QAWM:
TRIBE-STATE RELATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN
FROM DARIUS TO KARZAI

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By

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“All politics is local”

*Thomas Phillip “Tip” O’Neill, ’36*
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Provinces of Afghanistan

1. Herat
2. Farah
3. Nimruz
4. Badghis
5. Faryab
6. Ghor
7. Helmand
8. Jowzjan
9. Sar-e Pol
10. Daykundi
11. Oruzgan
12. Qandahar
13. Balkh
14. Samangan
15. Bamyan
16. Ghazni
17. Zabul
18. Kunduz
19. Baghlan
20. Parwan
21. Wardak
22. Kabul
23. Logar
24. Paktia
25. Paktika
26. Khost
27. Takhar
28. Panjshir
29. Kapisa
30. Badakhshan
31. Nuristan
32. Laghman
33. Nangarhar
34. Kunar
Panjsher Province
Chapter 1

Questions in Kabul:
An Introduction to the Political Geography of Afghanistan

Towards the end of my last visit to Afghanistan in the summer of 2010, I stopped in at the Kabul office of the American Institute for Afghanistan Studies to type up the notes from my final interviews. While I was there, I crossed paths with a well-known American anthropologist who was also visiting Afghanistan. As we made small talk, he mentioned that he had been coming to Afghanistan regularly since the early 1970s and that things seemed to get worse every year. His statement left me questioning how a country which, at different times had seemed to be the focus of the development and modernizing efforts of two superpowers, and with a current government that once was considered a model of the Western effort to promote democracy in the Middle East could continue to deteriorate. After I left Kabul, I spent a few days in neighboring Tajikistan waiting for my connecting flight home. The paved roads, generally garbage-less streets, and absence of the prospect for sudden violence made me feel as if I was in Western Europe instead of on Afghanistan’s
northern border. I wondered: How could these two countries, which share a religion, language, and several ethnic groups, be so completely different? Why has Afghanistan not developed into a modern state?

The answer, I believe, is governance. The political landscape of Afghanistan is dominated by tribal, ethnic, kinship and locality-based forms of social organization, collectively referred to with the Arabic gloss *qawm*. The most approximate English translation for this term, as it is used in Afghanistan, is a kin or locality-based solidarity structure. Across Afghanistan, these structures are the primary sources of security, social order, justice, and economic development in their communities. In short, for most Afghans, their *qawm* is the government. Different national governments throughout Afghan history have adopted various approaches to confronting these non-state governance structures. Before the nineteenth century, societal groups were permitted a large degree of autonomy, so long as they did not oppose the interests of the monarchy. Since the 1880s, however, successive Afghan rulers have attempted to break the power of local governance structures by asserting the political, economic, and social authority of the central state. This effort has largely failed and Afghanistan remains a weak state mired in violence.

This thesis will seek to explain the reasons behind the current crisis in Afghanistan by examining the political and cultural history of the land and the people between the Oxus and the Hindu Kush from prehistory to the fall of Taliban. I hope to demonstrate that the weakness of the contemporary Afghan state is rooted in political and social conditions that are observable throughout history. By considering historical developments through theoretical approaches to tribe-state relations, we will see that
the contemporary crisis of governance in Afghanistan is a product of attempts by recent state leaders to discard established and successful styles of governance and rule in a manner that is antithetical to Afghanistan’s political culture. Rather than view poor governance as the natural condition of Afghanistan, this thesis argues that Afghanistan can be governed successfully.

Before beginning a wider analysis, however, it is first necessary to understand Afghanistan’s political geography. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state that is comprised of dozens of small and large ethnic groups, each with relatively distinct cultural and linguistic traits. The most politically significant of these groups is the Pashtuns. Comprising about forty percent of the population, Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims who are divided into four large descent groups: Sarbans, Batani, Gharghasht and Karlanri. These are, in turn, composed of multiple tribal and subtribal elements. Because the Pashtun are segmentary, meaning that their tribal association is based on decent from a common ancestor, the size of these tribal and subtribal units can vary significantly according the circumstances.¹ In times of war with an outside power, for example, Pashtuns have formed temporary coalitions that lasted until the external threat was removed.² Among the Pashtun descent groups, the Durrani, a sub-section of the Sarbans, have provided the ruling class of Afghanistan since the mid eighteenth century. With the exceptions of the brief rule of Habibullah Kalakani in 1929 and the Soviet, Civil War and Taliban periods from 1978-2001, all of Afghanistan’s leaders

have been Durrani Pashtuns. The current president, Hamid Karzai, is a member of the Popalzai tribe, which is part of the same descent group as Ahmad Shah Durrani, the first Pashtun monarch of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s other ethnic groups, in order of largest to smallest, are: Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen, Aymaqs, Nuristanis and Pashais, Qizilbashs, Baluchis, Arabs, Pamiris, Jugis and Jats, Kirghiz, and Hindus. Not all of these groups are indigenous to Afghanistan and tribal and ethnic identities often transcend the
borders of the modern Afghan state.\(^3\) This is the case for Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Pamiris, Baluch, and Nuristanis, among others. Afghanistan’s ethnic groups, with the exception of Hindus, are Muslim; and all of the Muslim groups, except the Hazara, Qizilbash, and Pamiri are Sunni.

Some ethnic groups, such as the Pashtuns, are tribal; while others, such as the Tajiks are non-tribal. The chief difference between tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups is that tribes “define membership through the unilineal descent from a common ancestor, real or assumed.”\(^4\) Non-tribal groups, in contrast, do not make a genealogical claim of association between its members. Both types of groups, nevertheless, possess what medieval Arab polymath Ibn Khaldun called *asabiyyah*. Derived from the Arabic root for “to bind together,” *asabiyyah* is commonly translated as “group-feeling,” which Ibn Khaldun argues is “a natural urge in man.”\(^5\)

In his undergraduate thesis on tribalism in Oman, William J. Burke quotes Omani scholar Sulaiman Abdulsalaam, who describes *asabiyyah* as:

A conscious and unconscious social and psychological league that connects the individuals of a certain group based on ongoing lineage relationships. This league appears and strengthens in the case of danger that would threaten the life of its members. Consequently ‘*asabiyyah* towards the group’ transforms from a potential feeling in contexts of confrontations into an effective and powerful feeling for collective grouping and support. Hence, *asabiyyah* is the power of the group that instills the ability to encounter other threats.\(^6\)


The strength of these *asabiyyah* ties among Afghanistan’s *qawm* groups directly impacts the ability of the state to penetrate societal groups and govern effectively.

Describing governance patterns in Afghanistan, however, poses some methodological challenges. The complexity and multiplicity of Afghanistan’s local political communities make it extremely difficult to provide a single explanation for center-periphery relations throughout the country. The reasons behind one *qawm* group’s resistance to the state may be the same as another’s acquiescence. Similarly, it is inaccurate to indicate passivity or resistance to centralization based on broad characteristics, such as whether a *qawm* is tribal. In order to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghan state, it is necessary to analyze how the state has interacted with each different group. Such a broad and comprehensive analysis would be outside the scope of this thesis. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the reactions of the Pashtuns, Panjsheris and the Nuristanis to attempts at state centralization.

