

Understanding the Graveyard of Empires: Investigating the Effects of the Mujahideen Structure and Its International Support on Their Resistance Against the Soviet Union and the PDPA Regime, 1979-1996

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Understanding the Graveyard of Empires: Investigating the Effects of the Mujahideen Structure and Its International Support on Their Resistance Against the Soviet Union and the PDPA Regime, 1979-1996

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The Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Despite their unity in the face of a common enemy during the Soviet-Afghan War and the reign of the PDPA regime, they could not establish a stable government after the Soviet withdrawal and the PDPA regime's fall. The term Mujahideen refers to an overarching name for several, originally locally motivated movements opposing the foreign communist influence in Afghanistan during the later years of the Cold War and intending to defend their own understanding of traditional society.¹ While successful in preventing both the PDPA and the Soviets from ever controlling the whole country, the Mujahideen movement quickly showed signs of decay after the PDPA regime fell.² Thus, the civil war in Afghanistan continued until the Taliban assumed governmental control in 1996.³

This circumstance begs the question of the reasons for the Mujahideen's quick disintegration. Given the structure of the movement as such, consisting of many smaller resistant movements, and considering the role that international support played, this paper develops a response to the following research question: What are the respective effects of the structure of the Mujahideen movement and of the international support provided to it on the development of the civil war in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1996? The paper finds that the main reasons for the decay of the Mujahideen

¹ Ewans, Martin: *Conflict in Afghanistan*. Studies in asymmetric warfare. Routledge. London, United Kingdom 2005, p. 111;

Nojumi, Neamatollah: *The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*. Mass mobilization, civil war and the future of the region. Palgrave. London, United Kingdom 2002, p. 83;

Rubin, Barnett R.: *The fragmentation of Afghanistan*. State formation and collapse in the international system. Yale University Press. New Haven, MS USA 1995, p. 185-187;

Tarzi, Shah M.: *Politics of the Afghan resistance movement*. Cleavages, disunity and fragmentation. In *Asian Survey* 31 (1991), i. 6, p. 479-495, here p. 480.

² Sinno, Abdulkader H.: *Organizations at war in Afghanistan and beyond*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY USA 2008, p. 215.

³ Rubin, Barnett R.: *Afghanistan*. What everyone needs to know. Oxford University Press. Oxford, United Kingdom 2020, p. 109-111.

movement and thus the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 are, on the one hand, the ethnically fragmented and hostile composition of Afghan society, which led the Mujahideen to unite in defense against the communist enemy only.⁴ On the other hand, the ethnic ties to parts of Afghan society and geopolitical interests of regional powers, especially Pakistan's, led to their continuous interest-motivated meddling in Afghan affairs, undermining both Afghan nationalism and the development of a united resistance movement.⁵ However, the United States also carry significant responsibility in the way the civil war in Afghanistan and the Mujahideen resistance developed. They were financially and materially supporting the movement but largely did not control the exact receiver of their contributions, which was primarily determined by Pakistan.⁶ In this way, the US contributed to the Mujahideen's fragmentation and strengthened fundamentalist Islamist powers.

To arrive at this finding, recent Afghan history as well as its societal composition has been studied and brought into connection with the Mujahideen's rise, development, and fall. Further, the individual support schemes of the US, Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been studied and connected to the resistance movement's characteristics over time.

For the scarcity of diverse academic literature and the author's lack of Pashtu and Dari proficiency, the consulted literature is largely of Western origin. Many authors have Afghan roots but received their education in Western institutions and/or live in Western countries permanently. This needs to be kept in mind as a potential source of bias. The consulted primary sources are largely related to U.S. support for the Mujahideen in its first years. The main characteristics of this support scheme are appar-

⁴ Goodson, Larry P.: *Afghanistan's endless war. State failure, regional politics and the rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press. Seattle, WA USA 2001, p. 17;
Nojumi, p. 2, 84, 89;
Rubin 1995, p.180, 191, 227, 230, 232.

⁵ Tarzi, p. 404.

⁶ Coll, Steve: *Ghost wars. The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin Press. New York, NY USA 2004, p. 60;
Ewans, p. 136;
Jalal, Syed U.: *Sectarianism, geopolitics, and the legacy of the Mujahideen. Pakistan's role in the Soviet-Afghan war*. In *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4 (2023), i. 2, p. 15-21, here p. 20;
Little, Douglas: *Mission impossible. The CIA and the cult of covert action in the Middle East*. In *Diplomatic History* 28 (2004), i. 5, p. 663-701, here p. 690;
Lowenstein, Julie: *US foreign policy and the Soviet-Afghan War. A revisionist theory*. In Harvey M. Applebaum '59 Award (2016), i. 9, p. 1-77, here p. 38;
Rubin, Barnett R.: *The fragmentation of Afghanistan*. In *Foreign Affairs* 68 (1989), i. 5, p. 150-168, here p. 154;
Rubin 2020, p. 72;
Saikal, Amin: *Modern Afghanistan. A history of struggle and survival*. Tauris. London, United Kingdom 2004, p. 204.

ent there, but to inquire more about the characteristics of the other foreign actors' support, access to relevant primary sources would have further enriched the research.

Regarding the role of regional powers in the Mujahideen support, the paper concentrates on Pakistan and, to some extent, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Further research could, however, attempt a more detailed consideration and include the role of other regional actors, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Regarding the internal structure of the Mujahideen, further research could also consider the role of the smaller Iran-backed Shia resistance parties.

The paper is structured as follows: At first, Afghanistan's recent history from the mid-19th century is depicted, focusing on foreign interferences. This section is followed by a general description of Afghan society. The main section is then chronologically divided into three parts. The first focusses on the Mujahideen's characteristics and structure, as well as the role of the international support for it between 1979 and 1987 – the early years until the Soviet Union started to slowly plan its withdrawal and the US started to question its support scheme. The second part depicts the movement's internal structure and support networks between 1987 and 1992 – the Soviet withdrawal period and the time until the Soviet Union's dissolution. The last part covers the time period between 1992 and 1996 – the civil war after the fall of the PDPA regime until the takeover by the Taliban.

