

# **Afghanistan**

**Research Paper 97/41**

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This paper looks at the background to the continuing civil war in Afghanistan and the issues raised by the current ascendancy of the Taliban movement. The Taliban ("students") are committed to an interpretation of Islam which severely restricts the rights of women in the fields of education and employment and which has brought them into direct conflict with the international aid agencies. It also looks at the policies of neighbouring states and the implications of developments in Afghanistan for the whole region.

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## SUMMARY

Afghanistan is a country of complex history and ethnic composition which has often been a focus of international tension. A ten-year war of resistance against an unpopular Marxist regime which was propped up by Soviet military force ended with the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers in 1989, but divisions within the victorious *mujahideen* movement prevented its representatives from taking power in the capital Kabul until 1992. It proved impossible for the *mujahideen* to form a single united government and civil war has continued to the present day.

During 1994 and 1995 a new Islamic movement, the Taliban, emerged and rapidly took control of large areas of the country, apparently with substantial backing from Pakistan. In September 1996 the Taliban captured Kabul, but they are still facing fierce resistance from other factions based in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban have imposed a new order based on an extremely conservative interpretation of Islam, coupled with traditional Pushtun values. In particular, the Taliban attitude towards women has brought their regime into conflict not only with more liberal Afghans, but also with the international aid agencies. There is also international concern about the trade in heroin originating in Afghanistan and interest in the potential for the transshipment of oil and gas from Central Asia, should Afghanistan ever be sufficiently pacified to make the construction of pipelines viable.

Developments in Afghanistan are of significance to the whole of central and south-west Asia. They affect the stability of the newly independent states which were previously republics of the Soviet Union and are closely linked with the politics of Pakistan. Russia still has strategic interests in the region. The policy of the USA on Afghanistan is partly determined by its troubled relations with Iran. Britain and the other member states of the European Union are less directly affected, but are concerned about the narcotics issue and the humanitarian implications of continuing conflict in Afghanistan.

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## I Geography, history, culture

Afghanistan is divided geographically by the high mountain range of the Hindu Kush. To the north-west of the Hindu Kush lies the large segment of Asia now often referred to as Central Asia and formerly as "Turkestan". Much of that region is desert, but the oases and valleys have supported a civilisation which has been mainly Islamic for about a thousand years. The whole region formed the eastern extension of the medieval Persian Empire and Persian influence remained strong, albeit overlaid with the Turkic dimension introduced by Chinghiz Khan and the Mongols from the thirteenth century. The Afghan border now runs along the Amu Darya (Oxus) river which is easily crossed and leaves northern Afghanistan open to influence from developments elsewhere in Central Asia. The two largest ethnic groups of northern Afghanistan, the Uzbeks and Tajiks, are culturally and linguistically related to the largest population groups of neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan respectively. The language of the Uzbeks is Turkic and that of the Tajiks is a variation of Farsi (ie Persian).

Afghanistan to the south and east of the Hindu Kush straddles an historic migration and invasion route between Central and South Asia. The mountains form a distinct physical barrier and the small number of passes have generally been easier to defend militarily than to capture, but the main languages and religion (Islam) originally came from the west and the whole of Afghanistan has been influenced by Persian culture to some extent. The Pushtun (Pathan) people, who are the predominant ethnic group south of the Hindu Kush, speak a language, Pashto, which belongs to the Eastern Iranian group, but has strong Indian influences. While the Pushtun account for about half of the population of Afghanistan (ie around 7.5m), they represent about 10% of the population of Pakistan (ie around 13m). There is a strong sense of common Pushtun identity, which has recently made it possible for 3m Afghans to be received as refugees in Pakistan without overt hostility, but there are also cultural differences within the Pushtun community: the Afghans use more Persian loan words and tend to be herders of livestock; the Pakistanis use more Urdu and English words and are more likely to be settled agriculturalists.

Afghan society has been shaped by the austere economic circumstances. Only 6% of land is cultivated and efforts to extend this area by irrigation have been mostly unsuccessful. The economy has traditionally been based on the herding of sheep and goats by nomads and semi-nomads. Most people spent their lives in scattered villages among their own kinsfolk; women, although fully active in the village economy as well as child-rearing, moved outside their villages only with male escorts. Some villages were egalitarian as between male heads of household; others depended on a powerful landlord or *khan*. Villages were linked into larger tribal entities by wider ties of kinship and language, but these tribes have not generally developed traditions of centralised leadership.

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Until this century "Pushtun" and "Afghan" were virtually synonymous because the Afghan state was almost exclusively a Pushtun creation. Apart from small Sikh and Hindu communities, the overwhelming majority of the current population of Afghanistan are Muslims, and of these 90% are Sunni Muslims, the remainder being Shia and Ismailis. Islam has been a major unifying force against external interference (eg the Soviet occupation), but has tended to divide Afghanistan internally and there has been a persistent tendency for regional communities to rebel against central rulers perceived as lacking in piety. The weakness of central taxation and government machinery, partly a reflection of the terrain, has tended to leave political power in the hands of regional "warlords".

Afghanistan was united from 1747 under Pushtun rulers who gradually extended Pushtun settlement and influence to the north. In the nineteenth century Afghanistan became the focus of the strategic competition between the British and Russian Empires which has been described as "the Great Game". The eastern borders of Afghanistan were eventually drawn in such a way as to create a buffer between the two empires. For most of the period from 1842 to 1919 the Afghan government in Kabul was strongly influenced (and subsidized) by British India. Britain and British India recognised Afghan independence by a Treaty of Peace initialled in 1919 and signed in 1921.

In the inter-war period Afghanistan was regarded as a buffer zone between the potentially expansionist Bolshevik Russia and British India, but its strategic value diminished and it became something of an international backwater once Stalin had decided to concentrate on "socialism in one country".

The independence granted to Pakistan in 1947 led successive Afghan governments to cast doubt on the status of the border which divides the Pushtun people and push for unification with the predominantly Pushtun-inhabited areas of Pakistan. This became known as the Pushtunistan issue, which gained diplomatic support from both India and the Soviet Union. Britain, as the former colonial power, reiterated in 1950 and 1956 that it continued to recognise the international boundary which had been first delineated in 1893.<sup>1</sup> The issue continued to cause tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan until a rapprochement in the mid-1970s.

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<sup>1</sup> G Biger, *The Encyclopedia of International Boundaries*, 1995, 16.

