Afghanistan in the Balance

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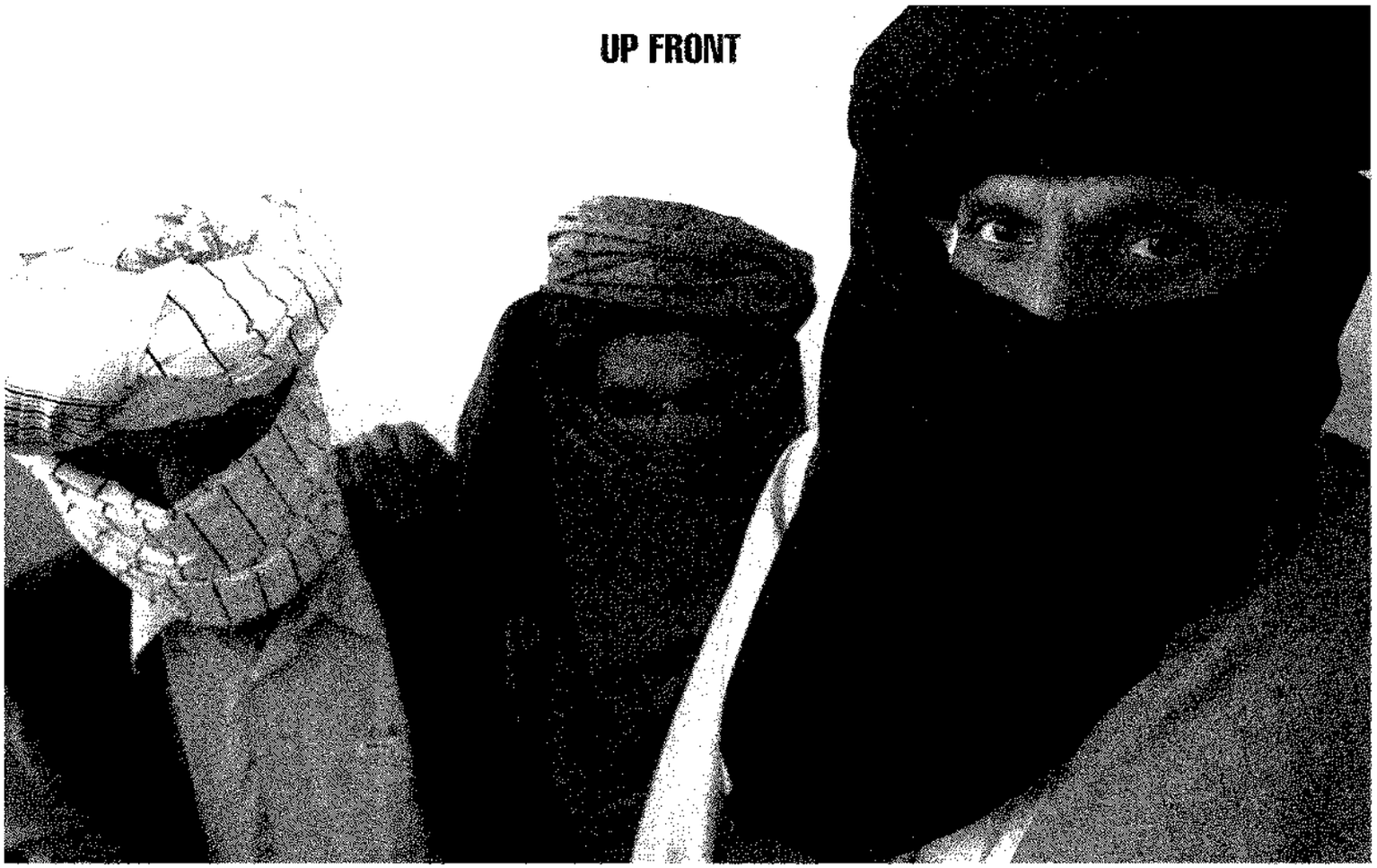

Three Taliban "defectors" crossing back into Afghanistan from Peshawar, Pakistan, October 2001. DERMOT TATLOW/PANOS PICTURES

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As Operation Enduring Freedom proceeds, there is growing danger that the Taliban's demise could produce a power vacuum like that which accompanied the last major superpower intervention in Afghanistan. Such a vacuum could reprise the civil war, anarchy and refugee flight that followed the fall of the country's communist regime in 1992. Supporting Afghans who are committed to building their government and their country from the bottom up is the only alternative to chaos.