1. Afghanistan: Recent history and societal structure

1.1 Afghanistan's recent history until 1996

Much throughout the 20th century, Afghanistan was a monarchy with Mohammed Zahir Shah as its king between 1933 and 1973. In 1973 he was overthrown by his cousin Mohammed Daoud who turned Afghanistan into a republic.⁷ While Zahir Shah was progressive and Western-oriented, Daoud was also progressive but Soviet-oriented.⁸ Both leaders were nationalists as they were interested in Afghan unity under Pashtun control, the quantity-wise dominant ethnicity in Afghanistan. Further, as most Pashtun Afghans have never considered the Afghan eastern border with Paki-

⁷ Rubin, Michael: Who's responsible for the Taliban? In *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6 (2002), i. 1, p. 1-16, here p. 2-3.

⁸ Rubin M., p. 3.

stan as legitimate, since it separates ethnic Pashtuns between the two countries and prevents Afghan access to the Arabian Sea, Zahir Shah, and especially Daoud, also favored the unification of all Pashtun inhabited territory into Afghanistan.⁹ As a result, sensing a threat to its sovereignty and Eastern border stability, Pakistan was hostile towards Daoud.¹⁰ In consequence, the Pakistani prime minister at that time, and later president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, supported the formation of the anti-modernist resistance in Afghanistan already in 1973 by providing in-kind support and military training. Such policies have been continued by the following president General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.¹¹ The Pakistani support to the Afghan resistance plays an essential role in the analytical part below.

In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union stopped supporting Daoud as he opportunistically sought closer contact with the US and with the (at that time) pro-Western regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹² Instead, it started to support the marxist-leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).¹³ The party pursued the centralization of Afghan society and the decrease of importance of ethnicities and tribal affiliations.¹⁴ It consisted of two rivaling factions, the more radical Khalqs, mostly of Pashtun ethnicity and considered as down-to-earth rural people, and the more pragmatist Parchams, mostly of Tajik and Uzbek ethnicity and considered the urban intellectual elite.¹⁵ The Soviet Union encouraged the PDPA to stage a coup against Daoud on April 27th, 1978.¹⁶ Although the PDPA under Nur Muhammad Taraki and later Hafizullah Amin, both Khalqis, assumed power, factional rivalries did not decrease.¹⁷ Further, given the aversion of the Afghan society to anything promoted or imposed

⁹ Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Vassefi, Tara: The forgotten history of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. In *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (2012).

¹⁰ Noelle-Karimi, Christine; Maley, William and Saikal, Amin: Afghanistan. In *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (2005), p. 439-459, here p. 454;

Rubin M., p. 3;

Sial, Safdar: Pakistan's role and strategic priorities in Afghanistan since 1980. In *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Report* (2013), p. 1-10, here p. 2.

¹¹ Coll; Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi; Rubin, 2020, p. 5; Sial, p. 2.

¹² Noelle-Karimi, Maley and Saikal, p. 457.

¹³ Israeli, Ofer: The roundabout outcome of the Soviet-Afghan War. In *Asian Perspective* 46 (2022), i. 1, p. 1-20, here p. 4;

Rubin M, p. 5.

¹⁴ Nojumi, p. 70.

¹⁵ Ewans, p. 103; Noelle-Karimi, Maley and Saikal, p. 458; Nojumi, p. 65.

¹⁶ Grau, Lester and Nawroz, Yahya: The Soviet experience in Afghanistan. In *Military Review* (September-October 1995), p. 17-28, here p. 18.

¹⁷ Ewans, p. 110; Grau and Nawroz, p. 18; Rubin M., p. 5.

by foreign powers, criticism towards the party grew quickly. Consequently, their governmental system and control were soon threatened to collapse.¹⁸

As a result, the Soviet Union, willing to ensure their influence in Afghanistan through PDPA governance, decided to militarily invade the country on December 24th, 1979.¹⁹ The Soviets killed president Amin and installed Babrak Karmal from the Parchams.²⁰ Karmal was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah in 1986, a fellow Tajik Parcham who promoted Afghan nationalism in addition to centralization, thus acting less Marxist and emphasizing more Afghan history and Islamic principles.²¹ In this way, the PDPA and the Soviet Union hoped to stabilize the regime. The withdrawal of Soviet forces began in 1988, following the implementation of Perestroika and Glasnost reforms.²² The last Soviet forces left Afghanistan in April 1989. During their occupation they have destroyed entire villages as well as agricultural infrastructure vital for the Afghan population.²³ As a result, Afghanistan became dependent on foreign aid in the aftermath.²⁴ During the occupation, the Soviets have never controlled the countryside, where the resisting powers could form and hide.²⁵ As the Soviets were seen as imperialist occupiers unaware of Afghan contextualities, demands and needs, the resistance mobilized quickly.²⁶ Further, the resistance could develop in the refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran, which were at times inhabited by approximately 20 per cent of the displaced Afghan population.²⁷

Next to Pakistan, the US criticized Soviet PDPA support from the start and began to materially support the resistance on a small scale already half a year before Soviet

¹⁸ Grau and Nawroz, p. 18;

McCormick, Thomas J: America's half-century. United States foreign policy in the Cold War and after. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, MD USA 1995, p. 208;
Noelle-Karimi, Maley and Saikal, p. 458; Rubin, 1989, p. 152.

¹⁹ Israeli, p. 5; Rubin M, p. 6.

²⁰ Ewans, p. 118; Grau and Nawroz, p. 18; Rubin, 1989, p. 152; Saikal, p. 196.