## II Recent History

Marxist parties became increasingly influential during the 1960s as Afghanistan became more dependent on Soviet aid; in particular two rival Marxist-Leninist factions known as Khalq ("the people") and Parcham ("the banner"), both influenced by Soviet agents, gained a firm foothold among Afghan students and intellectuals. Thereafter, for a whole generation, the internal struggle took on the shape of a conflict between the more traditional view of Islamic-Afghan society and a Marxist-modernising view. Pro-Soviet army officers began to dominate the political scene and were instrumental in coups d'états in 1973 and 1978.

The first of these led to the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic led by Mohammad Daoud, a former prime minister and cousin of the deposed King Zahir Shah. The second overthrew Daoud and brought the leaders of Khalq to power. The latter initiated a reign of terror and factional infighting. Following the murder of the first Khalq leader, Nur Mohammad Taraki, his successor, Hafizulla Amin, accepted Soviet offers of military assistance against the Islamic resistance, but was himself murdered when the full-scale Soviet intervention began on 27 December 1979.<sup>2</sup> The Russians imposed Babrak Karmal, a leader of the rival Parcham faction, in his place.

The student leaders of the Muslim Youth Movement in the 1970s, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani, went into exile when the pro-Soviet factions took power and became leaders of the *mujahideen* resistance movement.<sup>3</sup> The first wave of Soviet troops consisted largely of reservists from the southern Soviet republics with interpreters from Tajikistan and proved singularly unenthusiastic or ineffective in suppressing Afghan nationalist resistance. By the time that better trained and more politically reliable ethnic Russian troops had been installed, the resistance was already well established and the Russians faced a long war of attrition in hostile territory. The intervention turned into a partial military occupation by 120,000 Soviet soldiers which lasted almost a decade. The combined military forces of the Soviet Union and the Karmal regime were able to hold most major cities and highways and to drive a large proportion of the civilian population into exile by aerial bombardment, but were never able to control most of the territory, particularly in the mountainous regions. Between 1979 and 1988 the Soviet forces lost more than 13,000 men killed and 1,000 aeroplanes destroyed.

During 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev decided that the Soviet strategy was failing and began to prepare a retreat. In 1988, under the Geneva Accords, the Soviet Union agreed to a staged withdrawal of its forces, the last of which were to leave Afghanistan in February 1989. The

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<sup>2</sup> The motives for this on the Soviet side are discussed in Section IX A.

<sup>3</sup> S B Majrooh, "Afghan intellectuals in exile", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 1990, 79.

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Accords were signed by the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and guaranteed by the Soviet Union and USA. The Afghan resistance movement was not formally a party to the agreement.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, the pro-Soviet regime of Najibullah (who had replaced Babrak Karmal in May 1986) survived for a while in Kabul on the strength of the Soviet armed and trained Afghan army and secret police force (*Khad*) and by trying to convince Afghans, other than its core supporters, that it had become pro-Islamic and democratic. The regime finally collapsed in 1992 under the combined attack of a loose coalition of Islamic and regional forces which would probably have succeeded earlier, but for the divisions and rivalries within its own ranks.

At Peshawar in April 1992 the Islamic resistance created a Supreme Coordination Council of the Islamic Revolution in Afghanistan and agreed that the presidency would rotate between mujahideen leaders, beginning with Burhanuddin Rabbani. However, the arrangement was soon challenged by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's movement which laid siege to Kabul from August 1992. In a further attempt at agreed power-sharing, the Islamabad Accord of March 1993 confirmed Rabbani as president for a further period, but allocated the post of prime minister to Hekmatyar. This also failed and, despite the formal swearing in of Hekmatyar as prime minister in May 1993, the position remained that Kabul was controlled by the forces of Ahmed Shah Masood, who supported President Rabbani, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was based outside the city, frequently bombarding it. Indeed, before long the Rabbani-Masood ruling faction found itself under armed attack from almost all of the other factions.

External mediators, notably the United Nations and the Islamic Conference Organisation, made further attempts to negotiate a federal power-sharing solution, but these foundered as a new polarisation emerged between the warring groups in 1994-5. As the Taliban (see below) replaced Hekmatyar's group as the leading Pushtun faction, others, such as General Dostum's Uzbek army, switched their allegiance back to the Rabbani coalition. Despite this rallying of forces behind the Kabul coalition, the Taliban advanced rapidly during 1996 and captured Kabul on 27 September 1996. On capturing Kabul the Taliban executed and mutilated Najibullah who had been living there under UN protection since his overthrow. The leaders of the Rabbani administration were forced to flee the city.

At the height of the civil war and Soviet occupation the number of refugees in neighbouring countries reached approximately 5m out of an estimated population of 15m. After 1993 the refugees began to drift back. By February 1996 the number of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan had fallen to 864,000 while 1,420,000 remained in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Repatriation had slowed during 1995 owing to the resumption of fighting, but broadly speaking the rise of the Taliban

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1996, A/51/12, 34 and Addendum, 30-1



has coincided with the large-scale return of Pushtun refugees from Pakistan and the two phenomena have clearly been connected.

The Taliban now control around four fifths of Afghanistan, including Kabul. Fighting has recently been taking place to the north of Kabul, at the entrance to the Panjsher valley, near the approaches to the Salang tunnel and in the area to the north of Herat. In the light of their recent military successes, the Taliban are pressing for international recognition as the legitimate government of the whole country. To date this has not been granted, even by Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on 22 October 1996 which calls upon all of the parties to the conflict to engage in political dialogue and achieve "a fully representative and broad-based transitional government of national unity".<sup>6</sup> The resolution avoids conferring any privileged status on the Taliban by virtue of the fact that they have captured Kabul. For the time being, and despite protests from the Taliban administration, the representative of the previous Rabbani coalition government is still accredited to UN bodies. The Organisation of Islamic States has decided not to accredit any Afghan representation for the time being.

The current UN Special Envoy, charged with trying to mediate on behalf of the Secretary General, is Dr Norbert Holl. He visited the leaders of the main contending factions at their respective bases during the first half of March 1997 in an attempt to arrange exchanges of prisoners and explore the potential for new peace negotiations<sup>7</sup>.

It is occasionally suggested that the Afghan conflict might be resolved by the restoration of King Zahir Shah, now 82 years old and resident in Rome. Taliban spokesmen have occasionally said that they would not be opposed to this, but it seems improbable that they would welcome him as anything other than a figurehead and this in itself would be unlikely to make a Taliban regime more acceptable to its opponents.

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<sup>5</sup> Pakistan has, however, appointed a liaison mission to work with the Taliban.

<sup>6</sup> S/RES/1076.

<sup>7</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, FE/2863 A/3 and FE/2866/A/2.