The Panjsheris are members of the Tajik ethnic group who are defined by their geographical distribution around the Panjsher Valley, about sixty miles north of Kabul. Tajiks are Dari-speaking Sunni Muslims that comprise about thirty percent of Afghanistan’s population. Their non-tribal *qawm* relations are locality-based. The inaccessibility of the Panjsher Valley has helped guarantee Panjshi relative autonomy and independence from the central government. While the area typically acknowledged the Afghan monarch, it was not until the 1880s that the central government asserted sovereignty in the Panjsher. In the last century, Panjsheris have resisted attempts at state incorporation. In 1929, they supported the Tajik Habibullah
Kalakani as he overthrew and briefly ruled Afghanistan. During the Soviet War, the fierce resistance of the Panjsheris under the command of Ahmad Shah Massoud transformed the valley into an international cause célèbre. After the fall of the communist government and the rise of the Taliban, the Panjsheris secured materiel assistance from France, Russia, and Iran and preserved the independence of their valley. To this day, Panjsheris will point to the mouth of the valley as the line past which the Taliban did not advance. Following the U.S. invasion, the Panjsheris emerged as key power-holders in the new state. It is likely that, had Massoud not been assassinated by al-Qaeda two days before the September 11 attacks, he would have become the first Panjsheri national leader in Afghan history.

The Nuristanis are a tribal ethnic group that inhabit the mountainous region of northeastern Afghanistan along the Pakistani border. They are culturally, linguistically, and were, until the late nineteenth century, religiously different from other tribes in Afghanistan. The Nuristani speak five distinct Indo-Iranian languages, and are divided into fifteen tribes, each with numerous sub-tribal divisions. These tribal divisions are not as formal as those of the segmented Pashtuns, and like the Panjsheris, they are largely defined by locality. Unlike most groups in Afghanistan, Nuristani culture values individuality and simple societal arrangements. This is reflected in the Nuristani language, which does not have indigenous words for complex social groupings, such as “tribe” or “lineage.” Until 1896, they were referred to as Kafir, or infidel, by their Muslim neighbors because they practiced an animistic polytheistic religion. After their territory was conquered by Abdur Rahman,

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most converted to Islam, and the province was renamed Nuristan, or “Land of the Light.” Despite the official conversion, they have retained many of their pre-Islamic customs, such as their ornate grave markings.

Like the Panjsheris, the Nuristanis were independent from Kabul until their defeat by Abdur Rahman the end of the nineteenth century. While they enjoyed generally positive relations with the monarchy, the state never succeeded in penetrating Nuristani society. Consequently, the Nuristanis were the first to revolt against the Soviet-backed government in 1978. Also like the Panjsher, Nuristan never fell to Soviet forces. After the war, even the Taliban did not succeed subduing the province. Instead, the Pashtun-dominated social movement replicated the successful strategies of previous Afghan governments and ruled through local leaders. Since 2001, Nuristanis have strongly resisted U.S. and Afghan efforts to bring the province under government control.

Panjsheris and Nuristanis are ideal case studies for understanding the problems of governance in Afghanistan. Both are outside of the traditionally Pashtun-dominated state structure and enjoyed independence until the end of the nineteenth century. They were also essentially autonomous under the monarchy and strongly resisted the Soviet invasion. The major differences between the two, furthermore, help our analysis of patterns of governance across Afghanistan. As non-tribal Persian speakers who have a stable relationship with the current government, Panjsheris can serve as an indicator for the behaviors of other non-tribal groups, such as the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, and Aymaq. In contrast, the Nuristanis reflect the difficulty
of the central government to incorporate similar tribal communities, such as the
Pashai and many non-Durrani Pashtun groups.

In seeking to explain governance in Afghanistan, this thesis must first begin
by providing a theoretical approach to understanding Afghanistan’s political history.
The next chapter evaluates several political and anthropological models for
explaining the behavior of the state and the tribes across Afghanistan’s history. The
following three chapters will describe the historical evolution of Afghanistan—from
Darius to the fall of the Taliban—with an eye toward the Panjsheri and Nuristani
reaction to the expansion of the state. Finally, the thesis will conclude by examining
post-2001 developments and exploring some successful approaches to governance.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that Afghanistan is governable. In
the next few years, some in the West are likely to advocate the opposite as they seek
to justify a hasty military exit from Afghanistan. Such an argument ignores Afghan
political history and robs the Afghan people of a chance at stability in order to satisfy
short-term Western political exigencies. In 2009, the U.S.-led Coalition began to
increase the size of its forces in Afghanistan as it sought to replicate the successful
counterinsurgency strategies implemented in Iraq. In addition to this military “surge,”
Afghanistan also needs to find new approaches to governance in accordance with its
established qawm-based political culture. I hope that this thesis will be a part of this
much-needed “intellectual surge.”
Chapter 2

The State-Society Balance of Power:  
_Theoretical Approaches to Tribe-State Relations in Afghanistan_

Defining the roots of the problem of governance in contemporary Afghanistan requires locating individual political developments in their proper historical contexts. Dupree, Shahrani, and Barfield provide three approaches to understanding the recurring trends and themes of Afghanistan’s political history. First, as suggested by Dupree, there is an oscillation between state fusion and fission that is caused mainly by the state’s reliance on tribal confederations. Second, as Shahrani has argued, there is a process of state centralization throughout Afghan history which represents an attempt by one tribe to camouflage its rule over other groups as state-building. Finally, Barfield offers an explanation of the successful and unsuccessful approaches taken by rulers in Afghanistan which challenges the notion that Afghanistan is ungovernable from the center and offers a framework for how Afghanistan was successfully ruled in the past. The present chapter provides an overview of these
approaches to Afghanistan’s history and contemporary politics with a focus on the relationship between state and society.

Internal Imperialism – Fusion and Fission

Throughout Afghan history leaders have not sought to build nation-states, but rather have created political systems that more closely resemble empires. Power is distributed to family members and close allies while potential challengers are excluded or eliminated. Dupree explains the typical political life-cycle of early Afghanistan:

A charismatic leader arises in a tribal society and, by military power, intrigue, and judiciously arranged marriages, unites several tribes into a confederation, which spreads as far as its accumulated power permits, creating an empire, not a nation-state. With (sometimes before) the death of the emperor, fission occurs, and the great empire once again segments into a multiplicity of tribal kingdoms. Later, another charismatic leader arrives and the process is repeated.¹

By relying on temporary federations, these internal empires failed to create a normal system for the transmission of political power. As a result, for example, once the motivation for intra-tribal unity (external threats, charismatic leadership, etc.) faded, so too did the prospect of continued national unity. Dupree calls this phenomenon “the process of alternating fusion and fission.”²

“Internal Colonialism”

A result of the creation of “internal empires” is the state’s practice of governing non-Durrani groups through what Shahrani terms “internal colonialism.”

² Ibid.
While consensus was used to forge tribal confederations among the leader’s kin group, other ethnic and tribal groups were integrated into the state through ethnic cleansing, forced relocation, and the killing of tribal leaders. At the same time, the government enhanced the position of the dominant tribes in relation to its ethnic and tribal rivals by promoting Pashtun-centric policies that “denied the existence of ‘other’, non-Pashtun ethnolinguistic communities.” Not surprisingly, the practice of internal colonialism has led to the empowerment of the very local leaders that the state has tried to undermine. Shahrani explains that, in response to government attempts to undermine their identity and autonomy, local communities devised complex social mechanisms to insulate themselves from direct contact with government agents...[such as] creating community-based parallel power structures (that is, a strong Shari’a governed civil society) to resolve internal problems locally through trusted leaders, both religious and secular.

Barfield identified the same development during his fieldwork in the 1970s, when he noted that, “the Afghan government seemed remote to the local residents. There was no organic connection between them and the government-appointed officials.” Though the state was expanding and modernizing, its tribal character prevented it from penetrating and transforming society.