²¹ Nojumi, p. 75;

Maley, William: The Afghanistan wars. Palgrave Macmillan. London, United Kingdom 2002, p. 171-172;
Rubin, 2020, p. 77.

²² Rubin, 2020, p. 76.

²³ Gandomi, Jonathan: Lessons from the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan for the United States and NATO. In Journal of Public and International Affairs 19 (2008), p. 51-68, here p. 53;
Goodson, p. 92.

²⁴ Goodson, p. 101-102; Maley, p. 155-158.

²⁵ Gandomi, p. 53; Rubin M, p. 6.

²⁶ Baev, Pavel K.: How Afghanistan was broken. The disaster of the Soviet intervention. In International Area Studies Review 15 (2013), i. 3, p. 249-262, here p. 258.

²⁷ Imran, Ali and Xiaochuan, Dong: The revenge game. US foreign policy during Afghan-Soviet War and Afghanistan-Pakistan falling into hell. In Asian Political Science 11 (2015), i. 27, p. 43-52, here p. 48; Rubin, 1989, p. 152.

invasion.²⁸ Saudi Arabia, China and Iran supported the resistance as well, each for their own geopolitical reasons.²⁹ The Soviet invasion thus did not only come at a material and personal cost but also at a diplomatic one, as their relations with the Islamic world, with Asia and with the West were deteriorating.³⁰

When the Soviets withdrew, the Najibullah regime survived and the resistance remained active due to ongoing financial and in-kind support from all foreign supporters.³¹ Still, the Najibullah regime could not enforce control over the entire country, as it was burdened by the factionalism within the PDPA, with the Khalq faction at times cooperating with some resistance actors to fight the governing Parchams.³² With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991, Soviet assistance towards the Najibullah regime ended in 1992. Lacking domestic support as well, the Najibullah regime fell apart on April 16th, 1992.³³ Consequently, the US resistance support ceased in 1992 as well.³⁴

The Afghan resistance has never been a united movement wherefore, when the PDPA regime fell apart, it did not succeed in establishing a stable new government. The interim government resulting from the Peshawar Accords of April 26th, 1992, headed by former resistance leaders Sibghatullah Mojaddedi and then by Burhanuddin Rabbani, has never been recognized by all resistance powers and was therefore shaped by internal rivalries.³⁵ On this basis of ongoing power struggles, the Taliban could form in 1994, an Islamist fundamentalist movement considering itself a counterweight against the resistant Mujahideen groups. Pakistan supported the movement from the start, replacing the Mujahideen with the Taliban as their interest representatives and beneficiaries. The Taliban captured Kandahar already in 1994 and the capital Kabul in 1996, thereby assuming effective control over Afghanistan. The resistance was pushed back to Northern Afghanistan and reduced in numbers, however, in 1997 the Taliban could take control over the North as well.³⁶

²⁸ Little, p. 690; Lowenstein, p. 38.

²⁹ Lowenstein, p. 4; McCormick, p. 209, 210; Rubin, 1989, p. 152.

³⁰ Israeli, p. 4.

³¹ Rubin, 1989, p. 163; Saikal, p. 202.

³² Ewans, p. 110; Maley, p. 173.

³³ Saikal, p. 206; Maley, p. 190; Rubin, 1995, p. 269; Rubin, 2020, p. 81.

³⁴ Sinno, p. 178.

³⁵ Maley, p. 213; Rubin, 1995, p. 266, 274.

³⁶ Rubin, 2020, p. 109-111.

1.2 Description of Afghan society

The Afghan society is highly diverse and divided, thus requiring a contextualization when analyzing the roots of the Afghan civil war and the rise of the Taliban. First of all, Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country with few roads, which makes it difficult to access and internally poorly connected. Ethnic groups and tribes have been living there in isolation from each other, resulting in ethnic, linguistic, and, to some extent, religious diversity.³⁷ A strong national bond does not exist in Afghanistan. People value autonomy and individualism, usually governing within their ethnic groups, especially their communal tribes (quam). Alliances with other actors outside these groups are often temporary and opportunistic.³⁸

The Pashtuns are the biggest ethnic group. They make up 40% of the population, are mostly Sunni muslim and also present significant shares of the population in Pakistan. They mostly live in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan and are further divided into groups, subgroups, and tribes.³⁹ The Tajiks form the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, making up 30% of the population. They are mostly Sunni muslim and have traditionally formed the intellectual elite in the country carrying political influence. They are primarily living in the northeast and western parts of Afghanistan and in the capital. Ethnic Tajiks of course also live in Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan in the northeast.⁴⁰ The Uzbeks form another big ethnic group in Afghanistan, making up 13% of the population. They are mostly Sunni muslims and have traditionally engaged in handicraft work. They reside in the northern part of Afghanistan, and the ethnicity is also well represented in neighboring Uzbekistan.⁴¹ The last of the larger ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the Hazara, who have a similar population share to the Uzbeks. They are mostly Shia muslims and live in the central highlands of Afghanistan.⁴² They form the only bigger ethnic group that is not affected by cross-border distributions.⁴³

Given that, neighboring countries, as well as regional powers with a connection to particular ethnic groups in Afghanistan, have a constant geopolitical interest in shap-

³⁷ Almost all Afghans are muslim but there are Shias and Sunnis as well as moderates and fundamentalists. Goodson, p. 12-13; Nojumi, p. 6-7; Rubin, 1989, p. 150.

³⁸ Goodson, p. 19; Nojumi, p. 68; Rubin, 1989, p. 151, Rubin M., p. 1; Tarzi, p. 484, 491

³⁹ Goodson, p. 14; Nojumi, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Nojumi, p. 64.

⁴¹ Nojumi, p. 64.

⁴² Nojumi, p. 64.