### **III The Taliban**

The Taliban ("students") movement emerged suddenly in 1994 as a major player in the Afghan civil war and clearly derived logistical support from Pakistan, where many Taliban activists had been in exile. The Rabbani coalition government at first accused the former Pakistani internal affairs minister Nasirullah Babar of being the real leader of the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Taliban founder and leader, Mohammed Omar Akhund,<sup>9</sup> had previously been a minor figure in the Afghan mujahideen movement, but seems to have reacted against corruption and incompetence in the mujahideen leadership and returned to religious studies in Pakistan following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. By April 1996 his movement had gained so much prestige among the Pushtuns that he was elected spiritual leader of Afghan Muslims at Kandahar.

Subsequent events seem to confirm that the Taliban have considerable indigenous support within Afghanistan, principally among the Pushtuns. In fact, the Taliban seems to have largely absorbed and taken over the support previously enjoyed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hizb i Islami which was regarded as being closely in touch with hard-line Sunni Muslim groups abroad. According to some accounts the Taliban filled a political vacuum because Hekmatyar had lost support and the Pushtun south had descended into lawlessness.<sup>10</sup> However, it may have taken an external stimulus and military support to turn the Taliban into a successful military organisation: there have been persistent rumours of links with the Pakistani military intelligence service and funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The Taliban ethnic base is overwhelmingly Pushtun (Pathan) and its main stronghold is Kandahar, although it claims to reach out to all Afghans. Its religious stance is conservative and reflects a school of Sunni Islam associated with the seminary of Deoband in India which has long been influential on Afghan Muslims. The Deoband connection also gives the Taliban a clear cultural and religious link with the more conservative Islamic parties and movements in Pakistan. By contrast, the post-1992 Rabbani government in Kabul was associated with the Cairo school of revolutionary Islam which sees religion as a state ideology compatible with modernisation. Neither school is closely linked with the Shia fundamentalism of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers in Iran.

The rise of the Taliban and of Pakistani influences can also be seen as one of the consequences of the return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Forced migration in order to

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<sup>8</sup> See the section on Pakistan below.

<sup>9</sup> Or Akhunzada. He was born in 1963 and became a member of the Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami [Islamic Revolution Movement] led by Mohammed Nabi Mohammedi while in exile in Pakistan. This was a conservative Islamic group, but relatively moderate compared to some of the others - see Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 1987, 242.

<sup>10</sup> A Davis, "Afghanistan's Taliban", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1995, 315.

remain true to Islamic values and practices carries a particular significance in Islamic tradition. Known as *Hijrah*, it is regarded as a profoundly religious experience, even the supreme religious imperative.<sup>11</sup> Around half of the refugees were under the age of 18 and in their Pakistani exile a whole generation of youths were radicalised by attending *medreseh* (Koranic schools).

The growing impact of radical currents in world Islam on the *mujahideen* was noticed as early as the mid 1980s, ie long before the appearance of the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> There was little intellectual resistance to this: the alternative Persian-Islamic tradition of scholarship based on literary and philosophical studies had almost completely disappeared from Afghan society and secularism had been discredited by association with the Soviet occupation. According to S B Majrooh:

only those intellectuals who were members of or who had strong links with the Islamic resistance movements, especially with the revolutionary Islamic trend, stayed and became active in the *jihad*... But liberal and Western-trained or Western-orientated intellectuals faced serious problems in staying in Pakistan and integrating themselves into the resistance.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand the Taliban movement seems to include some relatively recent recruits to observance of Islam. There have been rumours that some key leaders known to their followers by pseudonyms are actually former supporters of the Marxist Khalq or people who once worked for the Kabul secret police during the Soviet occupation.<sup>14</sup> The transition from one authoritarian doctrine to another is not especially surprising, particularly since there is a common thread in the rejection of western influences and values.

The Taliban represent an attempt to unify and pacify Afghanistan after years of civil war. They also represent a reaction against the secularisation of Afghanistan and the disruption of what they regard as authentic Afghan Islamic society by foreign ideologies, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that their core of support comes from the mainly Pushtun south. Indeed, the head of the Taliban *shura* (council), Mullah Omar, has been based in the southern city of Kandahar since the autumn of 1994 and has so far declined to move to Kabul. There is no doubt that the Taliban aspire to create a genuine national government for almost the first time, as witnessed by their policy of not appointing regional governors drawn from the immediate locality. However, it remains to be seen whether or not they can succeed in

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<sup>11</sup> Z I Ansari, "Hijrah in the Islamic tradition", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 1990, 4. *Hijrah* is also commonly rendered in English as *hegira*.

<sup>12</sup> A Janata, "Afghanistan: the Ethnic Dimension", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> S B Majrooh, "Afghan intellectuals in exile", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 1990, 80-1.

<sup>14</sup> See Stephane Allix, "De la résistance à la prise de Kaboul, l'histoire secrète des talibans", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997, where several key Taliban figures are identified in this way.

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consolidating their rule over the whole of Afghanistan and whether they can maintain a grip on central government indefinitely in the face of regional resistance.

For the moment the Taliban are committed to introducing Islamic society in a strict form and criticize even the fundamentalists of Iran for being too lax. This implies a wide range of "reforms", including the introduction of punishments such as stoning and mutilation, insistence on the wearing of beards, a ban on the visual media, including television, for reproducing the human image contrary to Islamic tradition, and attempts to suppress recorded music as a distraction from study of the Koran. However, the most fundamental and controversial issue concerns the social position of women. Taliban spokesmen have acknowledged that this is the principal obstacle to their acceptance by the rest of the world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Statement by acting deputy foreign minister Sher Mohammad Abas Stanakzai reported by *Agence France Presse* on 22 December 1996.