Swiss and American Cheese Approaches

The internal colonial strategy of state building has been characterized by Barfield as an “American Cheese approach in which each slice is expected to be

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5 Ibid, 225.
uniform in texture and the same as any other...State control is deemed to be theoretically universal and absolute within its boundaries, whether one is in the capital or at its farthest margins.”  

Although no Afghan state has ever been ruled effectively in this way, most rulers since the 1880s have attempted the “American Cheese” approach to governance. According to Barfield, American Cheese governance is not suitable in areas once governed by Turco-Persian empires, where rulers “sought direct control of [population] centers and the lines of communication among them while largely ignoring the rest” of the “territories deemed unprofitable to rule or of little strategic value.” This “Swiss Cheese” approach to governance does not “assume uniformity across the landscape or their control of it.” You expect to find holes in the state’s control; however, these holes “do not constitute defects (as they would in American cheese) but are instead the products of the very process that created the cheese in the first place.”

The Swiss Cheese approach, Barfield argues, is “the most successful model of Afghan governance” because it does not compete with the strong, local power structures. According to this explanation, those that lived in the “holes” of central authority were permitted to live as they desired, so long as they did not challenge the state. If they did, the state engaged in punitive measures that demonstrated the cost of resistance. The purpose of this approach was “to intimidate the population and its leaders into acquiescence without changing the existing political structure.” For many centuries, this was the norm in Afghan politics.

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7 Ibid, 67.  
8 Ibid, 68.  
9 Ibid, 338.
The temporary successes of centralized rule in the late nineteenth century, however, convinced subsequent Afghan rulers that an American Cheese model would work forever. Ignoring the historical swings between fusion and fission and the unintended consequences of internal colonialism, these rulers sought to impose a single administration that forcefully suppressed local governance structures. This includes the Karzai government, which Barfield suggests is seeking to “restore a direct rule model that remains at odds with the realities of Afghanistan, especially rural Afghanistan, and the Kabul government lacks the military and administrative capacity to implement it.”

**Strong Societies and Weak States**

Dupree, Shahrani, and Barfield’s models explain how the state acts towards its societal groups, but do not account for the agency of *qawm* leaders, and therefore fail to provide a full explanation of the interaction between the state and societal groups in Afghanistan. Midgal and Waltz, however, provide models that suggests a societal group’s actions towards the state, while influenced by history, culture, and ideology, are shaped by the internal power distribution of the state. Generally, where societal groups are strong, the state tends to be weak, and vice-versa. Migdal has characterized this phenomenon as the inverse relationship between the strength of society and the capabilities of the state, thus arguing that “the emergence of a strong, capable state can occur only with a tremendous concentration of social control.”

Centralizing social authority is difficult in post-colonial states, which were once

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10 *Ibid*.
governed by imperial policies that, in most cases, encouraged the fragmentation of social control. While Migdal is primarily writing on Africa, Latin America, and Asia, his theory also applies to Afghanistan, which, as Durpee and Shahrani have shown, experienced similar colonial policies that contributed to social fragmentation. Migdal’s assessment accurately describes the unintended consequences of this type of state formation:

Colonial rulers used their advantage in power to direct resources and authority and to enforce sanctions in ways that deeply affected how indigenous forces reconstituted social control. They gave strongmen the wherewithal to build their social control in fragments of society.12

This social fragmentation creates “an oligopoly of mobilization capacity” among the various social leaders, which challenge the government’s ability to access the population and mobilize resources. Such leaders remain more relevant than the state because they are “able to offer viable strategies of survival to those of their villages,” that the weak state is not.13

Migdal’s theory codes countries in a two-by-two matrix in which the strength of society determines the capabilities of the state. Countries with strong societies, defined by the accumulation of mobilization capabilities by strongmen—“chiefs, landlords, bosses, rich peasants, clan leaders, za’im, effendis, aghas, caciques, kulaks”—tend to produce diffused power arrangements that weaken the capabilities of the state.14 Conversely, where political, economic, and natural catastrophes produce “deep social dislocations” that weaken the “existing bases of social control and

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12 Ibid, 141.
14 Ibid, 32.
strategies of survival,” the state accumulates power.¹ Such social turmoil in Europe in the fourteenth century was the “precondition for the creation of strong states” because it produced a political environment in which leaders were forced “to gain direct access to the population’s manpower and revenues” in order to mobilize against political and military rivals.²

Migdal reserves the term “anarchical” for environments with weak states and weak societies. Usually, such countries are experiencing a period of state collapse and ideological upheaval, the latter of which challenges the role of traditional leadership. Migdal’s use of this term, however, is too limited, as the relationship between the weak state and strong society is also defined by an anarchic system. In this system, societal groups compete with each other and the state (which in the case of Afghanistan is essentially the institutionalization of the dominant qawm) for security and access to resources. The study of the competition between units in an anarchic

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¹ *Ibid.*, 140.
system has been generally restricted to explaining the behavior of states in the international system, where each party “conducts its affairs in the brooding shadow of violence.”17 The prospect for war shapes action and creates a balance of power within the system. This approach to understanding political behavior usually does not apply to internal affairs, because, in most countries, the government “has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.”18 However, taking Waltz’s definition of legitimacy as the means “to prevent and counter the private use of force,” we may conclude that, in strong society–weak state power configurations, the use of force is legitimized, not by the government, but by the societal leaders who can mobilize the population.19

Despite the presence of anarchy in strong society–weak state environments, unit actors establish what Barth calls “a systematic set of rules governing inter-ethnic social encounters.”20 These rules create an environment that imposes costs on defection from the system (the illegitimate use of force). In this way, members of rival tribes, for example, refrain from killing each other or stealing each other’s goods because such actions might provoke a wider inter-tribal conflict that could reconfigure the balance of power in the system. Given these two factors—the monopoly on the legitimacy of internal violence and the limitation of external violence by system-wide rules—societal groups in weak states behave in a manner that is analogous to small powers in the international system.

Tapper concurs with this conception, arguing that the state and tribe “are best thought of as two opposed modes of thought or models of organization that form a

18 Ibid, 104.
19 Ibid.
single system...This tribe-state system involves a constant tension.” Societal leaders, like state leaders, constantly evaluate their environment and pursue the course of action that will best serve their interest. Waltz describes the calculations made by state leaders in an anarchic system:

If force is used by one state or its use is expected, the recourse of other states is to use force or be prepared to use it singly or in combination. No appeal can be made to a higher entity clothed with authority and equipped with the ability to act on its own initiative. Under such conditions the possibility that force will be used by one or another of the parties looms always as the threat in the background... [and] limits manipulations, moderates demands, and serves as an incentive for the settlement of disputes.22

How leaders respond to the prospect of violence is conditioned by the organizational capability and resources of their respective groups. Leaders of dominant powers in the system have the capabilities and resources to contend with other powers in the use of the force. Leaders of smaller powers, like societal groups in power-diffuse environments, generally lack the capability to respond to external threats individually, and rely on alliances that are designed either to “balance (ally in opposition to the principal source of danger) or bandwagon (ally with the state that poses the major threat).”23 When small powers are more vulnerable to the demands of dominant powers because of the latter’s geographic proximity and strong offensive capability, they are more likely to bandwagon. When the dominant power is weak or far away, the smaller powers will ally against it.24 The balancing and bandwagoning behavior evident through Afghanistan’s history illustrates the suitability of Migdal and Waltz’s

22 Waltz, 113-4.
approaches for explaining the behavior of qawm leaders in Afghanistan. Evaluating only the internal power distribution, however, provides an incomplete account of the motivations of local leaders in their interactions with the central government. Cultural and ideological norms, as well as the intra-tribal political dynamic also shape the behavior of societal groups.