⁴³ Goodson, p. 16.

ing the developments within the country. On the one hand, they intend to promote the representation of their ethnic groups, on the other hand, they seek to undermine or support potential secessionist movements, depending on whether they would work to the detriment or to the advantage of their own power.⁴⁴ The lack of contact between the ethnic groups in Afghanistan resulted in the difficulty uniting them as Afghans. Therefore, unity emerges only in times of common threats.⁴⁵

Further, Afghan society has traditionally not been fundamentally religious.⁴⁶ Islamization in Afghanistan occurred after repeated foreign invasions in the past and radical Soviet attempts to restructure its society, combined with the availability of weapons imported by foreign powers during and after the Soviet invasion.⁴⁷

2. The Mujahideen resistance

2.1 Early phase 1979-1987

2.1.1 General description of the resistance movement and characteristics between 1979-1987

The Mujahideen resistance rose from local urges to resist Soviet-backed attempts to restructure society. For abovementioned reasons, however, the movement was not unified at first.⁴⁸ Faced with a common threat, though, the resistance movement eventually grew, and its leadership could develop close to the Afghan Eastern border in Peshawar, Pakistan.⁴⁹ Due to Pakistan's own interest in undermining Afghan societal centralization and preventing the eventual rise of an Afghan identity, it welcomed the resistance and steered it in a pan-Islamist direction.⁵⁰

The resistance movement developed a split between its internal and external front, however. While the internal front consisted of local commanders and their followers, skilled in guerilla style fighting and benefitting from local support, the external front based in Peshawar was made up of different parties and their leaders, who were mostly drawn from the urban educated elites. The internal front was responsible for carrying out resistance activities. The external front was generally responsible for

⁴⁴ Sial, p. 1; Tarzi, p. 493.

⁴⁵ Goodson, p. 17; Nojumi, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Goodson, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Goodson, p. 131; Nojumi, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Ewans, p. 111, 137; Nojumi, p. 83; Rubin, 1989, p. 153; Rubin, 1995, p. 185-187; Tarzi, p. 481, 483.

⁴⁹ Gandomi, p. 55; Jalal, p. 17; Noelle-Karimi, Maley and Saikal, p. 458; Rubin, 1995, p. 180; Rubin M, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi; Tarzi, p. 493.

lobbying Pakistan, the US, and other foreign actors for financial and in-kind support, as well as for educating future members of the resistance.⁵¹ The collaborations between them appeared as communities of convenience rather than of conviction.⁵² External leadership was regarded critically by the internal leaders, it was necessary though to effectively face the power of the Soviet invaders and to ensure their weapons supply.⁵³

The parties at the external front continuously, but for abovementioned reasons unsuccessfully, tried to agree on common objectives.⁵⁴ There have been seven parties in Peshawar altogether. Three of them held a rather liberal interpretation of Islam, did not oppose secular customs and westernization as long as no direct foreign interference was exerted, were not hostile towards the former royalist regime of King Zahir Shah and primarily consisted of Pashtuns.⁵⁵ Then there was the Islamic Party of Afghanistan (Hezb-e Islami), which later split into two parties. One of these was led by Mohammad Yunus Khalis, who later aligned with the Taliban and also cooperated immensely with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The other party was headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Both of these were radically Islamist and more centralized and hierarchically organized than the others. They also primarily consisted of Pashtuns and benefited the most from foreign support, especially from Pakistan, the US, and Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶ Then, there was the Islamic Society of Afghanistan (Jamiat-e Islami), headed by the later president Rabbani and closely cooperating with the internal front commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, later considered an Afghan national hero. This party was more moderate than the Islamic Party and consisted predominantly of Tajiks. While it could receive some support from foreign actors, it did not achieve the same level of support as the Islamic Party.⁵⁷ Last but not least, the Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan was also part of the external front. Led by the Pashtun Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, this party promoted Arab interests in Afghanistan and propagated a fundamentalist Salafist Islam, which did not have backing among the

⁵¹ Israeli, p. 6; Nojumi, p. 85, 86, 87, 89; Tarzi, p. 480, 485-486.

⁵² Nojumi, p. 84, 89; Rubin, 1995, p.180, 191, 232.

⁵³ Rubin, 1995, p. 227, 230.

⁵⁴ Jalal, p. 18; Nojumi, p. 89, 92-94.

⁵⁵ Rubin, 1995, p. 203-213.

⁵⁶ Nojumi, p. 86; Rubin, 1989, p. 153-154; Rubin, 1995, p. 214-218, 232

⁵⁷ Rubin, 1995, p. 218-220.

Afghan population.⁵⁸ In addition to these seven parties, several Shiite parties existed as well, promoting their interests against the Sunni majority in Afghanistan. They operated from and were supported by Iran.⁵⁹ The existence of all these parties depicts the ethnic, religious, and ideological diversity and complexity of the Afghan resistance movement, even at the external front.

Due to their communal-based governance, the Afghan population supported the overarching party structure of the resistance only reluctantly. The radicalism of some parties was also questioned, as the home front was less concerned with (religious) ideology than with their financial well-being and the survival of their societal structure.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, abovementioned dependency structures made internal Mujahideen commanders also cooperate with Khali's, Hekmatyar's, and Sayyaf's parties.⁶¹

As it took considerable time for the resistance to organize effectively, it was only around 1985 that the Soviets appeared to be losing the ability to maintain control. This was largely due to high-tech weaponry supplied by the US.⁶² However, the movement continuously provided a semi-institutionalized platform for political Islam in Afghanistan, which facilitated the development of Islamist extremism.⁶³

3.1.2 The role of the international support between 1979-1987

Due to Soviet meddling within Afghan politics already prior to the invasion, the US had supported the Mujahideen on a small and non-invasive scale ever since June 1979.⁶⁴ After the invasion started, the US stepped up their non-invasive support immediately due to the feared increase of the Soviet Union's influence in the South and Middle East, making its way to the Persian Gulf, altogether potentially threatening the US's oil supply.⁶⁵ The interest to protect access to the Persian Gulf is also depicted in the Carter Doctrine adopted in January 1980, stating that it would be defended against the Soviets by the means necessary.⁶⁶ The US quickly noticed that the Afghan

⁵⁸ Baerden, Milton: Afghanistan. Graveyard of empires. In *Foreign Affairs* 80 (2001), i. 6, p. 17-30, here p. 24;
Rubin, 1995, p. 220-221.

