1,300,000 | North  |
| Aimaq             | 800,000   | West   |
| Farsiwan, Heratis | 600,000   | West and South   |
| Turkmen           | 300,000   | North  |
| Brahui            | 100,000   | Southwest  |
| Baloch            | 100,000   | West and Northwest   |
| Nuristanis        | 100,000   | East   |

Source: Hyman, *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964-83*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p 11.

## II

### The Taliban and the Islamic State

The rise of the Taliban movement in 1994-95 surprised both the Afghan groups as well as observers of the Afghan war. Who are the Taliban? Where have they come from? How did they travel the political distance from obscure mud houses to the corridors of power in Kabul? What is their political agenda? What are the sources of their support? These are some of the questions that need to be answered in order to fully understand the character of the Islamic regime that the Taliban are attempting to build in Afghanistan and how it fuels conflict. The Taliban are essentially the product of the twenty years war. Those who organised the Taliban militia, and now command it at the military and political levels, come from the religious schools where they taught Islamic theology before joining the Mujahideen resistance. Generally, these Islamic scholars are known as *ulema* and have traditionally enjoyed tremendous respect among the devout Muslim Afghans. They not only issued a religious decree of *jihad* (holy war) against the Soviet forces, making it a religious obligation for the Afghans to fight the invading infidels, but they also practically participated in the war. There is an erroneous impression about their being a new force. In terms of their political and military organisation, they are new, but the top Taliban leaders are the veterans of the Mujahideen resistance. Once the Soviet forces left the country, and the communist regime in Kabul finally fell in April 1992, they demobilised and went back to the *madrassas* (Islamic religious schools). Traditionally, the Afghan *ulema* have left the business of politics to others and demanded of them the establishment of an Islamic order and enforcement of the *Sharia* (Islamic laws). They had expected the Mujahideen to rebuild the country, to create better conditions for security and to introduce Islamic laws and maintain a just order. Some of them still remained active in the fold of various Mujahideen parties, but generally, the more conservative of the *ulema* retreated to their religious sanctuaries devoting time and energies to raising a new group of Taliban or students of Islamic theology.

Most of the Taliban are just students and have yet to complete their religious training. The tragic war of Soviet intervention drove millions of Afghans to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. The heavy casualties on the part of the Afghans left hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans. It is unfortunate that the countries that formed the anti-Soviet coalition, including Pakistan, did not pay attention to the education of Afghan children, especially the orphans. Given the character of the war, military training and equipping of the Mujahideen and concern over their politics took precedence over education or social development of the refugee population. The growing *madrassa* network in Balochistan and the North West Frontier (NWF) provinces of Pakistan that was supported by the

Middle Eastern governments and private philanthropists attracted the orphans and children of poorer families. The *madrassa* was a much securer place for orphans than the crowded refugee camps. And more importantly, the religious institutions offered food, places to live, medical care and education. The enrolment of the refugee children was not confined to the above provinces; they filtered down to Punjab and Sindh as well. The state policies under Zia ul-Haq's military regime were also responsible for the expansion of religious institutions. They began to receive huge amounts of governmental assistance, and the volume of this assistance depended on the number of students. This gave an incentive to the *madrassas* to recruit more children.

The Taliban grew up in the religious atmosphere of the *madrassas* and went through the rigours of a hard and isolated life that had very few amenities. Their early childhood experiences, socialisation in the all male institutions devoid of any sensibilities of a family life has vastly shaped their mindset and behaviour patterns with the Afghan society. Rigidity, puritanism, glorification of martyrdom, *jihad* and masculinity are some of the traits that symbolise the political culture of the Taliban. In our view, the social and psychological dynamics of the *madrassas* have greatly shaped this culture and the mindset. The centuries old curriculum, which totally ignores scientific subjects and studies of the modern world, has failed to develop a well-rounded individual in the Taliban. Simplicity, from living to thinking, has reduced their analysis to a simple calculation of good and evil, and every thing is evil if it does not fit into their worldview. It is the strong faith in the righteousness of their ideas and conduct, which gives them a sense of mission to change the world in their image.

