

## **BACKGROUNDER ON AFGHANISTAN: HISTORY OF THE WAR**

The U.S.- led military intervention in Afghanistan marks the fourth phase in the country's twenty-three-year-old civil war. In every phase foreign powers have intensified the conflict by supporting one side against another.

### **The First Phase: The Saur Revolution and Soviet Occupation**

Before civil war erupted in 1978, Afghanistan was a monarchy under Muhammad Zahir Shah, who had come to power in 1933. After World War II, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union used economic assistance to compete for influence. After the US established military ties with Pakistan in 1954, Afghanistan increasingly turned to the Soviet Union support.

In 1964 Zahir Shah convened a Loya Jirga, or Grand Council, of tribal leaders to debate a draft constitution that would provide for a more representational government. However, Zahir Shah did not relinquish any power; political parties were permitted to organize but not to contest elections. Zahir Shah was overthrown by his cousin Daoud Khan in 1973; the king has remained in exile in Rome ever since. In staging the coup, Daoud had allied himself with the Parcham faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-Leninist party that had been formed in 1965. In 1967 the PDPA split into two factions, Parcham ("flag") which drew its support from urban, educated Pashtuns along with other ethnic groups, and Khalq ("masses") which had the support of educated rural Afghans, also predominantly Pashtun.

(Pashtuns comprise the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and have dominated the government for centuries. Other major ethnic groups in Afghanistan include Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. For more on Afghanistan's ethnic groups, see Human Rights Watch backgrounder, *Armed Conflict Poses Risk of Further Ethnic Violence*.)

After gaining power, Daoud tried to marginalize the Parchamis and distance the government from the Soviet Union. The two factions of the PDPA reunited in 1977 and launched a coup on April 27, 1978, killing Daoud and seizing power.

The PDPA government, under Khalq leadership, then embarked on a campaign of radical land reform accompanied by mass repression in the countryside that resulted in the arrest and summary execution of tens of thousands. Those targeted included political figures, religious leaders, teachers, students, other professionals, Islamist organizations, and members of ethnic minorities, particularly the Hazaras, a Shi'a minority that has long been subject to discrimination by Afghanistan's ruling elite. The government's repressive measures, particularly its attempt to reform rural society through terror, provoked uprisings throughout the country.

Alarmed by the deteriorating situation, especially the collapse of the army and the prospect that a disintegrating Afghanistan would threaten its security on its southern border, the Soviet Union airlifted thousands of troops into Kabul on December 24, 1979.

The Khalq president, Hafizullah Amin, was assassinated after Soviet intelligence forces took control of the government and installed Babrak Karmal, a Parchami, as president.

The Soviet occupation force of some 115,000 troops and the Karmal government sought to crush the uprisings with mass arrests, torture, and executions of dissidents, and aerial bombardments and executions in the countryside. Some one million Afghans died during this period, most in aerial bombardments. These measures further expanded the resistance to the communist government in Kabul and fueled a flow of refugees out of the country that soon reached five million out of a population of about sixteen million.

Islamist organizations that became the heart of the resistance – and collectively became known as the jihad fighters or *mujahidin* – based themselves in Pakistan and Iran.. Seeing the conflict as a cold war battleground, the United States and Saudi Arabia, in particular, provided massive support for the resistance, nearly all of it funneled through Pakistan. The arms pipeline gave Pakistan a tremendous ability to bolster parties in Afghanistan that would serve its own interests.

Joining the resistance forces were thousands of Muslim radicals from the Middle East, North Africa and other Muslim countries. Most fought with Pashtun factions that had the strongest support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the Hizb-i Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Ittihad-i Islami of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Among them was Osama bin Laden, who came to Pakistan in the early 1980s and built training facilities for these foreign recruits inside Afghanistan.

### **The Second Phase: From the Geneva Accords to the Mujahidin's Civil War**

Negotiations to end the war culminated in the 1988 Geneva Accords, whose centerpiece was an agreement by the Soviet Union to remove all its uniformed troops by February 1989. With substantial Soviet assistance, the communist government held on to power through early 1992 while the United Nations frantically tried to assemble a transitional process acceptable to all the parties. It failed. In the aftermath, the U.S. and its allies abandoned any further efforts toward a peace process until after the Taliban came to power. The UN effort continued, but suffered from the lack of international engagement on Afghanistan. Donor countries, including the U.S., continued to support the relief effort, but as the war dragged on, aid donor fatigue and the need to respond to other humanitarian crises left the assistance effort in Afghanistan chronically short.