⁵⁹ Maley, p. 178.

⁶⁰ Rubin, 1989, p. 158; Tarzi, p. 489.

⁶¹ Rubin M., p. 9.

⁶² Israeli, p. 14.

⁶³ Baev, p. 252; Lowenstein, p. 13, 14.

⁶⁴ Coll; Ewans, p. 120; Lowenstein, p. 4, 28.

⁶⁵ Baerden, p. 20; Israeli, p. 8; Lowenstein, p. 12, 51.

⁶⁶ Ewans, p. 125.

resistance was not capable of facing the Soviet threat alone and neither were regional powers around.⁶⁷ While during the first years the support had been increasing but remained on lower levels, the contributions increased more immensely when Ronald Reagan became president in 1981. While in 1980 funds worth approximately \$50 million were allocated to the resistance, it was \$280 million in 1984 and even \$470 million in 1985, however still not standing in comparison with the much higher amounts spent by the Soviets.⁶⁸

In the first years, it remained important to the US to remain in a state of plausible deniability⁶⁹, meaning that no in-kind support from US production was distributed to the resistance, all means of support were just delivered to Peshawar, and the contact with the Mujahideen was carried out by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Pakistani intelligence service, as a middleman.⁷⁰

Pakistan had its own interests in Afghanistan, intending to undermine Afghan nation-building, prevent Pashtun secessionist movements in Pakistan, and ensure strategic territorial depth on its Western border, given the ever conflictual relationship with India in its East.⁷¹ However, Pakistan lacked the financial means to provide the resistance promoting these objectives with effective support. The US, having the financial means but lacking the deep contextual knowledge about the resistance powers, appeared a natural partner for Pakistan to counteract the Soviets and the PDPA regime.

Saudi Arabia also possessed interests in a Soviet-free, Islamic Afghanistan. Both the government and private, Islamist fundamentalist actors supported the Afghan resistance powers. They provided similar financial contributions as the US.⁷² In addition, Saudi voluntary fighters participated directly in the fighting.⁷³

As the US lacked interests in Afghanistan other than preventing the Soviet Union from integrating it into its sphere of influence, it did not have an extended interest in Afghan state building.⁷⁴ Further, it was dependent on Pakistan regarding the support

⁶⁷ United States Government Publishing Office. Department of State: Foreign relations of the United States. 1977-1980 Volume XII. Afghanistan, p. 892.

⁶⁸ Baev, p. 254; Ewans, p. 120; Israeli, p. 13; Saikal, p. 199

⁶⁹ Bearden, p. 20.

⁷⁰ Coll, p. 63; Little, p. 690; Rubin, 2020, p. 66.

⁷¹ Sial, p. 1.

⁷² Bearden, p. 24; Sial, p. 2; Tarzi, p. 493.

⁷³ Pakistanis did this as well. Coll.

⁷⁴ Lowenstein, p. 39; Rubin, 1995, p. 201; Rubin, 2020, p. 67, 72; Tarzi, p. 492.

delivery to the resistance powers, as the use of the Pakistani territory was necessary for that.⁷⁵ Therefore, the US did not only leave the aid distribution to the different Mujahideen powers fully to the ISI, but also turned a blind eye on both Pakistan's nuclear weapons ambitions and its poor human rights record.⁷⁶ In the very beginning of the covert action, this procedure might, for the lack of contextual knowledge on part of the US, have made sense. Already right after the beginning of the invasion, the CIA provided the US government with the information that the resistance movement in Afghanistan was highly fragmented and unlikely to act in a unified manner "unless Pakistan takes the lead in trying to unite or at minimum increase the coordination among the diverse groups"⁷⁷. This, however, Pakistan did not do, as described below.

Therefore, even if there was a dependency in the relationship between the US and Pakistan and even if the US had not been as aware of the exact Afghan Resistance contextualities, it is apparent already this early that intending to influence whom the support was allocated to might have benefitted the US interest to efficiently counteract the Soviets and to not contribute to other unintended side effects. By the end of March 1980 at the latest, the US also had a rather accurate picture of the resistance's exact fragmentations on ethnic, tribal and religious lines and between the internal and external fronts, as depicted in information provided by the CIA to the government and in a telegram from the US Department of Defence to a high-ranking military officer.⁷⁸ The contextual knowledge continued to improve over time, even though it remained "uneven in quality and far from complete"⁷⁹ as the CIA admitted to the government.

Pakistan chose the Islamic Party of Afghanistan with its leader Hekmatyar as the main beneficiary, as he promoted the Pakistani objectives of Soviet expulsion, Pan-Islamism and undermining Afghan nationalism most adequately.⁸⁰ These motives had entered the US's conscience as well.⁸¹ The CIA officer for the Afghanistan Task Force in the 1980s, Charles Cogan, noted for example that relations with the benefit-

⁷⁵ Coll, p. 51; Israeli, p. 2; United States Government Publishing Office, p. 860.

⁷⁶ Ewans, p. 136; Jalal, p. 20; Rubin, 1989, p. 154; Saikal, 204.

⁷⁷ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 447.

⁷⁸ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 628, 659-660.

⁷⁹ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 822.

⁸⁰ Coll, p. 60, 63; Ewans, p. 136-137, p. 154-155; Nojumi, p. 120; Rubin, 1995, p. 199, 201; Rubin, 2020, p. 64, 66; Tarzi, p. 492.