The *ulema* and the Taliban began to grow restive over the issues of corruption, both moral and material, among the Mujahideen parties, the worsening law and order situation, division of the country into ethnic fiefdoms and continuation of the civil war. Enforcement of the Islamic laws, close to the heart of the Taliban, depended on peace and reunification of the country that looked remote as long as the country remained under the control of the Mujahideen. They argued that other Afghan parties, like the Islamic National Front of the Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and those who had controlled the former communist regime or co-operated with that regime deserved neither mercy nor any place in the future political set up of the country. Their expectation was that the Mujahideen groups would work together toward three common objectives that had defined the war of resistance—establishing of an Islamic state, reunification of the country, and total elimination of communist militias and their collaborators. The Taliban became convinced that the Mujahideen groups could not be trusted anymore, and that they were no better than the former rulers of the country.

The Taliban launched their movement to oust the Mujahideen from the outskirts of Kanadhar in 1994. Local incidents of highhandedness, excessive taxation, moral decay and banditry provoked the Taliban to organise protests and attack against the local strongmen of the Mujahideen. They termed their rule unjust and their character as un-Islamic. Small local victories had snowball effects. The Taliban found that the local population had turned against the Mujahideen commanders and they wanted to throw them out as quickly as possible. It is pertinent to mention here that the Mujahideen groups at the centre had hardly any organisation or political control over the local commanders. Their links with the parties based in Peshawar, and now in Kabul considerably weakened after the external sources of economic and military assistance dried up in the early 1990s. That was the leverage of influence the Mujahideen leaders had over the local commanders. These local gendarmes who had gained legitimacy in the name of resistance, now controlled the population at gunpoint, deriving material benefits for the family or clan that they represented. There were virtually tens of thousands of local commanders fleecing people on one pretext or another. The trading community from Kanadhar had an interest in clearing up the check posts that were set up by the local commanders and they began financing the Taliban to do the job.<sup>ii</sup> Many observers ignore the fact that the Afghan resistance had degenerated into a civil war around Kabul over the issue of political power and into total anarchy in the countryside.

A number of things worked to the advantage of the Taliban as they went on taking over one area after another, quite often without much resistance from the defenders. First, the local population had reached breaking point over the corrupt practices of the Mujahideen commanders. The issues of personal security, honour, justice and economy incited many of them to rebel against the commanders. At the first sight of the new force of the Taliban, they switched sides and began joining the masses of the religious militia. The local tribes regarded them as liberators, raising their hopes of a better future. Second, the puritanism and simple life style of the Taliban was closer to the Islamic ethos of the tribal Pashtuns. They presented the opposite of the material ways of the Mujahideen commanders. Their personal character and the political slogans of order, security, justice and Islamic law were totally effective and attracted the support of the tribal population.

Finally, the Pashtun ethnic factor was very important in generating support for the Taliban. The political power at the centre had passed on to the Tajiks when Burhanuddin Rabbani took over the interim presidency in late 1992 under the Peshawar accord. He refused to implement the second part of the accord; that was to arrange elections for the *Majlis-i-Shura* (consultative assembly) and the new President. Instead, with the support of Russia, Iran and India, he began to strengthen his personal rule and institutionalise the power of the non-Pashtun minorities. He grew so arrogant in power that he refused to allow Gulbadin Hikmatyar, the Prime Minister designate under the accords, even to enter Kabul city. All attempts at persuasion not to deviate from the central elements of the accord failed, which resulted in renewed fighting between the forces of the *Jamiat-i-Islami* (Islamic party) and others opposed to it. His refusal to share power brought the war closer to the capital city for the first time, and has since then caused tremendous destruction to the city and its population which was spared during the Soviet-Mujahideen war for nearly eleven years.