In the first few days after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it became clear that the United States was going to seek out allies in the region to assist efforts to destroy al-Qaeda bases and networks of support in Afghanistan. Very quickly that objective was expanded to include dislodging or crushing the Taliban, who have ruled most of Afghanistan in recent years and who have provided Osama bin Laden safe haven since 1997. While the Bush administration has stated that it is not out to replace one regime with another, it has embarked on a strategy clearly designed to do exactly that. The administration chose as its new allies in the fight against bin Laden and the Taliban the so-called Northern Alliance, more accurately known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or the United Front.

The United Front might be new allies, but they are certainly no strangers to the US. Most of the factions cur-

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rently allied in the coalition fought against the Soviet Union and Afghan communist forces in the 1980s. Some, but not all, benefited from the CIA pipeline that funneled funds and weapons to the Afghan *mujahideen* (resistance forces). All battled for control of the country after the communist government collapsed in April 1992. The Bush administration, wary of the Front's record of infighting and human rights violations during this period, is concerned about the consequences should US support pave the way for the United Front to capture Kabul. Leaders within the United Front are well aware of the danger of repeating the past if they, and not a more broadly representative government, replace the Taliban. But little thought has been given to what kind of transitional mechanism could work to bring together Afghans from different constituencies inside the country. As the US-led military campaign proceeds, there is growing danger that the Taliban's demise could produce a power vacuum like that which accompanied the fall of the communist government, and possibly reprise the civil war and anarchy that followed.

Roots of Anarchy

Afghanistan's seemingly endless war began on April 27, 1978, when a small, internally divided Marxist-Leninist party took power in a coup. Before 1973, Afghanistan had been a monarchy, ruled by Muhammad Zahir Shah, the last of the Durrani dynasty.[1] Zahir Shah is a Persian-speaking Pashtun. In the mid-1960s, Zahir Shah had embarked on a series of very gradual reforms to Afghanistan's political system: allowing political parties to organize, and convening a *loya jirga*, or Grand Council,[2] which assembled representatives to debate a draft constitution that provided for the establishment of a bicameral parliament. But the reforms were limited. The parliament had only consultative status and political parties were not allowed to contest elections. In addition, districts were drawn so as to ensure that Pashtuns, the predominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, held the majority in both houses. Zahir Shah was ousted in 1973 by his cousin, Daoud Khan, whom Zahir Shah had attempted to marginalize through new laws prohibiting members of the royal family from serving in parliament or ministerial positions.

Daoud immediately declared Afghanistan a republic and himself president. In staging the coup, Daoud had allied himself with the Parcham (Flag) faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a small Marxist-Leninist party that had been formed in 1965. In 1967, the party split into two factions, Parcham and Khalq (Masses). Both factions were predominantly Pashtun. However, the Pashtuns in Parcham were largely urban and Dari (Persian)-speaking. The party drew on the support of urban Afghans from various ethnic groups. Khalq's social base was primarily rural, educated Pashto-speaking Pashtuns.[3]

At about the same time, a number of Islamic organizations also formed. Like the PDPA, their leaders were for the most part students and faculty at Kabul University. These groups were strongly opposed not only to the ruling elite but to foreign influence in Afghanistan in general. The first to form was Jamiat-i Islami, which included in its membership several professors at the university. The party split in 1976-77, with engineering student Gulbuddin Hikmatyar heading the breakaway party Hizb-i Islami. These parties became the core of the resistance based in and around Peshawar, Pakistan, after 1978.

Daoud's alliance with the PDPA was an opportunistic one. Once in power he tried to shun the party, distance his government from the Soviet Union and attract aid—and advice on setting up a secret police force—from the Shah's Iran.[4] Islamic organizations came under increased pressure, and most of the top leaders went into exile in Pakistan. At a *loya jirga* he convened in 1977, Daoud promulgated a new constitution based on a one-party system. By this time Khalq and Parcham were ready to reunite. They did so, and in the April 27, 1978 coup, they killed Daoud and his family. The coup, which took place in the lunar month of Saur, came to be known as the Saur Revolution.