⁸¹ Rubin, 2020, p. 67; United States Government Publishing Office, p. 776.

ting Mujahideen could only hold short-term as their long-term interest was not compatible with Western values and aims.⁸²

While Hekmatyar might have fulfilled the US interest of fighting the Soviets, he was the most radical Islamist in the resistance movement, neither responding to Afghan demands for state-building nor to Western interests.⁸³ Further, Pakistan, for its known interests, also actively undermined the unification of the internal resistance front, as they feared the rise of Afghan nationalism.⁸⁴ While mainly focusing on counteracting the Soviets in Afghanistan, it is doubtful whether the US aimed at actively undermining Afghan state-building as an unstable situation in the area might have threatened their aspired access to the Persian Gulf and Middle East oil as well. Therefore, it remains questionable why Carter and especially Reagan and the CIA did not exert more influence on the ISI and why they did not intend to directly communicate with the resistance parties and fighters.⁸⁵ This is even more so as the Pakistani-US dependence had not been one-sided. While the US depended on Pakistan's contextual knowledge and territory, Pakistan highly depended on the US's financial resources and weapons supply.⁸⁶ The US knew this all along as Pakistan demonstrated its vulnerability repeatedly. In August 1978 for example, President Zia "sought guarantees from Washington as a deterrent against what he considered Soviet-backed Afghan encroachments on Pakistani territory".⁸⁷ In March 1979, the CIA reported to the government that President Zia had said that "Pakistan cannot act in isolation"⁸⁸ to potential Soviet measures of retaliation. Seven months later, the CIA informed the government that President Zia "is anxious that CIA provide this equipment [weapons and ammunition] through the ISID".⁸⁹

After the Soviet invasion had started, the US geopolitical interest in Afghanistan increased immensely, as Carter articulated to the nation.⁹⁰ While Pakistan might have used this to press the US to contribute more to the resistance, the interdependency

⁸² Imram and Xiaochuan, p. 47.

⁸³ Rubin, 1995, p. 201.

⁸⁴ Nojumi, p. 94, 104, 129; Tarzi, p. 492.

⁸⁵ Ewans, p. 136, p. 154-155; Imram and Xiaochuan, p. 47.

⁸⁶ Ewans, p. 137; Jalal, p. 19;

United States Government. Department of State: Pakistan. Security planning and the nuclear option. Report 83-AR, p. 10.

⁸⁷ United States Government Publishing Office, p. VIII-IX.

⁸⁸ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 125

⁸⁹ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 212.

⁹⁰ Carter, Jimmy: Address to the nation on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. January 4th, 1980.

argument still holds, as Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, combined with its lack of financial and material means, remained unchanged.

Furthermore, the US knew all along as well that indirectly supporting the Resistance would come together with losing "much control over how the funds would be spent, and also much of the influence which would accrue through dealing directly with the Afghan dissidents", as the government had been informed accordingly by the CIA.⁹¹ The question remains why this concern had not been taken into account more.

In 1986, the US started to openly question the ISI's distribution practices. At that time, Reagan also aimed at putting more pressure on the Soviet Union. Therefore, the US did not only decide to increase its financial contribution immensely, to \$630 million in 1987, but to also end its policy of plausible deniability and have more direct contact with the Mujahideen powers.⁹² For instance, Reagan invited Rabbani, the spokesman of the Resistance Alliance, to the White House in 1986 to discuss the movement's fragmentation as well as ways to counteract it.⁹³ Further, the US began delivering Stinger missiles, a US-made shoulder-fired surface-to-air anti-aircraft missile system, directly to the Resistance as well.⁹⁴ With Saudi Arabia matching the US contributions again, the Mujahideen benefitted from their highest amount of financial and material support that year. The changed US policy did not change the overall situation, however: Hekmatyar's party was still supported the most and the resistance movement remained fragmented.

2.2 Intermediate phase 1988-1991

2.2.1 Resistance characteristics between 1988-1991

When the Soviet Union announced its withdrawal, unity between the resistance powers decreased further, despite the opportunity to promote the PDPA regime breakup then.⁹⁵ On the internal front, commanders and communities were not dependent on support from the external front and Pakistan any more after the neutralization of the Soviet threat, also given the abundance of weapons available to them

⁹¹ United States Government Publishing Office, p. 127.

⁹² Little, p. 691; Rubin, 1995, p. 182;

United States Government: Afghanistan III. The Resistance Alliance (1986).

⁹³ United States Government: The President's meeting with Afghan Resistance Spokesman Rabbani and other Resistance leaders (June 16, 1986).

⁹⁴ Bearden, p. 21; Rubin, 1995, p. 182; Rubin, 2020, p. 73;

⁹⁵ Sinno, p. 215.

by that time and the increase of direct contact between foreign supporters other than Pakistan and them.⁹⁶ Therefore, to pursue their non-ideological pragmatic self-interest, internal commanders did not rely on the external parties any more, wherefore they, in turn, lost their legitimation.⁹⁷ In that time, new alliances were formed as well. People affiliated with the Khalq faction of the PDPA started to side with local Pashtun resistance forces but also with Hekmatyar.⁹⁸ It became apparent here at the latest that the resistance in Afghanistan was ultimately less ideologically and more ethnically and self-interest oriented. The resistance opposed the Soviets because they were seen as foreign invaders intending to restructure their traditionalist society, but not due to a concern with communist ideology as such. What actually interested the population was representation of their ethnicity in the government and decentralized governance.⁹⁹

Consequently, the initial intent by the resistance to form an Interim Government in 1989 to replace Najibullah and the PDPA regime after the Soviet withdrawal failed.¹⁰⁰ The assault by the resistance on Jalalabad in 1989, aimed at taking control of Afghanistan militarily, failed as well.¹⁰¹ Both incidents led the internal front to further lose trust in the external front and the capabilities of the resistance movement in general.¹⁰²

2.2.2 The role of the international support between 1988-1991

When the Soviets communicated their withdrawal plans, the US's interest to invest in Afghanistan decreased as well. Therefore, they did not attempt to support a peaceful power transition or to establish an effective Mujahideen government.¹⁰³ Instead, they were rather orienting the extent of their support at what the Soviets were doing. The Soviet Union kept supporting the PDPA regime financially and materially after their withdrawal until they dissolved, wherefore the US continued to support the Mujahideen as well, but by decreased amounts.¹⁰⁴ In this phase, this circumstance did

⁹⁶ Rubin, 1995, p. 183; Sinno, p. 189, 195.