The Pashtuns have historically ruled Afghanistan as founders of the country and as a dominant ethnic majority. They have vigorously defended this right. The Pashtun tribes with all the traditional rivalries between the Durranis from the south and the Ghilzais from the east faded in the face of a common threat from the Tajiks under their strongman, Commander Ahmad Shah Masud. There was so much infighting among the Mujahideen groups from the Pashtun areas and personal rivalries ran so deep that they failed to develop any consensus on how to regain Kabul, the symbol of Pashtun rule and authority, from the Tajiks. In fact, the common Pashtun fixed the responsibility for passing on power in Kabul to the Tajiks on the divisive character of the Mujahideen groups. In contrast, the march of the Taliban held a promise for the recovery of the capital from Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masud. The successive victories, assertive character and quick justice in medieval fashion impressed the ordinary Pashtuns and instilled confidence in them about the ability of the Taliban to lead the Pashtuns to victory against the northern minorities. It is no coincidence that throughout their victory march from Kanadhar to Kabul, the Taliban militia did not encounter any opposition force. Even the *Hizb-i-Islami* forces of Hikmatyar disappeared from the scene on the arrival of the Taliban.<sup>iii</sup> More than ideology, the political considerations of re-establishing Pashtun dominated political authority in Kabul forced even those Pashtuns who hated the Taliban for their extremism and intolerance to extend passive support. The guarded silence on the part of the nationalist elements among the Pashtuns both in Pakistan as well as from Afghanistan, now living in exile in Pakistan speaks volumes for the latent support they have given to the Taliban. They seem to be maintaining a distance from the Taliban, and may even stab them in the back at the opportune moment, but they are reluctant to open any new front against them as long as they face the common enemy in the north.

The political agenda of the Taliban is as divisive as their quest for a conservative Islamic order in Afghanistan. Territorial reunification of the country, a centralised political system, demilitarisation of the society and enforcement of Islamic law constitute the basic elements of the Taliban's political agenda. All Afghan groups both ethnic and political, want a re-unification of the country, but they disagree on how this should be achieved and on what terms. The Taliban fiercely oppose any demand for regional autonomy or federal arrangements. They want to revive the old unitary system, because

that is what Afghanistan has known for more than two centuries and this would be more compatible with the interests of the Pashtun majority than federalism. But Afghanistan has changed so much during the past twenty years in terms of the balance among the ethnic groups, that the ethnic minorities are not willing to accept the old system anymore, and would like to shape a new contract but within the confines of Afghanistan. The distrust between the Taliban and the northern alliance has widened with the bitterness of the civil war and issues of autonomy and centralisation will wait political settlement and reconciliation.

The demilitarisation policy of the Taliban may sound altruistic, but it is also aimed at eliminating all forms of opposition. They have achieved remarkable success in areas under their control, which is more than 80 per cent of the territory. By taking away most of the large and small weapons from the former local commanders and Mujahideen groups they provided a greater sense of security to the population.

Islamisation of the state, which is the central objective of the Taliban, has alienated all the Afghan moderates and minority groups, including educated women. The application of the Islamic code of life in the conservative interpretation of the Taliban appears to be too primitive, harsh and smacks more of a medieval tribal order than an enlightened modernist understanding of religion. Harsh Islamic punishments like flogging of men and women in public, execution of convicts in open spaces, amputation of limbs and revenge killings by the relatives of murdered persons have been widely condemned even by well respected Islamic scholars from the Middle Eastern countries. Women are not allowed to work, schools for girls are still closed, apparently for security reasons, all adult women have to wear a veil from head to toe, and they cannot come out of their homes or visit hospitals except with a male escort from the family.<sup>iv</sup> One wonders how much of this treatment is Islamic and how much of this is tribal in character. Most of the Afghan *ulema* and political groups that have supported the idea of the Islamic state feel troubled about how the Taliban are interpreting and enforcing Islamic law in the country. The Afghan women's rights groups based in Pakistan, Afghan intellectuals and moderate sections of the society, including the northern minorities find the Islamic state of the Taliban extremely violent, intolerant and primitive. How long this order will last depends on two factors. First, the response of the Pashtuns, who at the moment are supportive of the Taliban in their quest for unification of the country, may determine the future order. Underneath the veneer of stability in the Pashtun areas or generally in the Taliban controlled territory, there is some unease about the Taliban's style of governance. But who will replace them, and when, is a different question, and in view of uncertainties in the country, it is difficult to identify such forces or the timing. But there cannot be greater manifestation of political instability than the civil war, and in conditions like this nothing may be permanent.