Superpower Intervention

The immediate targets of the leaders of the PDPA's new Democratic Republic of Afghanistan were members of the former ruling elite. Political activists and religious leaders—particularly the Islamists—as well as tribal leaders, students and teachers were arrested and many were executed. Ethnic minority groups were also targeted, especially the Shi'a Hazaras. The Khalqis soon emerged as the dominant force and many Parachamis were also arrested. Under the leadership of Hafizullah Amin, the Khalqi prime minister, the government launched a campaign of radical agrarian reform in the countryside that met strong resistance and soon provoked uprisings throughout the country. The government responded with brutal force: in one notorious incident, over 1,000 unarmed villagers in Kerala, Kunar province, were massacred on April 20, 1979.[5] Tens of thousands are believed to have been executed by Amin's forces as the government attempted to impose its new policies through terror.[6] The army rapidly disintegrated. Throughout this period, the PDPA government had continued to receive aid from the Soviet Union. The demise of the army, more than anything else, prompted the Soviet Union to make its move and airlift troops to Kabul on December 24, 1979.[7] Amin was assassinated, and a decade of Soviet occupation began.

The Soviet invasion greatly expanded the resistance, a large part of which was organized around the Islamist parties based in Peshawar, Pakistan, and around the Shi'a parties based in Iran.[8] Through the CIA, the US covertly channeled arms and other support to the *mujahideen*. At the beginning the aid was not that substantial, but it increased dramatically after 1981. According to James Rupert:

Afghan carpet merchants in Peshawar. Carpet depicts the Taliban's hanging of communist president Najibullah. DERMOT TATLOW/PANOS PICTURES

> The CIA, apparently unconvinced that the *mujahideen* could really win the war, resisted a large, covert aid program. But congressional supporters of the *mujahideen* pushed the Reagan administration to enlarge the program from a reported level of $50 million in FY 1981 to $630 million in FY 1987. US officials cited over the years in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and other media gave figures for the annual military aid allocations that, totaled from FY 1980 through FY 1989, equaled about $2.8 billion....This does not include more than $150 million in food, surplus (non-lethal) Defense Department equipment and transportation assistance given the guerrillas and their supporters under a program administered by the US Agency for International Development.[9]

Though the assistance was provided by the US, along with Great Britain, Saudi Arabia and several other countries, it was distributed by Pakistan. The CIA effectively subcontracted to Pakistan's directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) the job of determining which groups got how much.

Pakistan's Covert Wars

Two phrases more or less sum up Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan: "the Pashtun question" and "strategic depth." When British India was partitioned into the independent states of India and Pakistan, the status of the so-called tribal agencies—areas that bordered Afghanistan—was left unclear. Under the British, these agencies had semi-autonomous status. At the time of partition, Afghanistan argued that the Pashtun agencies should have the option of declaring their own separate nation of Pashtunistan that might be integrated with the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, ensuring that Pashtuns would be the majority population. Pakistan strongly opposed this suggestion. In the end, Britain allowed the agencies to choose only between India and Pakistan. All chose the latter.[10] The border dividing Afghanistan from Pakistan, called the Durand Line, cuts through Pashtun areas on both sides. The Pashtun question has continued to shape Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan. Afghan groups that Pakistan has supported—including the Taliban—are opposed to the idea of a Pashtunistan.

Pakistan's most important foreign policy concerns have always lain to the east, in its relationship with India. As long as Pakistan remained in a hostile standoff with India over Kashmir, it wanted to be sure that its western border was secure, and that there was a friendly government in Kabul that would not support the creation of a Pashtunistan. Over the years, Pakistani officials have described this imperative as "strategic depth." The term has also come to mean the establishment of stronger trade and political links to other Muslim states in the Middle East and Central Asia. After 1990, when popular revolt broke out in Indian-controlled Kashmir in support of independence, Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan also included support for a regime that would allow Kashmiri fighters to train there. As Ahmed Rashid notes, "the Kashmir issue became the prime mover behind Pakistan's Afghan policy and its support to the Taliban."[11] Since 1990, the ISI has fought a covert war on two fronts; of the two, Kashmir has always taken precedence.