Conceptions of legitimacy can also influence the behavior of group leaders. There is often a tendency to view tribes as stable polities with unchanging hereditary leadership. This image does not reflect the realities of the tribal system in Afghanistan, where there exists a more fluid concept of internal leadership. In addition to competing against the state, tribal leaders are constantly evaluating their position within the group. Often, other influential figures, such as landlords and clerics, are competing with the tribal leader for the loyalty and resources of the group members. In this environment, the tribal leader’s external policies must support his internal legitimacy. As we will see in Chapter 4, the religious and tribal leadership’s opposition to the erosion of their social and economic authority under Amanullah led them to organize a rebellion under the pretext of protecting their traditional values. Similarly, the declaration of a jihad by the tribal elders of Nuristan in 1978 was an attempt to motivate their followers to take up arms to protect their political and economic interests in the name of religion.

Salzman and Anderson have also dealt with the relationship between the internal politics of societal groups and their behavior towards the state.25 They have

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argued separately that differences in tribal structure determine the level of mobilization capability and influence behavior within the system. Leaders of indigenously centralized tribes have greater capability to mobilize their group’s resources and population and can therefore adopt more active policies towards advancing the interests of the group. In contrast, leaders of traditionally decentralized groups experience greater difficulty raising revenue and influencing internal political decisions and are more constrained in their interactions with other groups.26

The theoretical approaches described above provide us with the ability to identify individual case behavior as part of wider trends in Afghanistan’s political history. As we will see in the following chapters, the accumulation and devolution of state authority, subjugation of non-Pashtun groups, and power calculations of tribal leaders are best understood as instances of the theoretical approaches of Dupree, Barfield, Shahrani, Migdal, and Waltz.

26 Ibid, 204-5
Chapter 3

Foreign Invaders and Tribal Confederacies: 
*Tribe-State Relations from Prehistory to the Nineteenth Century*

Though the modern Afghan state did not begin to take shape until the late nineteenth century, the roots of contemporary state-society relations reach back to Afghanistan’s early history. The region’s first foreign conquests, carried out by Darius, Alexander, the Arabs, and Genghis Kahn illustrate patterns of governance and the historical saliency of *qawm* groups that are still evident today. Afghanistan’s present cultural and ethnic diversity has deep roots that are best understood through examining the Abbasid and Timurid periods. Similarly, contemporary political trends, specifically the political dominance of Durrani Pashtun tribes, are best understood in the context of the collapse of the Safavid Empire. By covering the period from Afghanistan’s prehistory to the late nineteenth century, this chapter provides the necessary historical background to explore the processes of state building that began in earnest under Abdur Rahman.
Afghanistan’s First Conquerors

Archeological evidence, including some of the world’s first stone tools, suggests that Afghanistan was first inhabited during the Middle Paleolithic era (between 300,000 and 30,000 years ago).\(^1\) It was not until much later, however, in the seventh century BC, that the area began to gain regional strategic and economic importance. Zoroastrianism has its roots in the region, and historians believe that Zarathustra was killed near Balkh, in northern Afghanistan, in 522 BC.\(^2\) The spread of Zoroastrianism, which became the court religion of the Achaemenids in 556 BC, incorporated Afghanistan into the Persianate world.\(^3\) When Darius the Great (522-486 BC) began consolidating control over Afghanistan, however, he encountered stiff resistance from “small tribal kingdoms,” whose “bitter fighting and constant revolts forced the Achaemenids to maintain strong garrisons” in the country, some of which evolved into towns which are still inhabited.\(^4\)

Darius’s invasion is significant because it was the first time in recorded history that Afghanistan was invaded and ruled by a foreign power. Importantly, the episode demonstrates that tribal governance structures have played a central role in Afghanistan for at least the last 2,500 years. The political and military significance of qawm groups in Afghanistan would become even more apparent when a Macedonian upstart defeated Darius III in 331 BC and sought to expand his own empire in the east.

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\(^1\) Although the term “Afghanistan” was not used until the 18th century, I have used the country’s modern name to refer to the various territories which would later become contemporary Afghanistan. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 260.

\(^2\) After the Umayyad invasion, his tomb, located at Mazar-e Sharif, was converted into the “Shrine of Ali,” the cousin of the Prophet and fourth Caliph. George MacMunn, *Afghanistan: From Darius to Amanullah*. (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1929), 9.

\(^3\) Dupree, 273.

\(^4\) *Ibid*, 274.
Alexander the Great is perhaps the best known of Afghanistan’s early conquerors. As Afghanistan’s first invader from west of the Bosporus, Alexander’s conquest is also viewed by both Afghans and Westerners as the harbinger of “wave after wave” of foreign invasions of the country.\(^5\) To be sure, the attitude of Alexander’s eastern conquests bore some similarities to later foreign efforts to subdue Afghanistan’s tribes. Before leading his armies east from Persia in 330 BC, the twenty-six-year old monarch implored his troops of the need to pacify the empire’s barbarian threats, “It is by your arms alone that they are restrained…We are dealing with savage beasts, which lapse of time can only tame, when they are caught and caged, because their own nature cannot tame them.”\(^6\)

Though Alexander led his troops through the regions of present-day Herat, Qandahar, Balkh, and Kabul, his invasion has special cultural significance for both the Tajiks and Nuristanis. In 327 BC, as Alexander was campaigning to subdue to Sogdians, from whom many Tajiks claim descent, “many guerillas holed up in the heretofore impregnable Sogdian Rock” fortress.\(^7\) Surrounded by high cliffs, the fortress seemed an unassailable refuge for the Sogdians, who taunted Alexander to look for “winged soldiers.”\(^8\) Rising to the challenge, Alexander equipped a company of volunteers with ropes and tent stakes to climb the cliffs. When the Sogdians woke the next day to find the Macedonian’s “airborne” troops, they surrendered.

Among the prisoners was Roxanne, the daughter of Oxyartes, a Bactrian leader from Balkh. Remembered by the Macedonians as “the most beautiful of all the Asiatic women they had seen,” Alexander fell in love with the girl, although he did

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7 Dupree, 281.
not pursue her romantically. When Alexander continued his conquests to the Rock of
the Chorienes, near present-day Faizabad, Tajikistan, Oxyartes, who had learned of
Alexander’s interest in his daughter, acted as the Macedonian’s dragoman and
negotiated for the surrender of the fortress. Shortly thereafter, Alexander and
Roxanne were married in a part-Macedonian, part-Sogdian ceremony.

