

Afghanistan: Between Hammer and Anvil

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Tariq Ali on John Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban. How the US fought its proxy war in Afghanistan*, and what kind of Islamist regime has resulted.

Coveted in the late 19th century by Russian Tsar and British Viceroy alike, Afghanistan's impassible fastnesses enabled it to avoid occupation by either colonial power. Two British invasions were repelled—a warning to both London and St Petersburg. Eventually an expanding Tsarist Empire and the British Empire in India accepted Afghanistan, still a pre-feudal confederacy of tribes with its own king, as a buffer state. The British, as the more powerful force, would keep a watchful eye on Kabul. This arrangement suited all three parties at the time. The result was that Afghan society never underwent even a partial imperial modernization, remaining more or less stationary for over a century. When change finally came, the catalysts were external. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the overthrow of the Ottoman Caliphate by Kemal's new model army in 1919 stirred modernizing ambitions in the young Afghan King Amanullah. Chafing under British tutelage, and surrounded by radical intellectuals who looked to Enlightenment ideals from Europe and the bold example from Petrograd, Amanullah briefly united a small educated elite with the bulk of the tribes, and won a famous military victory against British arms in 1919.

Success in the field gave Amanullah the confidence to launch a Reform Programme, partially inspired by Kemal's revolution in Turkey. A new Afghan Constitution was proclaimed, promising universal adult franchise. If implemented, it would have made Afghanistan one of the first countries in the world to give all women the right to vote. Simultaneously, emissaries were dispatched to Moscow to seek assistance. Though the Bolshevik leaders were themselves beleaguered by multiple armed interventions from the Entente powers, they treated the Afghan overtures quite seriously. Sultan-Galiev received the messengers from Kabul warmly on behalf of the Comintern, while Trotsky sent a secret letter to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party from his armoured train at the front-line of the civil war. In this remarkable dispatch, he wrote: 'There is no doubt at all that our Red Army constitutes an incomparably more powerful force in the Asian terrain of world politics than in the European terrain. Here there opens up before us an undoubted possibility not merely of a lengthy wait to see how events develop in Europe, but of conducting activity in the Asian field. The road to India may prove at the given moment to be more readily passable and shorter for us than the road to Soviet Hungary. The sort of army which at the moment can be of no great significance in the European scales can upset the unstable balance of Asian relationships of colonial dependence, give a direct push to an uprising on the part of the oppressed masses and assure the triumph of such a rising in Asia . . . The road to Paris and London lies via the towns of Afghanistan, the Punjab and Bengal.' A hallucinatory document by one of Trotsky's military specialists proposed the creation of an anti-imperialist cavalry corps of 30–40,000 riders to liberate British India.

Nothing came of such schemes. No doubt the failure of Tukhachevsky's march into Poland two years later had a sobering effect in Moscow. Amanullah got no more than friendship and advice from the Bolsheviks. The British, understandably nervous, were now determined to overthrow him. New Delhi purchased the services of a couple of leading tribes, fomented religious opposition to the king, and finally toppled him with a military coup in 1929. The Comintern journal *Inprecorr* commented that

Amanullah had only survived for a decade because of 'Soviet friendship'; more pertinently, the senior Bolshevik Raskolnikov remarked that Amanullah had introduced 'bourgeois reforms without a bourgeoisie', whose cost had fallen on peasants whom he had failed to win over with an agrarian reform, allowing Britain to exploit social and tribal divisions in the country.

Fifty years later history repeated itself, with a grimmer outcome. In the early seventies the reigning King Zahir was ousted by his cousin Daud, who declared a republic with the support of the local Communists and financial aid from the USSR. When, in April 1979, the Shah of Iran convinced Daud to turn against the Communist factions in his army and administration, they staged a self-defensive coup. Bitterly divided amongst themselves—inner-party disputes were sometimes settled with revolvers—the Afghan Communists had no social base outside Kabul and a few other cities. Their power rested on control of the Army and Air Force alone. The United States, taking over the historic role of Britain, soon started to undermine the regime by arming the religious opposition to it, using the Pakistani Army as a conduit. Under mounting pressure, the Afghan Communists broke into violent internecine strife. At this juncture, Brezhnev took the plunge that had been beyond the Bolsheviks—dispatching a massive military column to Kabul to salvage the regime.

This was exactly what Carter's National Security chief Zbigniew Brzezinski had been hoping for. The Russian leaders fell headlong into the trap. The entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan transformed an unpleasant civil war funded by Washington into a jihad enabling the mujaheddin ('holy warriors') to appear as the only defenders of Afghan sovereignty against the foreign army of occupation. Brzezinski was soon posing for photographs in a Pathan turban on the Khyber Pass and shouting 'Allah is on your side', while Afghan fundamentalists were being feted as freedom-fighters in the White House and Downing Street.