US Navy ordancemen aboard the USS Enterprise muscle bombs onto aircraft, October 7, 2001. DOUGLAS HOUSER/DOD PHOTO

The notion of "strategic depth" has long been criticized by observers who perceived that Pakistan's pursuit of short-term interests in Afghanistan actually undermined its own long-term economic and political security. In 1998, Eqbal Ahmad wrote:

> Afghanistan was long an irritating but innocuous adversary with territorial claims on the Northwest Frontier Province, Pakistan's largely Pashto-speaking province. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan's support of the anti-communist *mujahideen* ended Islamabad's hostile relations with Kabul, and rendered its influence dominant over Afghanistan. Pakistan has misused this gain to its detriment. Its Afghan policy—the quest for a mirage misnamed "strategic depth"—has deeply alienated trusty old allies while closing the door to new friendships. Its national security managers have in fact squandered historic opportunities and produced a new set of problems for Pakistan's security.[12]

Nonetheless, Pakistan's desire for a malleable government in Afghanistan led it to support Pashtun *mujahideen* who were opposed to the creation of Pashtunistan. Even before the Saur Revolution, the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had designated Gulbuddin Hikmatyar as its principal contact among the Islamist parties that had taken refuge in Pakistan from Daoud's repressive policies.[13] After the Soviet invasion, and the establishment of the arms pipeline, the ISI provided Hikmatyar with the lion's share of weaponry, justifying their preference on the argument that Hikmatyar was good at "killing Russians." In fact, Hikmatyar and his party were far less successful militarily that other *mujahideen* factions. In addition, Hizb-i Islami was involved in frequent battles with other *mujahideen* elements with whom it had personal, ethnic and ideological differences. On July 9, 1989, Hizb-i Islami forces ambushed Jamiat-i Islami forces (commanded by the late Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud) in the Farkhar gorge in Takhar province. Five of the Jamiat commanders were killed in the ambush. Another 25 soldiers were taken into custody, tortured and then executed.[14]

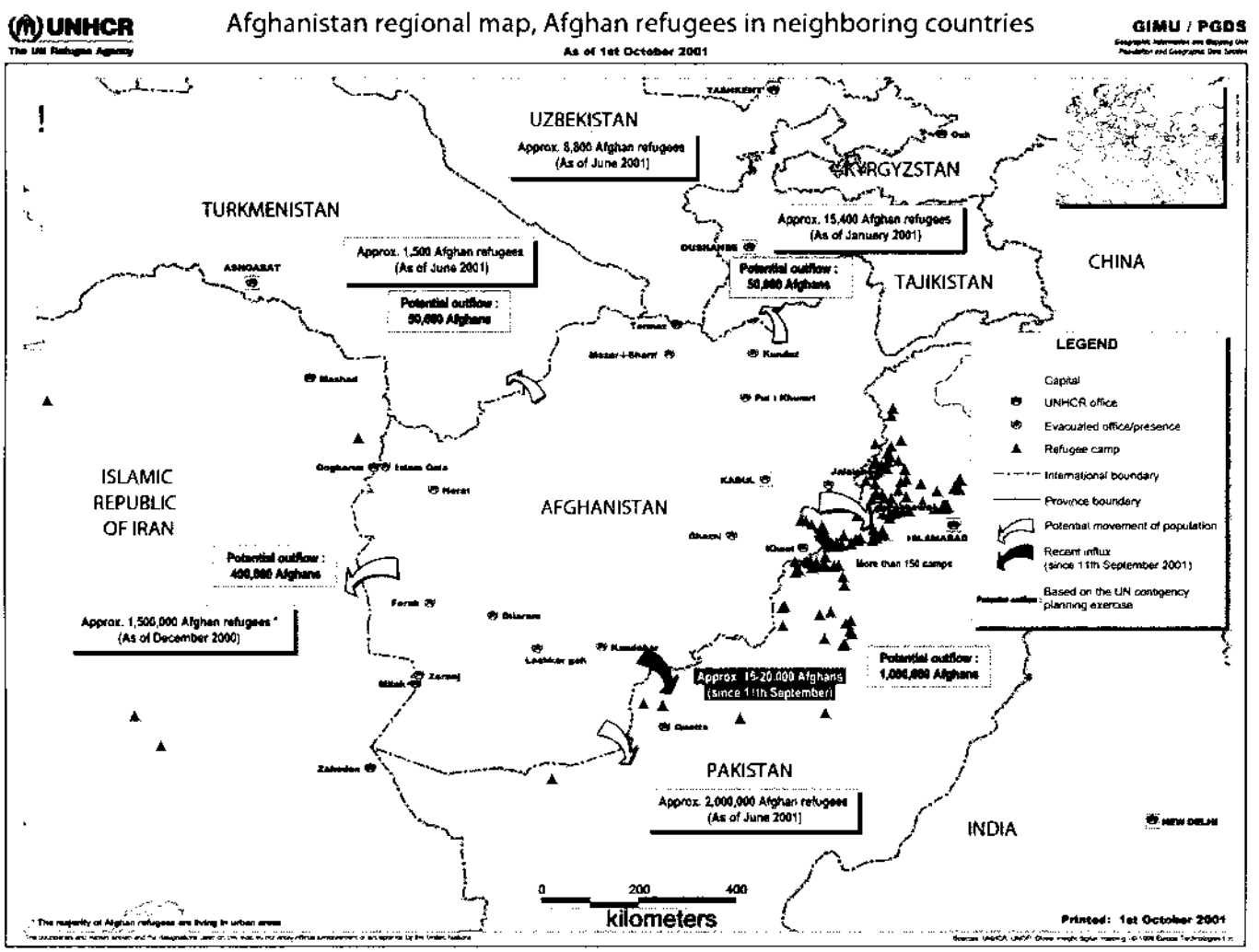
Hikmatyar's forces also had a reputation for terror tactics in Peshawar, Pakistan. They operated prisons in the refugee camps, as did some other *mujahideen* groups, notably that of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf.[15] Hikmatyar was also believed responsible for the "disappearance" and assassination of a number of Afghan political figures in Pakistan, including Syed Majrooh, a prominent intellectual and poet who ran the Afghan Information Center in Peshawar. Shortly before he was killed, Majrooh had published the results of a survey which showed that most Afghans supported the return of the former king, Zahir Shah.