Contemporary Tajik folklore holds Roxanne in high regard for her ability to
reconcile East and West, and today, many Tajiks in Tajikistan and Afghanistan name
their daughters after her. Though many Tajiks celebrate the romantic love between
Alexander and his bride, Tarn, a scholar of Alexander, views the arrangement as “a
marriage of policy, intended to reconcile the eastern barons and end the national war”
by encouraging the Sogdians to bandwagon with the Macedonians.9

In contrast, Alexander’s invasion of present-day Nuristan is widely viewed as
the first of many failed attempts to conquer Afghanistan. After subduing the Sogdians
in the north, Alexander turned south and followed the Kunar River towards India. The
account of the Roman historian Curtis Rufus indicates that Alexander encountered,
and conquered the “cultural forefathers of the Kafirs.”10 According to Rufus, “When
[Alexander] thereafter had conquered an unknown people, he came to the city of
Nysa,” where his men “set alight the trees; and the fire, thus nourished, attacked the
burial places of the inhabitants. These ancient buildings, being made of cedar wood,
easily caught fire and the fire spread to all sides.”11 After the local inhabitants
surrendered, Alexander’s men became “gradually more and more frivolous, garlanded
themselves with ivy and vines, and with the king’s approval abandoned themselves to

10 Lennart Edelberg, “Nuristanske Sølvpokaler,” *Kuml,* Den jyske Arkæologiske Selskab (1965) 196
11 Ibid, 194.
Edelberg points to the mention of burial houses, cedar wood, ivy, vines, and wine drinking—all characteristics unique to the valleys of Nuristan—to conclude that Alexander definitely encountered the Kafiris’ forbearers.

An interesting contrast is found between Curtis Rufus’s account and those of later historians of Afghanistan. Rufus does not pay special attention to the resistance of the Kafir tribes, but instead suggests a high level of fraternization between Alexander’s armies and the tribesmen (and, very likely, tribeswomen). However, later accounts paint Alexander’s eastern campaign as the origin of Afghanistan’s culture of armed resistance. Jones, for example begins his book, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, with this type of account of Alexander’s conquests of Afghanistan. Barfield recounts the popular version of Alexander’s campaign and relates it to contemporary military challenges:

> The difficulties that Alexander the Great faced in fighting the mountain tribes in the Kunar valley in the fourth century BC were not that much different from those faced by the Americans there in the twenty-first century, except that the former dropped boulders and the latter shot rockets from their mountain perches.13

The Afghans (who later rewrote the story to replace the Kafiri tribesmen with Pashtuns) are equally quick to celebrate their “defeat” of the Macedonian.14

However, as Edelberg and Dupree point out, the Kafiris likely bandwagoned with Alexander as he pressed into India.15 Rather than the source of stiff resistance that Nuristan would become for the Soviets and Americans 2,300 years later, Kafiris became partially integrated into the Macedonian order of battle. Other components of

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12 Ibid, 195.
15 Dupree, 283.
contemporary Nuristani folklore, such as attributing lighter skin and hair color to the genetic imprint of Alexander’s armies, indicate that the Nuristanis may not have resisted the Greeks as much as some would like to believe.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{The Rise of Eastern Empires}

Though Alexander succeeded in unifying the “savage” eastern tribes into one polity, his accomplishment was fleeting, and following Dupree’s model of fusion and fission, “local rebellions broke out in the Bactrian and Indian provinces almost immediately” after his death.\textsuperscript{17} The dissolution of the empire gave rise to the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, which ruled over Afghanistan until it was succeeded in the first century BC by the Kushan Empire, which “was especially significant in the cultural and political development of the country.”\textsuperscript{18} Afghanistan’s present multiculturalism reaches back to this period, when Hellenistic and Buddhist cultures mixed and gave rise to a new Graeco-Buddhist civilization. The Kushan period also saw the expansion of western trade with China, which brought Buddhism to the Han and enhanced the economic importance of Afghanistan as the center of the Silk Road.\textsuperscript{19}

In the second century AD, Kushan power began to fade and the Sasanian Empire, centered in Persia, became the dominant imperial power in Afghanistan. The Sasanians did not hold Afghanistan for long before the Hephthalite Huns invaded from Central Asia and displaced them with “wholesale destruction” that “caused

\textsuperscript{16} Barfield, 29.
\textsuperscript{17} Dupree, 283.
major social dislocations in the country” around 450 AD. Undeterred, the Sasanians allied with the Western Turks defeated the Hephthalites around 565 AD. The Turks were given control of Hephthalite territory north of the Oxus River, while the Sasanians gained the territories to the south. The significance of this demarcation is evident today, as the Oxus River (now named the Amu Darya) has largely endured as Afghanistan’s northern border since.

Islam Enters the Fold

In the seventh century, the Sasanians were defeated by the Umayyad Caliphate, who reached Afghanistan in 699. Despite the religious zeal that undergirded their conquests, the Umayyads recognized the intractability of tribal structures and pursued a “Swiss Cheese” strategy of governance by “permit[ting] local native rulers to retain their thrones,” albeit with the “assistance” of Arab military governors and administrators. While the pre-Islamic period in Afghanistan lacked “ethnic homogeneity, a unified economic and administrative system, religious unity, and political stability,” the Muslim invasion brought “a cosmopolitanism and lack of racial consciousness” that permitted greater political and cultural unity. One region that did not join in the cosmopolitanism was Kafiristan, which resisted foreign influence and conversion to Islam until the late nineteenth century.

When the Abbasid caliphate began to weaken around 850, local rulers began to proclaim their own dynasties, which swore fealty to Baghdad, but continued to

20 Gregorian, 13.
21 Dupree, 303.
22 Ibid, 312.
23 Gregorian, 14.
fight amongst themselves.\textsuperscript{24} This period, which lasted until the twelfth century, saw the expansion of Turkic control over Afghanistan and the eastern caliphate. The first of these Turkic empires, the Ghaznawids “militarized” the Afghan tribes for “their periodic incursions into India,” which has “contributed to the emergence of Afghan military feudalism” which continues to be a feature of Afghan political life.\textsuperscript{25}

The rise of the Seljuk Turks in Afghanistan, which began around 1038, saw a similar devolution of central authority to feudal and regional power holders, in line with Barfield’s Swiss Cheese model.\textsuperscript{26} When the Ghurid Empire rose in the middle of the twelfth century, decentralized power had become the norm in Afghanistan. The Ghurids, which, unlike Afghanistan’s previous rulers, were based in Afghanistan, depended on “tribal military power” for their campaigns in India.\textsuperscript{27} The Ghurids co-opted tribal leaders with land tracts and booty from across the Hindu Kush that “enabled Afghans to perpetuate and strengthen their feudal society” which persists to this day.\textsuperscript{28}

**Mongol and Timurid Invasion and Safavid Rule**

Genghis Khan’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1220 has been compared to an “atom bomb,” the affects of which are still visible.\textsuperscript{29} The violence and destruction of the Mongol conquest is evident in both the ruins of lost cities, such as Shahr-i Gholghola near Bamiyan, and in the apocalyptic role that Genghis Khan plays in

\textsuperscript{24} Dupree, 313.
\textsuperscript{25} Gregorian, 15.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid}, 16.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{29} Dupree, 316.
contemporary folklore. Notably, while the Panjsher Valley was devastated by the invasion, the Kafiris largely avoided capitulating to the Mongols. \(^{30}\)

Though many point to Genghis Khan as one of Afghanistan’s failed invaders, the historical evidence suggests that he pacified and effectively governed Afghanistan. \(^{31}\) Like Afghanistan’s recent conquerors, Genghis Khan imposed a centralized regime that did not allow for variance or deviation. However, unlike recent rulers, Genghis Khan possessed a monopoly of force that allowed him implement such an American Cheese approach. For example, he razed entire cities in order “to reshape the flow of trade across Eurasia” to “routes that his army could more easily supervise and control.” \(^{32}\) The lasting, but unpalatable, significance of his rule is that it demonstrates the degree of violence and destructiveness necessary to govern Afghanistan in a manner that is not reflective of its political culture or social history.