Washington's role in the Afghan war has never been a secret, but John Cooley's remarkable book is the first systematic and detailed account of how the United States utilized the intelligence services of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to create, train, finance and arm an international network of Islamic militants to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. As a former Middle-East correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor and ABC Television, Cooley gained easy access to retired and serving officials in the states mobilized in this final episode of the Second Cold War. Although he does not always cite his sources, and some of what he says should be viewed with scepticism, his information corroborates much that was widely bruited in Pakistan during the eighties. According to his account, the US drew in other powers to the anti-Soviet jihad. Cooley contends that Chinese help was not restricted to the provision of weapons, but extended to the provision of listening-posts in Xinjiang, and even dispatch of Uighur volunteers whose costs were covered by the CIA. Some form of Chinese assistance was privately always acknowledged by the Generals in Islamabad, though Beijing has never admitted it. Cooley even suggests the PRC has not been immune to the post-Soviet-withdrawal-syndrome: Islamic militants turning on the powers that armed them. However, the country not mentioned by Cooley is Israel, whose role in Afghanistan remains one of the best kept secrets of the war. In 1985 a young Pakistani journalist working for The Muslim, Mansur, accidentally stumbled across a group of Israeli 'advisers' at the bar of the Intercontinental Hotel in Peshawar. Aware that the news would be explosive for the Zia dictatorship, he informed his editor, some friends and a visiting WTN correspondent. A few days later the mujaheddin, alerted by the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), captured and killed him.

In the course of his account, Cooley describes a meeting in 1978 in Beirut with Raymond Close, former station chief of the CIA in Saudi Arabia, who clearly charmed him. If he had questioned him more closely, he would have discovered that Close had previously been posted to Pakistan, where his father had been a missionary teacher at the Forman Christian College in Lahore. His son was fluent in Persian, Urdu and Arabic. In nominal retirement, he would have been ideally placed to help orchestrate operations in Afghanistan, and their back-up in Pakistan, where the Bank of Credit and

Commerce International (BCCI) functioned as a channel for CIA funding of clandestine activities, and laundering profits from the heroin trade. Cooley's argument that the United States and its relays in the region paid a heavy price for victory in Afghanistan is indisputable. In Egypt Sadat was executed by Islamist soldiers as he was taking the salute at a military parade. In Pakistan Zia—not to speak of his fellow-passengers Arnold Raphael, US Ambassador in Islamabad, and General Rahman, of Pakistan's ISI—died in a mysterious plane crash that few believe was an accident. The five thousand US marines still in Riyadh are not there to threaten Saddam Hussein, but to defend the Saudi Royal Family.

Afghanistan itself, a decade after Soviet withdrawal, is still awash with factional violence. Veterans of the war have helped to destabilize Egypt, Algeria, the Philippines, Sudan, Pakistan, Chechnya, Daghestan and Saudi Arabia. They have bombed targets in the United States and declared their own war against the Great Satan. Osama bin Laden, whose icon adorns the jacket of Cooley's book, has become the bugbear of US official and popular fantasies—after starting his career as a Saudi building tycoon with links to the CIA. When the Pakistani Generals pleaded with the Saudi dynasty to send a princeling from the Royal Family to lead the holy war, he was sent as a friend of the palace instead. Doing better than expected, he was to surprise his patrons in Riyadh and Foggy Bottom. Cooley concludes with the following advice to the US government: 'When you decide to go to war against your main enemy, take a good, long look at the people behind you whom you chose as your friends, allies or mercenary fighters. Look well to see whether these allies already have unsheathed their knives—and are pointing them at your own back.' His pleas are unlikely to move Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has no regrets. 'What was more important in the world view of history?' he asks with more than a touch of irritation, 'the Taliban or the fall of the Soviet Empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?' Contempt for the rights and lives of ordinary people elsewhere in the world—a trade-mark of the Washington outlook before, during and after the Cold War—could not be more pithily expressed.

Ahmed Rashid's book is the first credible account of the rise to power of the Taliban. The author is a courageous Pakistani journalist who has been reporting from Afghanistan since 1978, and refused to be intimidated or suborned in his pursuit of truths inconvenient to the powers that be. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the de facto alliance of states that had backed different factions of the mujaheddin soon fell apart. Islamabad did not want any broad government of reconstruction, preferring—with US and Saudi support—to impose its own pawn, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, on the country. The result was a series of vicious civil wars, punctuated by unstable cease-fires, as Hazaras (backed by Iran), Ahmed Shah Masud (backed by France), and the Uzbek general Dostum (backed by Russia) resisted. When it became obvious that Hekmatyar's forces were incapable of defeating these foes, the Pakistan Army shifted its backing to the students it had been training in religious schools in the North-West Frontier since 1980, where the alphabet consisted of *jeem* for jihad, *kaaf* for kalashnikov and *tay* for tope (cannon). By 1992 the Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province could remark that the juvenile fanatics in the madrassahs might or might not 'liberate' Afghanistan, but they would certainly destabilize what was left of Pakistan.