## IV The Taliban and women

As in Iran, the role of women in Afghan society has been subject to a struggle between traditionalists and modernisers in the twentieth century. The wearing of the veil has often been the symbolic battle ground. An early attempt to defy tradition and outlaw the veil or *chador* was one of the causes of the overthrow of King Amanullah in 1929. The King had attempted to introduce comprehensive social reforms, including compulsory education for boys and girls and the abolition of slavery and polygamy. He was forced to abdicate following a widespread uprising against his supposedly anti-Islamic reforms.<sup>16</sup> Apart from a brief renewed attempt at liberalisation in 1949-51, the position of women in Afghanistan remained essentially unchanged until 1959 when prime minister Mohammad Daoud announced the support of the government for the voluntary abandonment of the *chador* and admitted women to the public service. Once again this was part of a more general attempt at economic and social modernisation.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s Afghanistan fell increasingly under the secularising influence of the Soviet Union and the increasing number of educated women in the cities made a return to tradition seem improbable. During the Soviet occupation after 1979 the Marxist Afghan government allowed women to dress as they wished and the general absence of men from civil occupations led to large numbers of women entering the professions, especially in Kabul, by far Afghanistan's most modernised city. However, the more traditional attitudes towards women persisted among the 80% of male Afghans who lived in the countryside and also among the refugees in Pakistan. According to Nancy Hatch Dupree, in the refugee camps even educated urban Afghan women:

are kept in unaccustomed purdah and dressed in flowing traditional clothing designed to camouflage all vestiges of their femininity. In public they are shrouded under veils. Innuendos and outright threats from overzealous traditionalists have prevented all but the most courageous - even with the support of equally courageous men - from working even in all-female workplaces.<sup>18</sup>

The Taliban, who have emerged from the refugee camps and from rural Afghanistan, therefore reflect a traditionalist backlash which has been growing in strength for almost 20 years and which has been reinforced by the perceived need to affirm the traditional and Islamic identity of Afghanistan against the former "atheistic" regime based in Kabul and its Soviet backer.

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<sup>16</sup> S Q Reshtia, "Social reforms in Afghanistan in relation to neighbouring countries: interference and peace", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 1990, 52.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 55, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan", in E Anderson and N H Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, 1990, 128.

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The Koran does not always lend itself to clear interpretation, especially in translation. According to one English version it calls on women to "cast down their eyes, and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward and let them cast their veils over their bosom".<sup>19</sup> This could be interpreted to indicate the wearing of a shawl and the assumption of a general air of modesty, or, in the extreme case, the complete covering of the female body in plain, unadorned robes. The Taliban are currently insisting on an extreme interpretation. In their strongholds of Kandahar and the south they have already imposed the wearing of the traditional *burqa* which conceals the whole body, including a mesh covering the eyes.

The Taliban have also imposed severe restrictions on women being allowed to work. In theory some medical work, such as nursing in female wards and orphanages, is allowed, but otherwise a comprehensive ban is maintained and policed in the areas controlled by the Taliban. The religious justification for this appears flimsy and seems to rely on a general belief in the iniquity of women coming into social or professional contact with men other than their husbands. This probably owes as much to the traditional Pushtun code of conduct and honour (the *Pushtunwali*) as to an interpretation of Islam. The insistence is on full segregation between the sexes in the work-place, and since, in most cases, this is quite impractical, the result is a prohibition on female employment.

The Taliban have also excluded women and girls from education, but this is said to be a temporary measure pending the introduction of suitably segregated facilities. There are differing reports about the kind of female education which the Taliban envisage for the future. Some spokesmen have said that they could envisage women studying engineering, provided that segregation is maintained, but practice in the areas of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban seems to limit female education to study of the Koran up to the age of 8 or 9 only.

It is also held in strict forms of Islamic *sharia* law that women have a lower legal status than men so that, for example, the testimony of a woman is given less weight than that of a man. Since Afghanistan currently lacks a settled legal and constitutional order, it remains to be seen whether these *sharia* positions will be formally entrenched.

There have been some reports that the Taliban have moderated their attitude towards women since they first captured Kabul, possibly under pressure from Pakistan. For example, female foreign journalists have been shown more tolerance.<sup>20</sup> However, a British journalist in Kandahar in early 1997 reported that there has been no sign of relaxation after two years of

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in J Simpson and T Shubart, *Lifting the Veil: Life in Revolutionary Iran*, 1995, 116.

<sup>20</sup> *The Independent*, 24 October 1996.

Taliban rule - and that Afghan women are still excluded from education and most forms of employment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J Steele, "Time fails to temper Taliban zeal", *The Guardian*, 6 January 1997.

## V The dilemma of the UN and humanitarian agencies

As the Afghan civil war has continued through the 1990s the fighting and the lack of central government infrastructure have left the civilian population, especially in the city of Kabul, heavily dependent on humanitarian aid from international agencies. During the last two winters in particular, Kabul has lacked fuel, medicines, electricity, running water and food.<sup>22</sup> The international relief agencies have endeavoured to maintain their operations regardless of the political situation, but have encountered severe difficulties in dealing with the Taliban because of the attitude of the latter towards women.

In practice the issue has severely disrupted relief efforts. It is normal for international aid agencies to rely to a considerable extent on locally-recruited staff and to apply no discrimination between men and women. In Taliban-controlled areas the international bodies such as the UNHCR and UNICEF have been forced to suspend operations when their locally-recruited female staff were prevented from working, and in some cases harassed or arrested.

In the resolution of 22 October 1996 the UN Security Council expressed "deep concern" about discrimination against women in Afghanistan and, in the section of the resolution calling for action, "denounced" this discrimination, noting the possible repercussions on international relief and reconstruction programmes in Afghanistan.

The UNHCR resumed operations on 11 December 1996, in order to help refugees through the coldest part of the winter and following the release of its arrested staff, but it is having to manage without female Afghan staff. UNICEF has refused to fund projects in areas where there is not full equal provision for education for both sexes.

In February 1997 two French male aid workers were arrested in Kabul for allegedly attending a party to which local female aid workers were invited and this led to several agencies once again suspending their operations.<sup>23</sup>

In the January 1997 issue of *The World Today* Michael Keating argues that the aid agencies on the ground are in a very weak position to argue with the Taliban about human rights. He concludes:

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<sup>22</sup> *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, FCO Background Brief, October 1996, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *The Economist*, 8 March 1997. They were still held in prison as of mid-March 1997.



The reality is that, in the long term, conditionality might be more productively directed by Western politicians - who ultimately vote the money - at the aid agencies themselves, both UN and NGOs.

Those agencies which put into practice human rights and gender equity principles should be supported, and those which do not, admonished, even penalised. Perversely, the Taliban may have been of service; their success is likely to strengthen agencies' resolve and practice in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Keating, "Women's rights and wrongs", *The World Today*, January 1997, 12.

## VI The opposition to the Taliban

As of March 1997 the Taliban control around four fifths of Afghanistan, including Kabul and have already enjoyed some success in pushing northwards. The remaining territory is controlled by a loose alliance of the forces which were supporting the Rabbani coalition when Kabul fell and which were mainly, though not exclusively, based in northern strongholds. The anti-Taliban forces have formed the "Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan".