After the death of Genghis Khan, his empire dissolved and local power holders again emerged as the dominant form of governance. A century and a half later, Tamerlane, a Turkic ruler from Samarqand, conquered Afghanistan. As brutal and destructive as Genghis Khan, Tamerlane fused together an empire that included much of Central Asia and the Iranian plateau. Like his predecessors, however, when he attempted to conquer the Kafirs, he was “stung for his pains.” \(^{33}\) His dynasty lasted until the mid-sixteenth century, when his descendant, Babur, was driven into India by

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\(^{30}\) Gregorian, 19.  
\(^{33}\) MacMunn, 7.
the Uzbek Shaybanids. There, he founded the Moghul Dynasty, which continued to project into eastern Afghanistan and came into conflict with the eastern tribes.34

The decline of the Timurids coincided with the rise of the Shi’a Safavid Empire in Persia. It was during this period of Safavid rule that conditions that would continue to shape Afghanistan’s political culture began to emerge. The intensification of the Sunni-Shi’a divide, as well as the discovery of maritime routes between Europe and Asia, isolated Afghanistan from the wider Muslim world. Additionally, the expansion of Safavid power also contributed to Afghanistan’s political division. While Uzbeks controlled the north and the Moghuls dominated the east, the Safavids took the south and west. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these three empires continually came into contact in the area between Kabul and Qandahar.35 Not coincidentally, during the same period, “tribalism continued to prevail” in Afghanistan, and “at least 345 separate named tribal units,” including the Kafiris, remained largely independent.36

Rise of the Pashtun Tribes

The astute reader will have noticed the absence of the most politically significant qawm group in contemporary Afghanistan from the first two millennia of Afghan history. Though it does not fit with the myth of Pashtun supremacy over Afghanistan, Pashtuns did not play a role in national politics until the mid-eighteenth century.37 Indeed, their appearance as the dominant tribes of the south and east only dates back to the division of Afghanistan between the Moghul, Uzbek, and Safavid

35 Dupree, 321.
empires in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{38} Not surprisingly, each empire adopted a different approach to dealing with its “tribal problem.” Confronted with stiff resistance from eastern Pashtun tribesmen, the Moghuls were compelled to regularly undertake costly military expeditions and pay local leaders to guarantee Moghul sovereignty in the tribal areas. These policies resulted in the development of “a strong sense of Pashtun consciousness, which became increasingly manifest through the emergent Pashto poetic and literary tradition” and resistance to Moghul rule.\textsuperscript{39}

Because of their attempts to impose Shi’ism on the population, the Safavids were met with much fiercer resistance than the Moghuls. Shahrani characterizes how the Persians maintained their rule through internal colonialism:

\begin{quote}
The Safavids recruited local fighting men into the Persian armies, then stationed them in Persia, banished individuals, transplanted entire kinship groups in distant areas, and relied on a policy of divide and rule, creating conflicts between local leaders.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

One of the groups relocated by the Safavids was the entire Abdali clan, who were moved from Qandahar to western Afghanistan in order to break the power of Pashtun tribes in the south.\textsuperscript{41} In addition to empowering the Ghilzai Pashtuns, this strategy also encouraged the development of aristocratic clans within the different Pashtun tribes. One of these clans, the Hotaki of the Ghilzai, would make the first attempt at establishing an Afghan state at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The rise of the Pashtuns as national political players began in 1703, when the Safavid ruler, Shah Sultan Husain I sent a Georgian mercenary to Qandahar to put down a Baluch rebellion in the region. A local Hotaki Ghilzai leader, Mir Wais Khan,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{38} Barfield, \textit{Afghanistan}, 92.  \\
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}  \\
\textsuperscript{41} Gregorian, 44.
\end{flushleft}
chaffed under the rule of the new Governor-General and led a failed rebellion against the Safavids. The Georgian exiled Mir Wais to the Safavid capital of Isfahan, where “through judicious flattery and subtle bribes” he was able to gain the favor of the Shah’s court. In Isfahan, Mir Wais observed the weakening of the Safavid dynasty and calculated his return to power. He received permission to make the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, where he was able to obtain a fatwa calling for the Sunni overthrow of the Shi’a Safavids. In 1709, Mir Wais returned to Qandahar armed with both the fatwa and the good graces of the Shah and successfully revolted against the Safavids. Four months later, Mir Wais’s Ghilzais defeated the Safavids, along with their Abdali allies.

The political power of the Ghilzais continued to grow when Mir Mahmud, the son of Mir Wais, invaded Persia in 1719. Although he was met with resistance from the 42,000 strong Persian army (which included twenty-four cannon under the command of a French officer, Philippe Colombe), Mir Mahmud pressed on and, in 1722, captured the Safavid capital of Isfahan. Ghilzai rule over Persia would be short-lived, however, and by 1736, Nadir Shah Afshar, a Turk from Khorasan, expelled the Afghans. With the help of the Abdali Pashtuns, he expanded the Persian Empire across Afghanistan, unifying the country’s northern, eastern, and western regions for the first time in modern history. In 1739, he sacked Delhi before taking his campaign into Central Asia. His successes, however, led him to become “so fiercely tyrannical that the inevitable end came in 1747, when he was assassinated by Salah Beg, the captain of his guard.”

42 Dupree, 323.
43 MacMunn, 53.
and his former Abdali Pashtun allies emerged as the dominant political force in of the newly unified Afghanistan.44

The Durrani Empire

In the aftermath of Nadir Shah’s assassination, Ahmad Khan Abdali, the king’s treasurer during his Indian and Central Asian campaigns, seized a great part of royal treasury (including the famed Koh-i Noor diamond, which is currently set in Queen Elizabeth’s crown) and, with 10,000 Abdali horsemen, marched to Qandahar.45 There, the Abdali tribal leadership convened a jirga, or council, where, after nine days, they selected Ahmad Khan as their military leader.46 Contrary to some historical accounts, Ahmad Khan was not selected to become King of Afghanistan, but was chosen by the Abdali leadership because “he was a member of the comparatively weak Sadozai clan of the Popalzai subtribe” that the “chieftains presumably believed they could remove from power if he did not act in their interests.”47 Perhaps sensing this intrigue, Ahmad Khan initially resisted the jirga’s decision until Sabir Khan, a local holy man, placed some wheat in Ahmad Khan’s turban and declared him “Shah, Pearl of Pearls” (Badshah, Durr-i Durran). The sobriquet stuck and Ahmad Khan’s dynasty and the Abdali tribes have since been called Durrani.48

The selection of Ahmad Shah Durrani demonstrates that, from the outset, the Afghan state has been in conflict with tribal leaders who have resisted surrendering their privileged positions to the monarchy. Additionally, the selection of a monarch whose rule was contingent on the good will of the Durrani leadership ensured that

44 Barfield, Afghanistan, 97.
45 MacMunn, 54.
46 Dupree, 332.
47 Gregorian, 46.
48 Dupree, 333.
“the monarch’s first task was to satisfy the interests of his own clansmen” before those of the state. Ahmad Shah achieved this by distributing landholdings and important state offices to leaders of the various Durrani subtribes. In contrast, “non-Durrani tribes received an insignificant amount of land,” but paid most of the taxes and provided the most soldiers. This tribalization of the central government, largely expressed through the distribution of offices in accordance with qawm interests, has since endured as a defining characteristic of Afghan politics.