In early 1992, the forces of Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, head of a powerful Uzbek militia that had been allied with Najibullah, and the Hazara faction Hizb-i Wahdat, joined together in a coalition they called the Northern Alliance. On April 15, **non-Pashtun militia forces that had been allied with the government mutinied and took control of Kabul airport, preventing President Najibuillah from leaving the country and pre-empting the UN transition. Najibullah took refuge in the UN compound in Kabul, where he remained for the next four years. On April 25, Massoud entered Kabul, and the next day the Northern Alliance factions** reached an agreement on a coalition government that excluded the Hizb-i Islami led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar—the protégé of

Pakistan. Rejecting the arrangement, Hikmatyar launched massive and indiscriminate rocket attacks on Kabul that continued intermittently until he was forced out of the Kabul area in February 1995. (For more on the Afghan parties, see Human Rights Watch backgrounder, *Poor Rights Record of Opposition Commanders*).

In June 1992 Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Tajik leader of Jamiat-i Islami, became president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA), while Hikmatyar continued to bombard Kabul with rockets. In fighting between the Hazara faction, Hizb-i Wahdat, and Sayyaf's Ittihad-i Islami, hundreds of civilians were abducted and killed. After ensuring that the governing council (shura) was stacked with his supporters, Rabbani was again elected president in December 1992. In January 1994, Hikmatyar joined forces with Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, head of a powerful Uzbek militia that had been allied with Najibullah until early 1992, to oust Rabbani and his defense minister, Ahmad Shah Massoud, launching full-scale civil war in Kabul. In 1994 alone, an estimated 25,000 were killed in Kabul, most of them civilians killed in rocket and artillery attacks. By 1995, one-third of the city had been reduced to rubble.

### **The Third Phase: The Taliban's Conquest of Afghanistan**

During this period, the rest of the country was carved up among the various factions, with many mujahidin commanders establishing themselves as **local** warlords. Humanitarian agencies frequently found their offices stripped, their vehicles hijacked, and their staff threatened. [It may be worth emphasizing that this fragmentation was especially characteristic of southern Afghanistan, much less so of the north and west, which were governed more or less as mini-states by Ismail Khan, Dostum, and Hizb-i Wahdat]. It was against this background that the Taliban emerged. Former mujahidin who were disillusioned with the chaos that had followed their victory became the nucleus of a movement that coalesced around Mullah Mohammad Omar, a former mujahid from Qandahar province. The group, many of whom were madrasa (Islamic school) students, called themselves *taliban*, meaning students. Many others who became core members of the group were commanders in other predominantly Pashtun parties, and former Khalqi PDPA members. Their stated aims were to restore stability and enforce (their interpretation of) Islamic law. They successfully attacked local warlords and soon gained a reputation for military prowess, and acquired an arsenal of captured weaponry.

By October 1994 the movement had attracted the support of Pakistan, which saw in the Taliban a way to secure trade routes to Central Asia and establish a government in Kabul friendly to its interests. Pakistani traders who had long sought a secure route to send their goods to Central Asia quickly became some of the Taliban's strongest financial backers.

In September 1995, the Taliban took control of Herat, thereby cutting off the land route connecting the Islamic State of Afghanistan with Iran. The Taliban's innovative use of mobile warfare appeared to indicate that Pakistan had provided vital assistance for the capture of Herat. In September 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul after Massoud was forced to retreat to the north. Sometime after Massoud's loss of Kabul, he began to

obtain military assistance from Russia as well as Iran. The Northern Alliance was reconstituted in opposition to the Taliban.

Osama bin Laden, who had left Afghanistan in 1990, returned in 1996, living first under the protection of the Jalalabad *shura* (tribal council), until the Taliban took control of Jalalabad and Kabul. In 1997 bin Laden moved to Qandahar where he developed a close relationship to Mullah Muhammad Umar, the head of the Taliban. His fighters fought alongside Taliban troops.