### III Foreign Intervention

Afghanistan has become the playground of a new 'great game' among the regional powers. Iran, Pakistan and some of the Central Asian states have conflicting interests in the outcome of the civil war in the country. The root cause of interference of the regional powers is political polarisation among the Afghan groups and the civil war, which pushes them to seek external support to counterbalance their internal adversaries. Whether or not external interference is a cause of civil war is open to debate, and the question will evoke different answers. We wish to make two submissions. First, all civil wars have a tendency to become internationalised. Foreign private groups and states in the neighbourhood take advantage of the local difficulties of weaker and more vulnerable states and support political rivals, including secessionist groups.<sup>v</sup> Such support is aimed at achieving certain concrete political objectives. The situation in Afghanistan is more complex than before. Various groups in Afghanistan share ethnic and religious bonds with similar groups in the neighbouring states, which invites a natural interest in their well being. Besides, ethnic and religious factors, regional states have a clash of interests over

their political and security agendas. Second, there is the history and pattern of external intervention in Afghanistan, which started as a reaction to the Soviet military intervention. This intervention, notably from Pakistan was welcome by most of the Afghans fighting the war of resistance as critical to their struggle for national liberation. Others have joined the competition for influence after the Soviet military withdrawal. Let us examine what the specific interests of various states are, how they clash, and what their impact on the civil war in Afghanistan is.

### *Iran*

Although Iran was preoccupied with its war against Iraq in the larger part of the nineteen eighties, it never ignored Afghanistan. Its responses to the Soviet intervention were different from Pakistan's. Pakistan organised, sheltered and supported a large network of armed resistance groups. Tehran received refugees much like Pakistan, in millions, but kept them in camps separated from the local populations, and did not allow any Pakistan-based party to recruit guerrillas for resistance. Inside the country, it paid greater attention to the politics and military capabilities of the Shia groups in the central region of Hazarajat. The Iranian clergymen, advisers, military equipment and money travelled together in the dominant Shia areas. There is a strong sense of persecution among the Hazara Shias by the majority Sunni sect of Afghanistan, and the perception of this persecution is very strong among the Iranians. After the Islamic revolution, protection, welfare and empowerment of the Shias, who are a minority sect in almost every Muslim country, has been one of the central objectives of Iran's foreign policy.

Iran developed an understanding with the Soviets on the question of the role of the Hazara Shias in the war. The Soviets did not attack them in return for their passivity and abstention from the Mujahideen resistance. Iran had a long-term objective of preparing the Afghan Shias for a future political and military role in the post-Soviet Afghanistan. Therefore, it devoted much of its energies to their unity, training, equipment and organisational matters. Pakistan and Mujahideen groups regularly consulted Iran and the Shia factions over the issue of a negotiated settlement, a Soviet withdrawal, the Geneva Accords, and the formation of an interim government. The quantum of representation for the Shias in any future government always caused serious differences among the Mujahideen and the Shia factions, and to date remains unresolved. Iran has been less compromising than the Shia factions. They demand 25-30% representation in all branches and departments of the government along sectarian lines, which the Pashtuns and some others find unacceptable, given, the fact that the percentage of the Shia in the country as a whole is much smaller than that. The question of representation on sectarian lines, they fear, would further fuel communalism and religious violence.

Iran's strategic aim is to establish a land corridor that would link Iran with the Persian speaking populations of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Its immediate goal is to strengthen the non-Pashtun minorities by giving them material and political support. This policy fits well into its strategic aim. Most of these minorities speak Persian and have traditionally controlled the regions where Iran would like to carve out a sphere of influence. Contrary to the pledges of supporting the Peshawar Accords and helping to ensure their full implementation, Iran began supporting President Rabbani, who had no legitimacy to continue beyond the tenure set in the Accords. Iran also facilitated the re-entry of India into Afghanistan by extending diplomatic support and helping it establish contacts with the northern minorities.