After securing his role as the leader of the Durrani, Ahmad Shah then turned to expanding his control over Afghanistan. While some historians incorrectly refer to his rule as the origin of the modern Afghan state, his governance more closely approximated that of his imperial predecessors. Indeed, the chief difference between Nadir Shah and Ahmad Khan was that the latter was Afghan. Capitalizing on the power vacuum created by Nadir Shah, and making full use of the former emperor’s treasure and cavalry, Ahmad Shah defeated the Ghilzai and expanded his empire to include Kabul, Peshawar, the Punjab, Herat, and Mashhad. However, as the empire grew, the power of Ahmad Shah was continually checked by the “tribal-feudal socioeconomic framework,” which required the consent of the Durrani tribal chieftains to enact important policies. Ahmad Shah’s empire similarly did not penetrate the non-Pashtun qawm groups, who were ruled indirectly “through their own local leaders.” In this way, the Durrani Empire was closer to “mechanism by

49 Gregorian, 47.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Shahrani, 31.
which the Pashtun tribes under [Ahmad Shah’s] command ruled over other territories,” than a centralized state.⁵³

Despite these limitations, Ahmad Shah adopted several policies that were intended to centralize the rule of the monarchy. He attempted to strengthen ties with various tribes by taking wives for himself and his sons from them. He also struck his own coins and attempted to create a standing army, which was designed to decrease the dependency of the monarchy on tribal levies.⁵⁴ His foreign conquests increased the legitimacy of the monarchy among the tribes and created a sense of national unity. In spite of these efforts, Ahmad Shah ultimately failed to establish a strong centralized monarchy or curb the political influence of tribal leaders. Gregorian summarizes the Durrani monarch’s dilemma:

To maintain his rule and consolidate the position of the monarchy he was dependent on the important Afghan tribes; at the same time, the country’s long-term interests called for a centralized monarchy on the Persian model, one that would not only be independent of the tribes, but assert its authority over them.⁵⁵

Every ruler since Ahmad Shah has struggled to balance these two imperatives against what Dupree described as the life-cycle of fusion and fission in Afghanistan.

In 1772, Ahmad Shah died from natural causes (“maggots developed [in the upper part of the nose] and they dropped into his mouth when he ate or drank”) and was succeeded by his son, Timur Shah.⁵⁶ The second Durrani monarch largely continued his father’s policies and also chafed under the power of the tribal leaders. In 1775, he moved the capital from Qandahar to Kabul, which was populated mostly

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⁵⁴ Gregorian., 47.
⁵⁵ Ibid, 49.
by Tajiks, in order to lessen the role of the Pashtun tribal leaders in national politics. However, like his father, Timur Shah was unable to weaken the political power of the Durrani tribes. After his death in 1793, his father’s empire seemed as if it was about to unravel. With no law of royal succession, the different tribes represented in the shah’s harem maneuvered for their kinsmen to become the new king. After a period of court intrigue, Zaman Shah emerged with the support of the powerful Barakzai clan.

Like his predecessors, the new king tried to centralize authority and challenge the tribal chiefs, eventually leading to the end of the alliance between the monarchy and the Barakzai clan. Struggling to maintain the authority of the monarchy, Zaman Shah allied with the Ghilzais and launched an invasion of India. In 1800, he executed several tribal chiefs, including the head of the Mohammadzai tribe (part of the Barakzai clan). In response, Fateh Khan, the son of the Mohammadzai chief, joined with Shah Mahmud, the king’s brother and rival, and imprisoned, blinded, and deposed Zaman Shah. The frequency and violence of these inter-tribal rivalries ensured that Afghanistan “entered the nineteenth century a politically disunited, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, tribal feudal state.”

**Afghanistan in the Nineteenth Century**

As the Durrani Empire began disintegrating in the late eighteenth century, internal divisions and foreign interference began to become indelible features of Afghan politics. With the support of the Barakzai tribal leaders, Shah Mahmud

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57 Dupree, 340.
58 Gregorian, 50.
59 Ibid, 51.
ascended the throne in 1800, until his brother, Shah Shuja, seized power in 1803. Shah Shuja ruled until 1809, when the Barakzai leaders, led by Fateh Khan restored Shah Mahmud. Shah Mahmud maintained power until 1818 when the Barakzai leaders again overthrew him and ended the Sadozai dynasty, this time in retaliation for his blinding and dismembering of Fateh Khan.⁶⁰

While the Durrani clans scrambled for control of their crumbling federation, Ranjit Singh, Zaman Shah’s former Governor of Punjab declared independence and established the Sikh Empire. Deprived of their Indian territories, the Sadozai rulers lost the access to the wealth “with which they had cemented their tribal coalitions.”⁶¹ Afghanistan became further divided by tribal warfare. Rubin points out that this trend recurs throughout Afghan history: the loss of outside revenue leads to the decline of state control and the devolution of power to regional centers. The most recent example of this is the overthrow of Najibullah in 1992, after the collapse of his patron, the Soviet Union, discussed further in Chapter 5.⁶² However, the loss of tribute from India was soon replaced with a different kind of support from the new imperial power across the Hindu Kush.

**Enter the British Empire**

Tribal infighting continued to fracture Afghanistan throughout the early 1820s. During this period, the Mohammadzai clan emerged as the dominant political force, with the brothers of Fateh Khan controlling the different regions of Afghanistan. By 1826, Dost Muhammad, who controlled Ghazni and Kabul, was

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⁶⁰ Dupree, 368.
⁶¹ Rubin, 46.
⁶² Ibid.
recognized by the family as the monarch. Over the next nine years, Dost Muhammad capitalized on his position and expanded the power of the monarchy by “curtailing the power of the other Durrani subtribes” while concentrating political and administrative control in the hands of his Barakzai kinsmen. At the same time, he expanded monarchy’s control over Kohistan, including the Panjsher Valley, which had hitherto resisted inclusion in the Durrani state. In 1835, these campaigns, coupled with “his judicious use of the institution of marriage to advance his political designs” proved fruitful and Dost Muhammad was crowned the Emir of Afghanistan.

As European powers drew closer to Afghanistan, Dost Muhammad was the first ruler to look to the West for technological and military support. In 1836, he asked the British Governor-General of India, Lord Auckland, for assistance to retake Peshawar from the Sikhs. In response, the British dispatched Alexander (later “Bukhara”) Burns to Kabul to investigate possible trade routes and work towards a rapprochement between the Afghans and the Sikhs. While no British military support was forthcoming, Dost Muhammad retained several Persian, French, American, and English adventurers as military advisers. Though mostly opportunistic soldiers of fortune, these advisers exposed the Emir to Western military technologies and organizations that he used to modernize and strengthen parts of his army. Despite some modest reforms, Dost Muhammad’s military efforts largely failed.