⁹⁷ Nojumi, p. 100-101; Rubin, 1995, p. 247; Sinno, p. 198; Tarzi, p. 487.

⁹⁸ Nojumi, p. 95-96; Rubin, 1995, p. 255; Sinno, p. 177.

⁹⁹ Goodson, p. 100; Rubin, 1995, p. 253, 277; Rubin 2020, p. 91; Tarzi, p. 491.

¹⁰⁰ Ewans, p. 150; Rubin, 1995, p. 247; Sinno, p. 176; Tarzi, p. 479-480.

¹⁰¹ Sinno, p. 207

¹⁰² Tarzi, p. 492.

¹⁰³ Saikal, p. 205.

¹⁰⁴ Sinno, p. 178;

United States Government: Annual State Department Report on Afghanistan, January 4th, 1989, p. 17.

not affect the beneficiaries much as Saudi Arabia increased its financial support and the ISI still channeled it largely to Hekmatyar.¹⁰⁵ Further, as stated above, the internal front was also less threatened by budget cuts at that time as the actors started to become more independent anyway.¹⁰⁶

The USA continued to criticize the distribution behavior of the ISI, however without real effects. When trying to allocate aid bilaterally to individual commanders, the territorial dependency on Pakistan became apparent. Apparently, there had also been a dispute between the State Department and the CIA, with the CIA willing to support Hekmatyar and Sayyaf further.¹⁰⁷

By June 19, 1990 at the latest, the US had been aware of the fact that "violence is rising in the Afghan refugee camps around Peshawar as traditionalist and Islamic fundamentalist groups in the resistance vie for power" and that "the political and military balance among resistance groups is shifting in favor of the Islamist groups, and anti-Western slogans are increasingly important rallying cries".¹⁰⁸ When looking at this from a purely US geopolitical interest perspective, it is questionable why the US partly kept on supporting the resistance powers without controlling that the support refrains from benefitting anti-Western forces. The USA still possessed the aforementioned leverage towards Pakistan to do so at that time, as Pakistan indirectly communicated their dependency on US financial and in-kind support still in 1991.¹⁰⁹

Shia Iran, previously supporting smaller Shia Mujahideen parties that for scope limitations remained unmentioned in this paper so far, switched its support to the PDPA regime in this phase as aspirations to build an interim Mujahideen government never included Shia people and thus fell short of representing their interests.¹¹⁰ The Mujahideen parties acting from Pakistan were all Sunni and thus had their own interest in excluding Shia people, and Sunni Pakistan favored this as well. This shows that international and regional powers did not only take relevant roles in the conflict

¹⁰⁵ Nojumi, p. 100.; Sinno, p. 201.

¹⁰⁶ Rubin, 1995, p. 250.

¹⁰⁷ Rubin, 1995, p. 251.

¹⁰⁸ CIA: National Intelligence Daily for Tuesday, 19 June, 1990, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ CIA: National Intelligence Daily for Monday, 25 July, 1991, p. 22.

¹¹⁰ CIA: National Intelligence Daily for Wednesday, 09 August 1989, p. 9;
Tarzi, p. 493;
United States Government: Annual Report, p. 12.

by financing their favored resistance actors but that they also helped increase the fragmentation of Afghan society by following their particular geopolitical interests.¹¹¹

2.3 Late phase 1992-1996

2.3.1 Resistance characteristics between 1992-1996

When the Soviet Union dissolved, so did its financial backing of the PDPA regime, leading to its dissolution in turn. Normally a great chance for opposition movements to assume control, the resistance remained too fragmented and trapped in diverse individual power interests to do so. In addition, as depicted in the next section, the resistance also became underfinanced due to the US ceasing its support entirely in 1992. Nevertheless, the resistance gave it another try and formed an interim government with first Mojaddedi and then Rabbani in power, an outcome of the Peshawar Agreement from April 1992.¹¹² Hekmatyar opposed this government and fighting ensued. The loyalty of the parties in the government was not guaranteed either and shifted according to their immediate interests.¹¹³ The government remained ineffective and the underfinanced parties dissolved soon.¹¹⁴ Only Hekmatyar's Islamic Party of Afghanistan and Rabbani's Islamic Society of Afghanistan survived. Due to their ideological differences and power aspirations, the two parties clashed frequently and neither succeeded in developing a national profile nor in having larger shares of the diverse population support them.¹¹⁵ The Afghan government under Rabbani with Massoud as its defense minister officially, even though never in effective control of the whole country, remained in power until 1996.¹¹⁶ However, it was constantly defending against assaults by Hekmatyar's party and a new resistance movement: the Taliban.¹¹⁷ The population support for these three powers was, again, largely characterized by ethnic affiliation as well as immediate calculations of self-interest.¹¹⁸

The Taliban could arise as the resistance was incapable of forming a stable government and as local commanders were acting for their own personal benefit instead of in the interest of the Afghan people. Further, the disastrous economic situation in Afghanistan promoted population support for the radical Islamic group, even signifi-

¹¹¹ Tarzi, p. 494.

¹¹² Nojumi, p. 96; Saikal, p. 214-215; Sinno, p. 182.