The two largest forces belong to the Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masood. General Dostum has his headquarters at Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and has repeatedly changed sides in the civil war, having at one time been a mainstay of the communists and Najibullah. It is believed that his army was originally trained and armed by Russia. After the break up of the Soviet Union Dostum was sponsored by the independent government of President Karimov in Uzbekistan. More recently, in 1993, Dostum made an unlikely tactical alliance with the remaining Mujahideen forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and followed this in 1994 with a similar, and equally unstable alliance with the Taliban. With the rise of the Taliban, first Hekmatyar and then Dostum rallied to the support of President Rabbani during the spring and summer of 1996.

Masood's forces have pulled back to their traditional bases in the Panjshir valley and side-valleys and are now trying to block further Taliban advances. Rabbani and Masood have their HQ at Taloqan near the Tajikistan border.

A third opposition element is provided by Shia groups of central and northern Afghanistan. It is currently unclear whether Hizb-i-Wahdat [Shia] fighters retain much independent military capability but they are receiving assistance from Iran. Their leader is now Karim Khalili.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has recently become resident in Tehran<sup>25</sup> and some of his commanders have defected to the Taliban but others have rallied to the "Supreme Council". Hekmatyar's forces, the Hizb-i-Islami, had been attacking Kabul with rockets for four years prior to their change of allegiance in June 1996. While this added some military strength to the beleaguered forces of the Rabbani-Masood coalition government, it also created much confusion. According to Anthony Davis, "Masood's troops were weary and in many cases confused and demoralised by the June alliance with Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami, who for four years had been an implacable enemy."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Agence France Press International*, 5 March 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Davis, "Anguish continues in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1996, 551.

The anti-Taliban alliance therefore has little ideological or political coherence. The Rabbani-Masood alliance was associated with a relatively pragmatic, statist, developmental school of Sunni Islamic thought with its roots in Egypt. In ethnic terms it is mainly Tajik - ie Sunni Muslim, but Farsi-speaking, and, for this reason alone, unlikely ever to command the allegiance of the Pushtun (or Pathan) who are the largest single ethnic group in Afghanistan. Dostum's organisation is known as the National Islamic Movement, but he has never been closely associated with Islam and can probably best be described as a pragmatic ethnic leader. Hekmatyar represents (or once represented) a puritanical Islamic school.

As long as it retained control of Kabul the coalition enjoyed some international recognition and some practical support (with a variety of motives) from India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia.<sup>27</sup> Some of these states, though probably not Saudi Arabia, may continue to support the coalition opposing the Taliban.

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<sup>27</sup> Very few foreign diplomats remained in Kabul by the autumn of 1996, but the list of countries which had kept missions open is indicative: Iran, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.

## VII Pipelines and drugs

Afghanistan occupies a key position in relation to the global trade in two commodities: hydro-carbons and narcotics. As other aspects of the "great game" have faded, these two factors are rarely absent from consideration when the fate of Afghanistan is discussed.

Afghanistan has no significant reserves of oil or gas itself, but lies astride one of the shorter and potentially more attractive routes between the new oil and gas fields of land-locked Central Asia and the open sea. Longer pipelines through Russia could bring oil and gas closer to Europe via the Black Sea, but would pass through the troubled North Caucasus. More direct routes through Azerbaijan and Georgia, or via Armenia and Turkey would skirt several regions of recent conflict and be vulnerable to possible future upheavals. A route through Iran is unacceptable to the USA and therefore to US companies. For this reason there has been persistent speculation about a possible 1,400 km route from Turkmenistan, via Western Afghanistan, to the Indian Ocean at Gwadar in Pakistan.

In December 1996 it was reported that a US-Saudi consortium had completed technical preparations for such a pipeline to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan. It had apparently negotiated with both the Taliban, who control the southern part of the route through Afghanistan, and General Dostum who still controls the northern part. The consortium recognised that it would be impractical to begin construction until the Afghan civil war has concluded.<sup>28</sup>

According to the *Daily Telegraph*:

Oil industry insiders say the dream of securing a pipeline across Afghanistan is the main reason why Pakistan, a close political ally of America's, has been so supportive of the Taliban, and why America has quietly acquiesced in its conquest of Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

Afghanistan is one of the world's largest sources of illicit opium and heroin production. Production in Afghanistan of illicit opium, from which heroin is made, was estimated at 2,300 tonnes in 1994-5.<sup>30</sup> Some 70% of the heroin which reaches Europe is believed to originate in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> Poppies have long been cultivated for opium and ultimately for heroin over a large area of upland Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Production was at relatively low levels

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<sup>28</sup> *Inside Central Asia*, 16-29 December 1996, 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 1995, United Nations, 1996, pp55; Ikramul Haq, "Pak-Afghan drug trade in historical perspective", *Asian Survey*, Vol XXXVI, No 10, October 1996, 948-9.

<sup>31</sup> *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, FCO Background Brief, October 1996, 5.

in Afghanistan until the 1950s when the banning of poppy cultivation in neighbouring Iran (and subsequently in Turkey) created lucrative new markets for Afghan growers and smugglers. Until the 1973 coup Kabul was also a magnet for adventurous western drug users. Heroin and opium have generally been transported from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Europe via India, but in recent years there has been an increasing tendency for the trade routes to run to the north and west via Iran and the Central Asian republics. Heroin laboratories are now found increasingly in the north of Afghanistan near the borders with the former Soviet republics.<sup>32</sup>

During the years of Soviet occupation and civil war most production was concentrated in *mujahideen* controlled areas and was used as a source of revenue to fund the resistance. The main outlet was across the border into Pakistan and the smuggling was often organised from the refugee camps there. Opium was generally turned into heroin in laboratories in the Pakistani tribal areas close to the Afghan border where Pakistani law has rarely been enforced. In addition to opium and heroin, Afghanistan became a major source of black hashish.<sup>33</sup> There is some evidence that the ready availability of hashish and heroin was a factor in undermining the morale and efficiency of the Soviet occupying army in Afghanistan.

In 1990 *The Washington Post* and *Time* magazine alleged that the US Government had deliberately turned a blind eye to heroin trafficking by elements in the *mujahideen* and Pakistani military intelligence because of the higher priority which it had given to confronting the Soviet Union. The leader of the fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was identified as one of the prime movers in the drugs trade. The Pakistani military are believed to have delivered small arms and ammunition to the Afghan rebels in trucks which were loaded with heroin for the return journey. The USA put pressure on the Rabbani government to enforce a ban on opium production and suspended aid in 1994 when this was judged to be ineffective.<sup>34</sup>

More recently, there have been suggestions that the USA was prepared to offer discreet support to the Taliban in return for undertakings to crack down on the narcotics production. To date this strategy does not seem to have proved successful since poppy cultivation was said to be higher than ever in Taliban-controlled areas in 1996.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 1995, United Nations, 1996, 52-4.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 951.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 953-4, 961.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Davis, "Anguish continues in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1996, 552.