By the end of 1994, Iran's policy objective began to diverge from Pakistan. Iran wanted Rabbani to continue although his arbitrarily extended term ended on 28 December 1994.<sup>vi</sup> This was despite the fact there had been several battles between Rabbani's forces and that of *Hizb-i-Wahdat* (United Party) around Kabul.<sup>vii</sup> Iran quickly moved to resolve the differences between the two parties in the face of the Taliban threat, which was not taken seriously in the beginning. But around this time,

after running down the defences of Hikmatyar in Charahsiab, they had moved dangerously closer to Kabul.

Since the ouster of the Rabbani government from Kabul in September 1996, Iran has increased its assistance to what is now known as the northern alliance, which includes, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Iran has supplied massive amounts of weapons and money to keep this alliance going. But the alliance received a major military set back in 1998 when their stronghold of Mazar-i-Sahrif fell to the Taliban. Early this year, they also ran down Bamayan province where the Shias had established their strong administrative and military base. After losing the main supply line from Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, Iran has turned to Central Asian states for supply routes to the few northern provinces that still remain under the control of Tajik warlord, Ahmad Shah Masud. Iran's position in Afghanistan is much weaker than it ever was. But Iran has important links with several Afghan groups and resources to finance the anti-Taliban forces, which it is not willing to accept. There is a great deal of bad blood between the Taliban and Iran for sectarian reasons. In recent years, Iran's relations with Pakistan have become strained over the situation in Afghanistan. Their failure to reach an understanding may continue to impede any progress towards a political settlement.

### *Central Asia*

The Central Asian states are concerned about the civil war in Afghanistan and its likely fall out on their own societies. They have different interests that they pursue with varying degrees of activism, but share a common desire for the end of the conflict and political stability in Afghanistan. The leaders in these states consider Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism of the Taliban a serious source of conflict in the country and a potential danger to its neighbours. The reason being that Islamic fundamentalism is linked to sectarian and religious terrorism and it is fast becoming a regional phenomena, as the Islamic groups have developed transnational connections. The Central Asian societies are rediscovering Islam as a way of life after a long, oppressive communist rule. There is a strong fear that the Islamic revival there may assume a fundamentalist form. It may be a different form, from the Afghan variety but the inspiration could well be the same.

Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian country that has been dealing directly and indirectly with the Taliban without extending any recognition to them. In March 1999, it hosted a meeting between the Taliban and the representatives of the northern alliance during which an agreement was reached to share power. But the next meeting that was scheduled for the month of April could not take place. Turkmenistan is interested in exporting natural gas from its vast resources to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan. Recently, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan have revived the gas pipeline project that suffered a set back in 1998, when the American company UNOCAL pulled out of the project.<sup>viii</sup> Turkmenistan shares this interest with other countries in the region and to support this end has pursued an active policy in Afghanistan to restore peace;<sup>ix</sup> because without the corridor of Afghanistan, the Central Asian dream of diversifying trade, lessening dependence on Russia and exploring new markets for energy resources would remain unfulfilled. Conflict in Afghanistan poses a barrier to all meaningful trade activities in the region.

In contrast to the relatively neutral policy of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have become actively involved in the Afghan conflict. They have two fundamental interests that drag them into the Afghan quagmire, ethnicity and security. Tajiks and Uzbeks form the second and third largest ethnic groups in the country. In recent years, the civil war in Afghanistan has taken an ethnic character, and all the non-Pashtun minorities are pitted against the more powerful and numerous Pashtuns. The Tajiks are the only group holding on to territory, contiguous with Tajikistan. They have established airbases there and get most of their military equipment from diverse sources through Tajikistan. Uzbekistan supports its co-ethnic groups across the border, mainly the Uzbek militia led by Rashid Dostum.<sup>x</sup> But none of the Central Asian states wants a redrawing of the state boundaries along ethnic lines because that would threaten their own territorial integrity. They are interested in the

question of ethnic rights but their prime motivation lies in securing the southern borders and promoting moderate Afghans.<sup>xi</sup> Russians have evolved a common set of policies with the Central Asian states where they maintain a sizeable military presence and political support. Rights of the minorities, a broad-based government in which all the Afghan groups have representation, a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement are some of the elements of their common policy. They also call for an end to outside intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, but this is something they are themselves guilty of, and other neighbouring states are no exception.