¹¹³ Rubin, 2020, p. 86; Sinno, p. 180, 216.

¹¹⁴ Rubin, 1995, p. 272.

¹¹⁵ Maley, p. 189; Saikal, p. 210, 211; Sinno, p. 174, 196, 216.

¹¹⁶ Maley, p. 200; Nojumi, p. 115-116.

¹¹⁷ Rubin, 1995, p. 274.

¹¹⁸ Nojumi, p. 113-114.

cant shares of the former resistance turned to the Taliban, as for example its leader Mohammad Omar, who used to be a Mujahideen fighter for the Khalis part of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan.¹¹⁹ Typical Taliban members were either illiterate, poor and underprivileged Pashtuns who came to Pakistan as refugees and received a radical Islamist education in the religious schools there, or former regional warlords.¹²⁰ The Taliban pursued the objective to fight a jihad, establish a radical Islamic government in Afghanistan and create a working system in the country.¹²¹ As this matched Pakistan's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, it shifted its support from the Mujahideen to the Taliban by providing financial and in-kind support as well as military training to them.¹²²

The Taliban could replace the Rabbani government in 1996. The main reasons for that were the fragmentation of the resistance, the lack of popular support for the government and Pakistan's shift in support.¹²³

2.3.2 The role of the international support between 1992-1996

The USA ceased their entire Mujahideen support when the Soviet Union dissolved due to their resulting lack of geopolitical interest in the country, but also due to their increased criticism towards Hekmatyar and the ISI.¹²⁴ Hekmatyar continued to receive support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia at first, while Rabbani and his government were at that time supported by powers hostile towards these two, India and Iran.¹²⁵ Thus, the disengagement of the Soviet Union and the US from the area led to the PDPA regime's dissolution but it did not lead to a sudden pacification in Afghanistan. Rather, regional powers took over the positions that the Soviet Union and the US had before, continuing the struggle for power game.¹²⁶ As the US did not engage in state-building in Afghanistan and primarily intended to force the Soviets out, it is not surprising that hostilities between different powers in Afghanistan prevailed after

¹¹⁹ Bearden, p. 26; Goodson, p. 110;

Khan, Imtiyaz Gul: Afghanistan. Human cost of armed conflict since the Soviet invasion. In *Perceptions* 17 (2012), i. 4, p. 209-2024, here p. 218-219;

Maley, p. 225; Nojumi, p. 127.

¹²⁰ Goodson, p. 99; Nojumi, p. 123; Rubin M., 2002, p. 11; Rubin, 2020, p. 97; Saikal, p. 221.

¹²¹ Laub, Zachary: The Taliban in Afghanistan. In *Council of Foreign Relations Backgrounders* (2012), p. 1-9; Nojumi, p. 118; Saikal, p. 221.

¹²² Goodson, p. 106, 112; Nojumi, p. 130; Saikal, p. 221.

¹²³ Maley, p. 213.

¹²⁴ Baev, p. 254; Maley, p. 179.; Noelle-Karimi, Maley, Saikal, p. 213, 459; Sinno, p. 180.

¹²⁵ Sinno, p. 218.

¹²⁶ Coll, p. 4; Goodson, p. 8; Khan, p. 211; Maley, p. 168; Rubin, 1989, p. 166; Rubin, 1995, p. 158, 183.

superpower withdrawal. Due to the US's selective support and contributions to the resistance powers, hostilities between them were rather exacerbated than counter-acted.

Pakistan changed its support pattern in 1994 when it exchanged Hekmatyar for the Taliban as beneficiaries. In doing so, the whole former resistance movement was left without a chance, as Indian and Iranian support to Rabbani's government was not sufficient to counteract against the well supported and less fragmented Taliban.¹²⁷

3. Conclusion:

Afghan society has ever since been very fragmented and the different ethnic groups tend to follow their self-interests rather than ideological or national ones, resulting in ethnic hostilities and tensions. The fundamental problem in Afghanistan undermining stable governmental structures thus results from the societal structure and not from foreign interference.

However, foreign actors have exacerbated the tensions between the different groups during the time of the Soviet invasion by self-interestedly supporting those resistance powers which could forward their own geopolitical interests best without paying attention to or actively undermining the needs and demands of a potentially pacified and unified Afghan society. Especially regional powers need consideration here. Given different Afghan ethnic groups' connections to regional powers such as Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, they possess (geo)political interests in Afghanistan that they pursued relentlessly during the considered time period.

While the Afghan societal structure as well as the regional powers' meddling in Afghan affairs carry the main responsibility for the inability of the Mujahideen to form a stable government in Afghanistan, the US also carries responsibility in undermining the development of a united Afghan nationalist movement. The US gave Pakistan free rein in choosing the fundamentalist Islamist resistance forces as the main beneficiaries of the US-provided support, even though the US knew about the fragmentation of Afghan society and the necessary careful consideration about resource allocations. While the US theoretically possessed significant leverage over Pakistan, as Pakistan had immense geopolitical interests in Afghanistan and was highly dependent on the American financial and material contributions to the Afghan cause, this leverage remained unused. The narrow-minded US interest in decreasing the So-

¹²⁷ Maley, p. 213.

viet Union's sphere of influence without long-sightedly intending to support unity and a moderate orientation within the resistance contributed to the maintenance of the fragmentation of Afghan society and to the direness of the Afghan civil war between 1979 and 1996.

Regarding the rise of the Taliban, while Pakistan and some former resistance members are the actors mainly responsible, the US also contributed, if only indirectly, to it. Former resistance members that ended up joining the Taliban had often received US-funded training and weapons before, which promoted the movement's success.

Altogether, superpowers acting in foreign contexts seem to be able to, according to their interest, strengthen or weaken specific conflict situations or dynamics. However, they are, due to local and regional power interests, realities, and agencies, hardly able to reshape contexts according to their desires.

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