Hikmatyar was opposed to any role in Afghanistan for the former king, whose regime he held responsible for corruption and for the encroachment of un-Islamic culture in Afghanistan. Majrooh had received threats from Hizb-i Islami shortly before he was killed.[16]

Onset of Civil War

Years of negotiations between the US, the Soviet Union and Pakistan culminated in the Geneva Accords, which stipulated that the Soviet Union would withdraw all of its uniformed troops by February 1989. With the help of continued Soviet assistance, the Afghan government, under the former head of the secret police, Najibullah, managed to hang on to power until 1992. But with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow's aid ceased, leaving Najibullah without the means to pay any of the militia forces he needed to maintain control over even the cities. In March, Najibullah agreed to step down as part of a UN-brokered transition. But the UN was too late. Abdul Rashid Dostum, commander of an army division made up largely of Uzbek militia forces, had entered into secret negotiations two months earlier with the Jamiat forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Shi'a Hizb-i Wahdat to move on Kabul and block the city's takeover by Hikmatyar. With Iranian support, the factions came together as the Northern Alliance.[17] Desperate efforts by UN negotiators to remove Najibullah from the country and assemble a transitional council collapsed as Dostum's forces seized control of Kabul airport, preventing Najibullah's departure. Najibullah fled to the UN compund in Kabul, were he remained for the next six years. Dostum's forces, together with Jamiat, Ittihad-i Islami, Hizb-i Wahdat and another Shi'a party took control of Kabul and kept Hikmatyar from entering the city.

The alliance did not last long. Within a few months, fighting had broken out between Sayyaf's party and Hizb-i Wahdat as each side targeted civilians of the rival ethnic group. Hundreds of civilians were massacred; both sides engaged in rape. The shifting alliances defined new patterns in the conflict. The Shi'a parties fought each other, while Jamiat fought against Hizb-i Wahdat. Through it all, Hikmatyar pounded Kabul with rockets, killing thousands of civilians. In 1994, Dostum allied with



Hikmatyar against Massoud. In 1995, Massoud was fighting Hizb-i Wahdat and unleashing his forces against the Hazara neighborhoods of West Kabul. By 1995, a third of Kabul had been destroyed, at least 50,000 killed, and hundreds of thousands driven from the city to become new refugees in Pakistan.

During this time, the rest of the country was divided among the factions, or among individual commanders operating as warlords. There was no security, no rule of law. International humanitarian agencies fought a constant battle to keep supplies moving inside the country and operated under continual threat of hijacking by predatory warlords.

Despite the gravity of the situation, the appalling number of civilian deaths, and the continued threat the conflict posed to regional security, there was scant attention from the outside world to the crisis in Afghanistan. The US, having achieved its objective in helping to secure a *mujahideen* victory, washed its hands of Afghanistan and appeared to accept as given that Afghans, riven as they were by ethnic and tribal loyalties, would inevitably fight, whether the rest of the world did anything or not.