### *Pakistan*

Pakistan's role in the Afghan conflict is more complex than that of any other state in the region. It has been involved in the country for the past twenty years, which until the end of the Soviet intervention had the approval of the overwhelming majority of the Afghans. Its interests in Afghanistan remain the same but its policies have changed with each successive transition in Afghanistan. It is beyond the purview of this article to trace the development of Pakistan's Afghan policy in any great detail. Briefly, it is focused on seeking a secure, stable, friendly, and peaceful Afghanistan. These are the stated objectives, but which group or combination of groups would ensure this policy is open to debate, and all choices result in winning some friends and creating some enemies. For the past four years, Pakistan's policy has settled on extending support to the Taliban both for objective and pragmatic reasons. Liberal sections of the Pakistani population, and even some governmental circles, see in the Taliban phenomena a dangerous development for all the regional states, including Pakistan itself.<sup>xii</sup> Their interpretation of Islam is harsh, and violent and the group is extremely intolerant toward those who deviate from their understanding of what is true and right. There are similar groups in Pakistan who belong to the same religious institutions and aspire to play the same role in Pakistani politics.

Immediate interests in Afghanistan rather than distant domestic threats guide Pakistan's strategy. These interests are about the larger issues of power, the ethnic balance, regional influence and access to the Central Asian region. Pakistan has no ideological affinity with the Taliban, but shares with them an interest in the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and a peaceful neighbourhood. However, Pakistan insists that a broad-based government through negotiation would ensure peace. It has used its influence with the Taliban effectively in bringing them to a negotiating table several times, but its influence is limited. When it comes to telling them to moderate their policies of Islamisation or to maintain a respectable standard of human rights, they listen to no one. In many respects Pakistan's support both material and political is very critical to the victories of the Taliban. Most of the Afghan population depends on the life supporting supplies of grain, sugar, fuel, oil, textiles, and medicine from Pakistan. But more important is the military muscle of the Taliban in the building of which Pakistan has played a central role. At the same time, Pakistan is cognisant of the fact that peace may not return to the country until a broad-based government is established and all foreign intervention stops. But Pakistan does not want to be the first to stop intervention, and leave the arena to Iran and Russia. It has vigorously supported the proposal that an arms embargo be imposed against all Afghan groups, something which has little appeal in Tehran or in Central Asian capitals. As the civil war in Afghanistan has grown more complex with the entry of such a variety and large number of foreign actors, Pakistan will remain engaged until a solution to the problem is found that is satisfactory to all, including the Pashtun majority that has grown much too dependent on Pakistan's support.

#### IV

### Conclusion: Prospects for Peace

All those who are involved in negotiating peace among the Afghan factions have realised how difficult it is to achieve it. The situation in Afghanistan is too complex to lead to any simple or easy solution. The large number and diversity of Afghan groups, the interference of regional states, the apathy of the major powers, the resurgence of ethnic and religious forces are just a few elements that make Afghanistan's civil war one of the most resistant to resolution. During the past ten years, the groups involved in the power struggle in the country have not given up war as an instrument of their policy. This is probably true of all civil wars and Afghanistan cannot be an exception. But the Afghans have yet to count the millions of people who have been killed or died in conditions of civil war, assess the cost of damage to the infrastructure and realise the dangers that starkly stare into their faces. The responsibility to restore peace in the country lies primarily with the Afghan groups. An understanding on broader issues like the structure of the state, distribution of power, and form of government would be central to laying down the foundations of a stable government. It is tragic that all Afghan factions start with the demand for an adequate share of power and leave the central issues out of the debate. Prospects for peace will remain bleak until the Afghan parties in the conflict evolve a common framework for reordering the Afghan polity. Following that, the role of the external powers may weaken and the civil war may consequently lose much of its venom.