The Taliban were orphans of the war against the Russian infidel. Trained and dispatched across the border by the ISI, they were to be hurled into battle against Muslims they were told were not true Muslims. Rashid captures their outlook vividly: 'These boys were a world apart from the Mujaheddin whom I had got to know during the 1980s—men who could recount their tribal and clan lineages, remembered their abandoned farms and valleys with nostalgia and recounted legends and stories from Afghan history. These boys were from a generation who had never seen their country at peace. They had no memories of their tribes, their elders, their neighbours nor the complex ethnic mix of peoples that was their homeland. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam was the only prop they could hold

onto and which gave their lives some meaning.' This deracinated fanaticism—a kind of bleak Islamic cosmopolitanism—made the Taliban a more effective fighting force than any of their localized adversaries. Although Pushtun in origin, the Taliban leaders could be sure their young soldiers would not succumb to the divisive lure of ethnic or tribal loyalties, of which even the Afghan left had found it difficult to rid itself. When they began their sweep from the frontier, a war-weary population often greeted them with an element of relief: citizens in the larger towns had lost faith in all the other forces that had been battling at the expense of civilian life since the Soviet departure.

If the Taliban had simply offered peace and bread, they might have won lasting popular support. Soon, however, the character of the regime they were bent on imposing became clear to the bewildered population. Women were banned from working, collecting their children from school and, in some cities, even from shopping: effectively, they were confined to their homes. Girls' schools were closed down. The Taliban had been taught in their madrassahs to steer clear of the temptation of women—male brotherhood was a condition of tight military discipline. Puritanism extended to repression of sexual expression of any kind; although this was a region where homosexual practices had been common for centuries, recruits guilty of the 'crime' were executed by the Taliban commanders. Outside their ranks, dissent of any sort was brutally crushed with a reign of terror unmatched by any preceding regime. The Taliban creed is a variant of the Deobandi Islam professed by a sectarian strain in Pakistan—more extreme even than Wahabbism, since not even the Saudi rulers have deprived half their population of all civic rights in the name of the Koran. The severity of the Afghan mullahs has been denounced by Sunni clerics at al-Azhar in Cairo and Shiite theologians in Qom as a disgrace to the Prophet. The great Pakistani poet Faiz, whose ancestors came from Afghanistan, could have written his lines from prison about the land of his forebears:

*"Bury me underneath your pavements, oh my country
Where no person now dare walk with head held high,
Where true lovers bringing you their homage
Walk furtively in fear of life and limb;
A new-style law-and-order is in use
Stones and bricks are locked up and dogs turned loose—
Villains are judges and usurpers both,
Who speaks for us?
Where shall we seek justice?"*

Certainly not from the Commander-in-Chief in the White House or his aide-de-camp in Downing Street. Little was heard from these pulpits for human rights as the women of Afghanistan were subjected to a vile persecution. Rashid notes tartly that a few mild words of criticism from Hillary Clinton were more designed to soothe American feminists during the Lewinsky scandal—not a very demanding task—than to alter the situation in Kabul or Kandahar or Herat, ancient towns where women had never before been reduced to such depths of misery. American business was less hypocritical. Responding to complaints about the pipeline it is constructing from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan, a spokesman for the US oil giant Unocal explained why capitalism is gender-blind: 'We disagree with some US feminist groups on how Unocal should respond to this issue . . . We are guests in countries who have sovereign rights and their own political, social, religious beliefs. Walking away from Afghanistan would not solve the problem.' Nor, of course, improve the rate of return on its projected investments.

Rashid makes clear that the Taliban could not have swept across Afghanistan without the military and financial backing of Islamabad, sustained in turn by Washington. The top Taliban commander Mullah Omar, today the one-eyed ruler of Kabul (and bin Laden's father-in-law), was long on the direct payroll of the Pakistani regime. The conquest of power, however, has had an intoxicating impact on

the Afghan zealots. The Taliban have their own goal for the region—a Federation of Islamic Republics that would enforce a pax *Talibana* from Samarkand to Karachi. They now control sufficient revenues from the heroin trade to fund their land campaigns. But they want access to the sea and have made no secret of their belief that Pakistan with its nuclear arms will fall to them one day. They know they enjoy strong support at the lowest and highest levels of the Pakistan Army. Lt. Gen. Mohammed Aziz, Chief of the General Staff, and Lt. Gen. Mahmoud Ahmed, the Director of the ISI, the two senior commanders who currently flank Pakistan's more secular-minded military dictator, Pervaiz Musharraf, are well-known for their Taliban sympathies. The sad and squalid story of the wreckage of Afghanistan is told well by Cooley and Rashid, but the tragedy is far from over.

P.S.

* From New Left Review 2, March-April 2000:

<http://www.newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2237>