Rebuilding Afghanistan will require a war crimes tribunal to prosecute crimes against humanity committed by all parties to the war, including the US-allied Northern Alliance.

Enter the Taliban

Not until the emergence of the Taliban in 1994, and the movement's successful conquest of Kabul in 1996, did international actors other than regional powers pay much attention to Afghanistan. The Taliban represent a movement of former *mujahideen* who coalesced around Mullah Mohammad Omar, a former fighter with a breakaway faction of Hizb-i Islami under Yunis Khales, who was the mullah at a madrassa (religious school) in Kandahar province. The core group, all of whom are Pashtuns and many of whom were madrassa students, called themselves *taliban*, which means students. Major Taliban leaders were educated in madrassas in Pakistan run by ulama of the Deobandi movement, a reformist movement emphasizing education in the fundamental teachings of Sunni Islam.[18]

Many among the Taliban's early leaders joined the movement out of frustration with the state of anarchy and the *mujahideen*'s failure to create an Islamic state. Later, the movement was joined by former Khalqi PDPA members, other commanders who had defected from *mujahideen* parties and foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa who had joined in the *jihad* against the Soviet Union and the Afghan communist government. Many of these fighters were trained in camps established by Osama bin Laden. The influence of the Arab fighters grew significantly after 1997, when bin Laden came under the protection of the Taliban and became a trusted adviser to Mullah Omar. Indeed, the access the foreigners enjoyed and the control they had in shaping Taliban policy was resented within the Taliban itself, and contributed to rifts within the movement that were evident by early 2001 over the destruction of the ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan and the movement's confrontations with international relief organizations over its restrictive policies on women.

The Taliban's early successes in disarming local warlords in Kandahar soon attracted the interest of Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who saw in the movement a counterbalance to Hikmatyar, whom the ISI continued to support. The Taliban also had extensive social links to the religious schools throughout the Northwest Frontier Province, and quickly attracted the support of local trucking cartels whose business had suffered as a result of the chaos in the country and saw in the Taliban a way to secure trade routes to the Middle East and Central Asia.[19] After the Taliban defeated Hikmatyar in 1995, Pakistan threw its weight entirely behind the movement. The Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996, and much of the north in mid-1998.[20] Over the next five years, the ISI provided the Taliban with arms, ammunition, spare parts, fuel and most importantly, military advisors and assistance during key battlefield operations. The Taliban's opponents turned increasingly to Iran and Russia for military aid.[21]

In the meantime, Pakistan continues to play reluctant host to over 2 million Afghan refugees. Thousands of new refugees fleeing the latest phase of the war are stuck in a no-man's land between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with Pakistan resisting pressure from international relief organizations to provide them haven. Well before September 11, Pakistan was making the refugees' hard lives even more miserable by shunting new arrivals to remote camps with few facilities, deporting Afghan men and intimidating refugees in the cities. While Pakistan astutely points to the West's own quota systems and other barriers to refugees in its own defense, it had long hoped to see a general return of the refugees as finally signaling both domestic and international accommodation with the Taliban. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and every other bordering state except Iran have also shut their doors to the refugees, though Iran waited until October 19 to declare that it would build camps to accommodate 250,000 new arrivals.

Indeed, the role of these actors, and the increasingly transnational ties that have linked the Taliban to other Islamist insurgencies in the region, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), argue against understanding the war as a civil war, even one supported by outside actors.

Given the long-standing and regional character of the Afghan conflict, it would be a mistake to analyze it solely or even primarily in terms of the political differences between the current protagonists. The civil war is unlikely to be settled by a negotiated agreement between these forces. The fact that this conflict has continued for over twenty years, despite repeated changes in the identity of the antagonists and the issues apparently at stake, indicates that its causes transcend such transient manifestations. The war is not a civil war but a transnational one.[22]

With every one of Afghanistan's neighbors pinning vital interests on the outcome of the conflict, there can be no end to the war without a coherent political and economic strategy designed to build support for peace both within Afghanistan and among its neighbors. Currently, Russia and Uzbekistan are primarily concerned with ending any support for Muslim insurgents in their country. Iran wants to be able to counter undue Pakistani influence over the next government and maintain its access to the Shi'a groups. Pakistan is determined that its own border concerns, and its need for a non-hostile neighbor on its western flank, be respected. Of course, there are those in the Pakistani military and ISI who are prepared now to stage-manage the post-Taliban regime by supplying either an old ally like Hikmatyar, or a Taliban recast to fit the bill. These hardline elements will continue to pose a threat unless Pakistan can be persuaded that its real economic and political security lies in a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