## VII Afghanistan's neighbours

### A. Pakistan

Given the history and ethnic composition of Afghanistan, events in that country are always likely to be of vital importance to Pakistan. Policy towards Afghanistan has always been largely in the hands of the Pakistan armed forces, but may be influenced by power struggles within Pakistan. The principal motive of General Nasirullah Babar, the interior minister in Benazir Bhutto's government who is believed to have masterminded Pakistani assistance to the Taliban, appears to have been to bring the Afghan civil war to an end and turn Pakistan into the main outlet for the exports of energy-rich Central Asia.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that the Taliban embrace an unsophisticated version of fundamentalist Islam which could have a destabilising knock-on effect on Pakistan seems to have been a risk which the Pakistan army was prepared to take. The fact that the Taliban alliance with General Dostum has collapsed makes the dream of a stable pipe-line route as remote as ever. However, Benazir Bhutto, and her successor as prime minister Nawaz Sharif, have appeared more cautious in their approach to the Taliban.<sup>37</sup>

Pakistan has found itself increasingly subject to the influence of Islamic fundamentalism since the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It moved towards a more Islamic form of government and social organisation under President Zia Al Haq, who ruled from 1977 to 1988. General Zia promoted the fundamentalist party Jama'at-i-Islami, which in turn supported the forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Afghanistan, as did the Pakistani army and Inter-Service Intelligence.

Quite how much influence the Pakistani government and armed forces had on the eclipse of Hekmatyar and the rise of the Taliban is still not clear. Hekmatyar seems to have become very unpopular and isolated within the Afghan resistance movement as early as the mid 1980s. His alleged involvement in drug trafficking may also have made him unacceptable to some of the external sponsors of the resistance. The Pakistani military leadership appears to have decided at some point in the early 1990s to withdraw its support from Hekmatyar and to foster instead the movement based on a younger generation of Afghan exiles and fighters which was to become the Taliban. According to one account:

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<sup>36</sup> Lucille Beaumont, "L'armée, arbitre suprême au Pakistan", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997, 4.

<sup>37</sup> According to *Izvestiya*, 16 October 1996, Benazir Bhutto while still prime minister of Pakistan distanced herself from the Taliban and accused the USA, UK and Saudi Arabia of arming them.

Having found Hekmatyar and the SCC [Supreme Coordination Council] inadequate to the task of toppling the government, the Pakistani military has thrown its weight behind a new and far more popular Pushtun contender for power.<sup>38</sup>

For whatever reason, there are said to be hundreds of Pakistani volunteers and technical advisers fighting with the Taliban<sup>39</sup> and it has been suggested that Pakistani agents persuaded some local warlords to ally themselves voluntarily with the new movement.<sup>40</sup> According to another commentator:

circumstantial evidence points strongly toward Pakistani involvement at the planning level, and reliable reports of cross-border logistics support and Pushto-speaking ex-Pakistani military personnel operating on the ground suggest Islamabad's backing was not confined to the map room.<sup>41</sup>

The Pakistani army and government may not have appreciated immediately that the younger generation of Afghan resistance leaders were advocates of an even more puritanical and conservative version of Islam than Hekmatyar and his followers. Following the death of General Zia in 1988 and the return to power of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Benazir Bhutto, the Jama'at-i-Islami had lost some of its previous influence to another religious party, the Jama'at Ulema-i-Islami, which was allied with the PPP and controlled some of the Koranic schools attended by Afghan refugees.<sup>42</sup> The Jama'at Ulema-i-Islami was connected with the austere orthodox Islam of the Deoband seminary in India, a centre of Islamic teaching originally influenced by the Wahhabi movement of Saudi Arabia.<sup>43</sup>

Pakistan's official policy towards Afghanistan remains one of non-intervention in accordance with the undertaking given in 1988 as part of the UN-brokered Geneva agreement. In a possible sign of a return to more overt even-handedness, the new government of Nawaz Sharif has allowed representatives of the Rabbani coalition to re-open their offices in Pakistan. On 5 February 1997 Sharif was quoted as saying "I don't know if Pakistan gave support to Taliban - it is time to review that policy"<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Davis, July 1995, 319.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Davis, "Iran's role in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review "Pointer"*, February 1997, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Stephane Allix, "De la résistance a la prise de Kaboul, l'histoire secrète des talibans", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Davis, "Anguish continues in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1996, 552.

<sup>42</sup> Allix, January 1997, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Rafiq Zakaria, *The Struggle within Islam*, 1988, 112-3.

<sup>44</sup> *Agence France Presse Internationale*, 5 February 1997.

### B. India

The fact that Pakistan was backing the Taliban was sufficient to ensure that the Rabbani "government" could rely on diplomatic support from India and there have been reports that it also received aircraft and spare parts, ammunition and ground radars.<sup>45</sup>

### C. Iran

The policy of Iran towards Afghanistan is determined partly by considerations of Iranian strategic interest and partly by affinity or solidarity with the minority Shia Muslim population of Afghanistan. More than a million Afghan refugees remain in camps in eastern Iran and have been slower to return than their counterparts in exile in Pakistan.

Afghan Shia militias with Iranian backing played a significant part in the Islamic resistance during the years of Soviet occupation and also in the complex faction fighting which broke out after the Soviet withdrawal. The main Shia grouping is Hizb-i-Wahdat-i-Islami (Islamic Unity Party). In 1995 its former leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, attempted to do a deal with the Taliban and cross to their side with his forces, but many of these refused and defected instead to the Rabbani-Masood coalition which at that time still held Kabul. Mazari was subsequently accused of treason by the Taliban and seems to have been executed by them, thus alienating still further the Shia from the Taliban. In September 1995 the Taliban took Herat and cut the Iranian supply route to the Shia of Kabul and central Afghanistan. Iranian sources have accused the Taliban of committing atrocities against their opponents in the Herat region and of drug smuggling into Iran.<sup>46</sup>

These events seem to have persuaded the Iranian government that it should support the Rabbani coalition and try to sustain it in power. The rumours concerning US backing for the Taliban no doubt reinforced this view and Iran would not in any case wish to see Pakistan gaining a dominant influence in Afghanistan. Despite the superficial resemblance between Iranian and Afghan fundamentalism, Iranian clerics actually regard the Taliban version of Islam as "fossilized". During 1996 there were reports that Iran had been supplying Kabul by air<sup>47</sup> and once Kabul had fallen to the Taliban it established an air bridge to Bagram in order to give covert military assistance to the anti-Taliban resistance in general and to its Shia elements in particular. There are also reports that the former governor of Herat has been granted asylum in Iran and is being encouraged to raise a new Shia Afghan army from the

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<sup>45</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Back with a vengeance: proxy war in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 1996, 61.