In 1997, the Taliban renamed the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; Mullah Omar assumed the title *amir-ul momineen* (commander of the faithful). In areas under their control, Taliban authorities enforced their version of Islamic law, enacting policies prohibiting women from working outside the home in activities other than health care, and requiring corporal punishment for those convicted of certain crimes. They prohibited women from attending universities and closed girls' schools in Kabul and some other cities, although primary schools for girls continued to operate in many other areas of the country under Taliban control. The Taliban also enforced a strict dress code for women, and required men to have beards and to refrain from Western haircuts or dress. Arguably the most powerful agency within the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as the Taliban renamed the country, is the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (al-Amr bi al-Ma'ruf wa al-Nahi `an al-Munkir), which is responsible for the enforcement of all Taliban decrees regarding moral behavior.

Through 1997 and 1998, the Taliban made repeated attempts to extend their control to the north of Afghanistan, where Dostum had carved out what amounted to a mini-state comprising five provinces which he administered from his headquarters in Shiberghan, west of the important city of Mazar-i Sharif. In Mazar-i Sharif, Dostum's forces controlled the city through an uneasy alliance with Hizb-i Wahdat, which had a stronghold in the large Hazara population in Mazar-i Sharif. On May 19, 1997, one of Dostum's deputies, Gen. Abdul Malik Pahlawan (generally known as "Malik"), who had a grievance against Dostum, struck an agreement with the Taliban and arrested a number of Dostum's commanders and as many as 5,000 of his soldiers.

As the Taliban entered Mazar-i Sharif, Pakistan was quick to seize the opportunity to recognize the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan, as was Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But the alliance with Malik quickly disintegrated when the Taliban attempted to disarm local Hazaras. Hundreds of Taliban soldiers were killed in the streets of Mazar-i Sharif, and some 3,000 were taken prisoner by Malik, and allegedly also by Hizb-i Wahdat, and summarily executed. In August 1998 Taliban finally took control of Mazar-i Sharif and massacred at least 2,000 people, most of them Hazara civilians, after they took the city. In the aftermath, Dostum left Afghanistan for exile in Turkey; Malik also fled and has reportedly lived in exile in Iran since 1997. Shortly after taking control of Mazar-i Sharif, the Taliban took control of the town of Bamian, in the Hazara-dominated central highlands. Some time after this the erstwhile Northern Alliance enlisted the support of factions from outside their ethnic constituencies, including the Council of the East, a Pashtun group led by former members of the Jalalabad shura

(council), and renamed themselves the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or United Front, for short. Rabbani remained the president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Dostum continues to command forces within the United Front; as does Muhammad Karim Khalili, head of Hizb-i Wahdat. Harakat-i Islami, another Shi'a party with significant Hazara support, is also part of the United Front. Sayyaf retains a leadership position within the United Front; many of his forces are believed to have joined the Taliban.

In August 1998, the United States launched air strikes against bin Laden's reputed training camps near the Pakistan border. The strikes came in the wake of the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam. In October 1999 the U.N. imposed sanctions on the Taliban to turn over bin Laden, banning Taliban-controlled aircraft from takeoff and landing and freezing the Taliban's assets abroad. The Taliban's failure to hand over bin Laden led to an expansion of the sanctions regime on December 19, 2000, including an arms embargo on the Taliban, a ban on travel outside Afghanistan by Taliban officials of deputy ministerial rank, and the closing of Taliban offices abroad.

Through 2000 and 2001, fighting continued in the northeast between Massoud's forces and the Taliban, with the Taliban taking control of Taloqan in September 2000, and driving the United Front further east to Faizabad. Fighting in the area, combined with the effects of a severe drought across the country, drove thousands of civilians into relief camps and into Pakistan. In the central province of Bamian, the forces of Hizb-i Wahdat and Harakat-i Islami, briefly took control of the town of Yakaolang in late December 2000, but lost it to the Taliban on January 8, 2001. After retaking the town, the Taliban massacred at least 178 civilians in reprisal. The town changed hands several times between January and June; during their last retreat from the area, Taliban troops burned down the town and many other villages in the district. In early 2001, Dostum returned to Afghanistan to meet with Massoud; his forces resumed guerrilla operations against the Taliban in mid-2001. At about the same time, the forces of Ismael Khan, the former Jamiat-i Islami governor of Herat who escaped from Taliban custody in 2000, also undertook guerrilla action against the Taliban in the center-west of the country.

On September 9, 2001, Massoud was assassinated when suicide bombers disguised as journalists detonated a device hidden in a video camera. United Front leaders have claimed that the assassins were linked to bin Laden, and many observers believe that the assassination was designed to deprive the United Front of its most effective leader in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

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