The regional states share some of the responsibility for the destruction of the Afghan state, which may not work in the interest of any of its neighbours. All states in the region are multi-ethnic, and if a secessionist subnationalism succeeds anywhere, it will engulf others in its wake. Differences between Pakistan and Iran are central to the current phase of the civil war. The rise of the Taliban who are doctrinally opposed to the Shia Islam, the official sect in Iran, has added to the complexity of international relations in the region. Sectarian terrorism in Pakistan and revenge killings between two sectarian groups which are apparently supported by Iran and its rival Middle Eastern countries has also something to do with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Some of the sectarian terrorists are known to have received training or shelter in areas that are controlled by the Taliban. For this reason Iran sees the Taliban with lot of scepticism and distrust. In our view an understanding between Iran and Pakistan would pave the way for at least meaningful dialogue among the Afghan groups.

The major powers, particularly the western countries have not fulfilled their part of the responsibility to Afghanistan and its peoples, in the wake of the end of the Cold War. The Afghan people paid a heavy price for defeating the Soviet strategic aims in the region, which contributed to its disintegration. But the west put on new lenses and began to see the Islamic motivations of the Afghans as destabilising. The accusations of giving refuge to international terrorists are as true as the abandonment of Afghanistan. A benign approach with some understanding of the Afghan phenomena and constructive engagement might have brought moderate forces in the country to the fore. After a long neglect, the United States and Russia have begun to give some support to the peace negotiations under the UN umbrella, but they need to show greater resolve than they have done so far. The six plus two formula—US, Russia, and six neighbouring states of Afghanistan—and the “points of common understanding” reached last year are a good beginning. For the last one year, the UN representatives have been more active than in previous years. They achieved remarkable success when the representatives of the Taliban and the northern alliance met in Ashkhabad in March 1999 and agreed to share power and iron out the difficulties in the way of permanent cease-fire.<sup>xiii</sup> But the next meeting that was to convene in April 1999 did not taken place. The basis of representation is a sticking point. While the northern minorities demand a share of power on ethnic grounds, the Taliban fiercely reject this view and seem agreeable to sharing power only according to the strength of the political groups. There is some flexibility in the attitude of the Taliban, from reunifying the country by force of arms, to begin negotiations with the opposition, as it is evident from the March meeting of Ashkhabad.<sup>xiv</sup> Many times before Afghanistan has been close to a settlement but never reached that goal.

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### Notes

- <sup>i</sup> S. Fida Yunas, "Afghanistan's Minority Nationalities," *Central Asia* No. 40, Summer 1997, P. 186.
- <sup>ii</sup> See an interview of Gen. Ret. Hamid Gul, *The Nation* (Islamabad), February 19, 1995.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Dawn* (Karachi), February 11, 1995.
- <sup>iv</sup> For detail, see Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- <sup>v</sup> See for instance, K.M. de Silva and R.J. May eds, *Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991).
- <sup>vi</sup> *Dawn*, February 26, 1995.
- <sup>vii</sup> "Kabul fighting," (editorial), *The News* (Rawalpindi), March 3, 1995.
- <sup>viii</sup> Mahdi Masud, "Central Asia's energy resources," *Dawn*, May 13, 1999.
- <sup>ix</sup> See Pakistan, Turkmenistan joint communiqué, *Dawn*, January 28, 1999.
- <sup>x</sup> Thomas Barfield, "The Afghan Morass," *Current History*, vol. 95, no. 597, January 1996, p. 41.
- <sup>xi</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro, "Afghanistan's Civil War," *Current History*, vol. 94, no. 588, January 1995, p. 40
- <sup>xii</sup> See "Afghanistan---here we come!" (editorial), *The Friday Times*, September 11-17, 1998.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Dawn*, March 15, 1999.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Dilip Hiro, "Peacemaking in Afghanistan has only just begun," *Dawn*, April 17, 1999.