<sup>46</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, FE/2617 A/1.

<sup>47</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 December 1995.



refugee camps located in eastern Iran.<sup>48</sup> Elements of this new force may already have been used in some of General Dostum's operations against the Taliban, but there is no suggestion that Iranian forces or advisers are involved.

## D. Central Asia

The newly independent states of Central Asia, formerly constituent republics of the Soviet Union,<sup>49</sup> are all ruled by nominally democratic presidential governments which have a secular, ie non-Islamic character and show a great deal of continuity with the mainly indigenous communist elites of the Soviet era. One of them, Tajikistan, has already experienced a civil war since independence and has large areas under the control of a rebel Islamic nationalist movement. All six governments<sup>50</sup> are nervous of the impact which an Islamic regime in control of the whole of Afghanistan could have on their own stability. In October 1996, following the Taliban capture of Kabul, the Central Asian republics (without Azerbaijan) held a summit meeting in Alma Ata (Kazakhstan), with Russian participation, to concert their strategies against this threat.<sup>51</sup>

After a further meeting of Central Asian and Russian defence ministers in February 1997 it was reported that contingency plans had been drawn up for the creation of two joint motorized divisions to defend the border along the Amu Darya river should the Taliban capture the whole of northern Afghanistan. The Uzbek president later spoke of the Taliban as "a large aggressive force" and his Tajik counterpart expressed anxiety at the possibility of a large flow of refugees out of Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> For the present the most likely and obvious tactic for the Central Asian governments, as for the Russians, will be to encourage the Tajik and Uzbek elements in northern Afghanistan to unite and to back them in their armed resistance to the Taliban.

For the longer term, their strategy is uncertain. Even a moderate Islamic government in Afghanistan, such as President Rabbani represented, could provide a model for the Central Asian Republics which the present regimes there would find threatening, particularly if it supported Islamic movements in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.<sup>53</sup> Unless Afghanistan swings back

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<sup>48</sup> Anthony Davis, "Iran's role in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review "Pointer"*, February 1997, 9.

<sup>49</sup> And prior to that territories of the Russian Empire conquered during the mid nineteenth century.

<sup>50</sup> Those most closely affected are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are further removed from Afghanistan, but are subject to some of the same concerns about Islam and instability in the region.

<sup>51</sup> Boris Vinogradov, "Rossiiskie "plyusy" afganskoi voiny"[Russian "pluses" from the Afghan war], *Izvestiya*, 16 October 1996.

<sup>52</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, based on Interfax news agency, SU/2858 G/1.

<sup>53</sup> R H Magnus & E Naby, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: models and mirrors", *Asian Survey*, XXXV, No.7, July 1995, 614.

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in due course to a more secular form of government, which currently seems unlikely, the relationship with Central Asia is likely to remain troubled and unstable.

## IX Russia and the United States

### A. Russia

Russia continues to regard Afghanistan as of strategic importance to its national interests, although perceptions of these have changed since the intervention launched in 1979. At that time the elderly Soviet leadership had no inkling of how close their economic and social system was to collapse and regarded the 1970s as a decade of successful global competition with the West in general and the United States in particular. Victories in Vietnam, Nicaragua, South Yemen and several African states for movements which the Soviet Union approved of and supported encouraged the Soviet leadership to believe that Afghanistan had joined the list with the Marxist coup of 1978. They assumed that Afghanistan could be kept within the Soviet "Commonwealth" with a moderate expenditure of military aid and assistance. The fact that it bordered the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union and had earlier been a bone of contention between Russia and Britain no doubt made interference all the more attractive.

After a decade of continuous strategic setbacks and a massive decline in economic and military power, Russian leaders now have a very different perception of their position in the world and they are engaged in desperate attempts to salvage as much influence as possible following their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988-9, the granting of independence to the Central Asian and Caucasian republics in 1991 and the defeat in Chechnya in 1996. In Tajikistan, Russia has been propping up a beleaguered secularist government against Islamic rebels since 1992. Russia has 20,000 troops in Tajikistan, mainly deployed along the Afghan frontier, and in April 1995 Russian planes bombed towns in northern Afghanistan which were believed to be bases for Tajik rebel forces. Russia's general objectives now are to avoid, if possible, the rise to power in any of the states of central and south-west Asia of an aggressively anti-Russian regime, and to retain as much economic influence in the region as possible, including influence over the large unexploited reserves of oil and gas.

It was these considerations which led them to give discreet backing to the Rabbani government while it still held Kabul. There is some evidence that Russian technicians were maintaining the Rabbani government's MiG fighters and Scud missiles for several years, while General Dostum has been supplied with aviation fuel and spare parts from Uzbekistan.<sup>54</sup> Similar considerations may persuade Russia to go on backing the opposition to the Taliban. In return Russia would expect Tajik and Uzbek leaders in northern Afghanistan to refrain from supporting rebel movements in the Central Asian republics. It has been reported that Russian advisors have already helped in the construction of a new air base for Masood's

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<sup>54</sup> For example, in August 1995 Taliban forces brought down an Il-76 transport plane carrying ammunition to the Rabbani-Masood forces and captured the Russian crew - *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 December 1995, 14.

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forces at Taloqan.<sup>55</sup> Whether or not the opponents of the Taliban could expect arms from Russia is a moot point, but for the moment they can still draw on weaponry left behind by the Russians in 1989. The Soviet and US governments had agreed in September 1991 to cease arming their respective former proteges in Afghanistan, but this did not prevent the discreet channelling of Russian assistance via Uzbekistan before the fall of Kabul.

### B. The United States

The US led the way among western states in giving substantial support to Afghan fundamentalists when these were resisting the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. US policy on the situation which has unfolded in Afghanistan since the Soviet withdrawal was set out in a statement to the Senate by the Assistant Secretary of State Robin Raphael in March 1995:

In Afghanistan, the United States actively supports the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. The Chief of the UN Mission has conducted intensive and imaginative negotiations over the past months seeking to end the bloody conflict and establish an interim council. Reluctance of factional leaders to relinquish their personal power for the overall good of Afghanistan remains the major obstacle. While the intentions of the Taliban movement are unclear, its leadership has expressed support in principle for a peaceful political process, and the UN Mission is pressing ahead to establish an interim council to take power from faction leaders.