What is needed is international support for an international-Afghan process to create a new, national government. With sufficient backing from the US, the UN could enlist the support of Afghans to coordinate this effort. It will require sufficient security in the country, perhaps through a peacekeeping force in some areas, and the coordination of local forces who accede to a UN process in others. Creating a government that will be accountable will require an international commitment to establish a war crimes tribunal to investigate and prosecute the most serious war crimes—crimes against humanity—committed in every phase of the war. While the Taliban's reputation for repression against women is well-known, its long record of massacres, particularly in minority ethnic areas, has attracted surprisingly little attention. Afghans will also need help in establishing other mechanisms inside the country to begin the long process of creating more accountable institutions, dealing with a range of human rights questions and unraveling the truth about the past. The UN should adopt appropriate monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and enlist high-level diplomatic pressure to minimize interference from neighboring states. The US and other allies should support a major reconstruction program in the country.

Afghanistan's crisis has been more than a quarter-century in the making. Any attempt to come up with a new government that does not assume a long process of consensus-building and consultation among the broadest possible range of Afghans is doomed to fail. While it is urgent not to leave a power vacuum in Kabul, it is equally urgent to ensure that that vacuum is not filled hastily. Supporting Afghans who are committed to building their government and their country from the bottom up is the only alternative to chaos. ■

Endnotes

1 The Durranis and the Ghilzais are the two major tribal groupings among Afghan Pashtuns. Both trace their genealogical roots to Qays, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Pashtuns have dominated among Afghanistan's rulers. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

2 The *loya jirga* is a tribal institution used to "elect" a leader from among participants.

3 Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 93.

4 Ibid., pp. 74-75.

5 Ibid., p. 115.

6 Asia Watch, *Afghanistan: The Forgotten War: Human Rights Abuses and Violations of the Laws of War Since the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990), pp. 10-11.

7 Personal communication with Barnett Rubin. See also Rubin, p. 111.

8 From the outset, Iran played a crucial role in organizing a number of the Shi'a groups and providing them with military assistance. Its efforts to control the groups often backfired, setting off bloody battles among the different parties. The Hazara Shi'a minority organized popular resistance to the Soviet and Afghan government forces from its strongholds in Hazarajat. See S.A. Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 179-181.

9 James Rupert, "Afghanistan's Slide Toward Civil War," *World Policy Journal* 6/4 (Fall 1989).

10 Rubin, p. 62.

11 Rashid, p. 186.

12 Eqbal Ahmad, "A Mirage Misnamed Strategic Depth," *al-Ahram Weekly*, August 27-September 2, 1998.

13 Rubin, pp. 83-84.

14 *Forgotten War*, pp. 54-55, 104-105.

15 Sayyaf headed the Ittihad-i Islami, the party that was most favored by Saudi Arabia throughout the war against the Soviet Union, and attracted a large number of Arab recruits, collectively known as "Wahhabis."

16 *Forgotten War*, p. 119.

17 Barnett Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 131.

18 These schools were affiliated with Dar-al 'Ulum, an Islamic seminary in the town of Deoband, India, where, in the mid-nineteenth century, the reformist movement was launched. See Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982). In Pakistan, the organization associated with the Deobandi movement is the Jamiat-i Ulama-Islam (JUI), a political party. After 1978, the JUI set up hundreds of madrassas for Afghan refugee boys. Many Taliban leaders studied at these madrassas. See Rashid, pp. 90-91.

19 Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan and the Taliban," in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (Lahore, Pakistan: Vanguard Books, 1998), pp. 76-77.

20 In one of their first acts after taking power in Kabul, the Taliban dragged former President Najibullah from the UN compound, tortured him and then hanged him.

21 Much of this support is detailed in Human Rights Watch, *Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia and Iran in Fueling the Civil War* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001).

22 Barnett Rubin, Ashraf Ghani, William Maley, Ahmed Rashid and Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: Reconstruction and Peacebuilding in a Regional Framework* (Bern, Switzerland: KOFF Peacebuilding Report 1/2001, Center for Peacebuilding, Swiss Peace Foundation., June 2001), p. 1.