Outside assistance to individual faction leaders has only strengthened their intransigence. We have worked hard with like-minded states to stop material support and funding for the belligerent factions, and to support the UN efforts to foster a return of peace and stability to Afghanistan. In the meantime, the U.S. has assisted refugees and those internally displaced due to the devastation of Kabul in 1994.

As mentioned elsewhere in the paper, there has been speculation that the USA has used its close links with Pakistani military intelligence to give some indirect support to the Taliban. This might appear strange in the light of US hostility towards Islamic radicalism in other contexts, but may be explained in terms of grand strategy by the fact that the Taliban, as Sunni Muslims, hold both Iranian and Russian influence in Afghanistan in check. When Iran began to support the previous Kabul regime against the Taliban in 1995, this may have been the signal for the United States to offer at least tacit support to the Taliban. It has also been suggested that the US administration felt that the Taliban would be more amenable than other groups to pressure over trade in narcotics.

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Back with a vengeance: proxy war in Afghanistan", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 1996, 61.

## X British and EU policy towards Afghanistan

The British Government unreservedly condemned the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan throughout its duration and supported diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict on the basis of self-determination for the Afghan people. British ministers held that a settlement should be based on the resumption by Afghanistan of its previous neutral and non-aligned status.<sup>56</sup> The British government also observed a series of punitive measures against the Soviet Union which had been agreed by NATO and other states: COCOM restrictions on technology exports to the Soviet Union were tightened, favourable credit lines were suspended, as were officially sponsored cultural and military exchanges. The British Ambassador was withdrawn from Afghanistan, but a small embassy remained. The British Government strongly supported the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games which was led by the United States, but the British Olympic Association decided not to follow the Government's advice and did take part.<sup>57</sup>

On the question of arming the Afghan resistance, the Minister of State at the FCO, then Douglas Hurd MP, told the Foreign Affairs Committee on 28 January 1981:

...it is important in our view that the resistance should be enabled to continue, and I think it is obvious to everyone who has followed the matter that they are receiving arms... (...) Arms are getting through; probably it is not in anyone's best interests that the sources of them should be discussed in public.<sup>58</sup>

In the mid-1980s there were persistent reports of Blowpipe anti-aircraft missiles manufactured by the then publicly-owned Shorts of Belfast being supplied to Afghan resistance groups in significant quantities. It was suggested in the Soviet and Afghan media, and also in some western commentaries, that this supply was financed and arranged, or at the very least facilitated, by the British government. British ministers declined to comment directly on how the *mujahideen* had acquired Blowpipe, but the then Foreign Secretary responded to direct questions in the House of Commons by saying:

...it is astonishing that anybody should be alarmed or dismayed by the efforts of the Afghan people to defend themselves against the Soviet onslaught. They face the might of a vast, modern

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<sup>56</sup> Memorandum by the FCO to the Foreign Affairs Committee, 23 January 1981, HC 41ii of session 1980-81,13.

<sup>57</sup> For a full account see G Grasselli, *British and American responses to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan*, 1996, 94-7.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, Q.53, 15.

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army, and most hon. Members will thank goodness that modern weapons are getting through to help them.<sup>59</sup>

Since the end of the Soviet occupation, the UK has actively supported UN efforts at mediation in Afghanistan and has contributed consistently to humanitarian relief, including mine clearance. Total UK bilateral aid to Afghanistan in 1994-5 was £8.3m, of which much the largest part was emergency humanitarian aid (£6.9m). A proportion of the UK contributions to international agencies, such as UNICEF and the UN High Commission for Refugees, will also have been spent on operations in Afghanistan or with Afghan refugees.

In January 1997 the prime minister, John Major, visited the Khyber Pass in Pakistan and was briefed on efforts being made to stem the traffic of drugs into Pakistan from Afghanistan. Commenting on the UK financial contribution to international anti-narcotics work, he said, "We have put resources in and I am prepared to put more resources in when we identify what is needed."<sup>60</sup>

The EU in its diplomatic initiatives is supportive of UN mediation to end the Afghan civil war and calls for a general embargo on the supply of arms and ammunition into Afghanistan. It also takes a stand on the rights of Afghan women and girls and calls on all Afghan factions to respect world human rights standards. According to the EU declaration adopted on 28 October 1996 the EU will seek modalities for the continuation of humanitarian relief which support the people of that country "irrespective of their gender and ethnic background".

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<sup>59</sup> HC Debates, Vol 118, c160. See also Mr Dalyell's speech from c204 and *The Independent* of 17, 18 and 27 June 1987. The supply of Blowpipe to Afghanistan was also the subject of a Thames TV documentary "The Secret Missile Trail" broadcast on 23 July 1987. British equipment seems to have found its way mainly to the Hezbe Islami [Islamic Party - one of two quite separate organisations using this name] led by Yunis Khalis and Abdul Haq.

<sup>60</sup> *The Herald*, 14 January 1997.

## **XI Conclusion**

Straddling as it does a major continental watershed, Afghanistan remains a focus of geopolitical competition between its more powerful neighbours. As a weak and somewhat artificial state, it has always been vulnerable to internal divisions and therefore also to interference from neighbouring states. At the same time the instability of Afghanistan may be perceived as a threat by neighbouring states. Instability and anarchy in Afghanistan is also a matter of concern to more geographically remote states because of the constant drain on international humanitarian efforts and because of the large quantities of heroin originating there. To these concerns is now added the increased anxiety about the way in which women are being treated in Afghanistan.

While the international community can express its unhappiness by a variety of means, including denial of recognition, suspension of aid programmes and the arms embargo now in force, have little direct leverage over the Taliban and the latter seem unlikely to moderate their views in response to international demands.

For the longer term it is not clear whether the Taliban will succeed in consolidating their rule over Afghanistan. They have swept to power by invoking Islamic puritanism to impose order and "peace", but there is still strong resistance to their rule in some areas and their future may depend on the relative willingness of outside sponsors, including Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia, to channel arms and money to the various factions. Pakistan, which was originally the principal sponsor of the Taliban, may now be preparing to distance itself from the movement. It is also possible that the unity of the Taliban will come under strain now that they are in control of most Pushtun and some non-Pushtun areas, particularly since they seem to have no clear strategy for winning the support of other ethnic groups. Unfortunately it may take further rounds of fighting and destruction before the plight of the Afghan population in general is relieved.

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