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63 MacMunn, 95.
64 Gregorian, 74.
66 Gregorian, 74.
67 Dupree, 371.
Figure 3.1 The Durrani Dynasty (1747-1973)

Abdal (lived c. 1000)

Zirak (lived c. 1400)

Popol

Aliko

Achak

Barak

Saddo (lived early 1600s)

Mohammad Zaman (lived early 1700s)

Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747-72)

Timur Shah (1772-93)

Rhamdel Khan of Kandahar

Sultan Mohammad of Peshawar

Haji Jamal Khan of Kandahar

Dost Mohammad

(1826-39, 1842-63)

Sher Ali

(1863-66, 1868-79)

Mohd. Afzal

(1866-67)

Mohd. Azam

(1867-68)

Mohd. Yaqub

(1879)

Abdur Rahman

(1880-1901)

Habibullah

(1901-19)

Queen Soraya

(Married Amanullah)

Mahmud Tarzi

Mohd. Nadir Shah

(1929-33)

Mohd. Aziz Khan

Amanullah (1919-29)

Mohd. Zahir Shah

(1933-73)

Mohammad Daoud Khan

(1973-78)

Revised from Dupree, *Afghanistan*, pp. 366-7

Unless otherwise stated, dates in parenthesis indicate reign
outside of Kabul, where the military remained “feudal-tribal” in character.\textsuperscript{69}

Dost Muhammad also began Afghanistan’s first modern efforts to centralize political authority in Kabul. He deposed or executed unruly tribal chiefs, including Panjsheri leaders, and launched a campaign to conquer the Hazara. To give his military aims religious legitimacy, he declared a \textit{jihad} against the Sikhs in Peshawar and adopted the title, \textit{Emir al-Muminin}, or Commander of the Faithful. In the capital, he brought the judicial system into the royal court, thereby limiting the power of the religious establishment. He improved tax collection and duties on foreign trade. The Emir also established relations with the non-Durrani border tribes, who he sought to incorporate into the national defense structure. Despite Dost Muhammad’s best efforts, however, these reforms were largely sporadic and restricted to Kabul. The loss of revenue from India was still limiting the monarchy’s ability to forge tribal alliances or project power.

In order to recover the sources of revenue necessary to continue his consolidation of power, Dost Muhammad looked to the British for support in recovering Peshawar from Ranjit Singh. The British, however, refused to support the Afghans against their Sikh ally and instead offered to mediate negotiations between the two parties. British policy in India sought to maintain a balance of power in the region, with Afghanistan powerful enough to resist the Russian-backed Persians, but not strong enough to challenge Sikh control of the Punjab.\textsuperscript{70} In 1837, this policy failed when the Persians, with significant Russian support, attempted to enforce their claim to Herat and laid siege to the city. Faced with the prospect of Russian

\textsuperscript{69} Gregorian, 77.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid}, 97.
expansion towards India, the British responded by dispatching a fleet to attack the Persian Gulf coast.\textsuperscript{71}

The siege of Herat convinced the British of the need for a friendly monarch in Kabul who would act as a buffer for Russian expansion while accepting Sikh control over the Punjab. Dost Muhammad, who had “showed a neutral preference for the British” and still pushed for Afghan control of Peshawar did not suit Britain’s imperial designs for the region. Fortunately for Lord Auckland, the deposed Sadozai monarch, Shah Shuja, who was in exile in India, was more than willing to accept British support for his return to power.

In April 1839, the British invaded Afghanistan, ostensibly to support the efforts of Shah Shuja’s (non-existent) army to remove the “anti-British” Dost Muhammad and restore the throne to the Sadozai dynasty. The details of the conflict are outside the scope of this thesis, but it suffices to say that the First Anglo-Afghan War was not the last time that a foreign army would invade Afghanistan without sufficient numbers to control the country in order to support a weak leader without clear objectives for victory. The invasion galvanized a national resistance against the British troops, all but one of which were slaughtered as they retreated to India. By the end of the conflict in 1842, Dost Muhammad, who initially fled to Bukhara, was restored to the throne until his death in 1863.

\textbf{State Disintegration and the Second Anglo-Afghan War} \textsuperscript{71}

Following the death of Dost Muhammad, the monarchy’s control over the country weakened and “internal dissention and anarchy prevailed in Afghanistan,” in

\textsuperscript{71} Paul Wooten, “Trade and Empire: The Royal Navy, Iran, and the Persian Gulf,” \textit{Al-Noor}, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2010), 53.
line with Dupree’s model of state fission. His son Sher Ali, ascended to the crown, but he lacked the resources necessary to expand state control. The advance of British India into the Punjab foreclosed the possibility of unifying the tribes with the promise of the “fruits of conquest.” Instead, the Afghan monarch was left to either play groups against each other or to seek aid from an outside power. While the British were forthcoming with some aid, it was not enough to ensure the monarchy’s control over the increasingly independent *qawm* groups. For this reason, during this period:

> Tribalism reemerged as a potent force that weakened the state in its battle with the khans for social control...the balance of power between state and tribes...repeatedly shifted, often because of changes in the relations between the state and the international system.74

Such a shift occurred in the 1870s, when, under new Conservative leadership in London, the British began to adopt a more forward policy towards confronting Russia in the “Great Game” for Eurasia.

As the British began projecting their influence into Afghanistan in the 1840s, the Russians pursued a similar course in Central Asia; and by 1874, Russia occupied much of the territory north of the Amu Darya (present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). The Russo-Turkish War of 1877 and the plan to extend Russia’s railway network into Central Asia heightened tensions with Britain, who viewed Tsarist expansion as a threat to India. Britain challenged Russia’s southern activities by moving an army to Quetta and petitioning Sher Ali to accept a permanent British mission in Kabul.75 Worried that the Russians would expect similar influence in Kabul, the king ignored the British requests. When the Russians dispatched a mission

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72 Gregorian, 105.
73 Rubin, 47.
74 *Ibid*.
75 While permanent diplomatic missions are the mainstay of modern diplomacy, the implication for Sher Ali of hosting a British consul would have been the acceptance of Britain as a foreign protector.
to Afghanistan (without the approval of Sher Ali) in 1878, the British again demanded that he accept British representation, and sent Neville Chamberlain to Kabul to lead the mission. When the expedition was denied permission to proceed to Kabul, the British fumed over the “glaring national insult” inflicted by the Afghan monarch. One month later, the British again invaded Afghanistan.

Despite their quick victory in deposing Sher Ali, the British did not seek to rule Afghanistan directly. Instead, they sought to establish a strong buffer state that could resist Tsarist advances without the assistance of British troops. For this task, the British found a willing partner in Sher Ali’s nephew, Abdul Rahman Khan, who General Roberts, the commanding general of the British forces in Kabul at the time called, “our most suitable instrument” for governing Afghanistan in accordance with British interests. In 1881, a year after the Liberals gained control of the Government, Britain withdrew its forces from Afghanistan and left Abdur Rahman Khan as the emir of their new client state.

Towards a Modern State

Abdur Rahman’s reign would see Afghanistan’s first attempt to create a modern centralized state in the European mold. These efforts, despite employing the trappings of modern statehood—automatic weapons to a centralized civil service—and the support of the British Empire, would ultimately fail. Several trends throughout Afghanistan’s history leading up to Abdur Rahman’s rule illustrate enduring sources of resistance to state centralization in Afghan political culture.

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76 Dupree, 408.
77 Rubin, 48.
78 Charles Windham, *Précis on Afghan Affairs*, Government of India Foreign and Political Department, 1914), 41.
First, the dominance of local governance structures in Afghanistan has been recognized since at least 500 BC, when Darius encountered resistance from “small tribal kingdoms” in his eastern campaign. These qawm and tribe-based units resisted incorporation by every successive foreign invader. Ruling Afghanistan, as Alexander, the Umayyads, and the Safavids demonstrated, required incorporating and then co-opting these tribal structures into the larger state framework.

Afghan rulers since the mid-eighteenth century have contributed to the saliency of local governance structures by pursuing internal colonialist policies that tribalize the state apparatus. The distribution of state sanction and benefits in accordance with qawm-based interests has impeded the growth of a modern state. As institutions were tribalized from the onset, the character of the Afghan government has continued to resemble a tribal confederation more than a national state.

Finally, the militarization of the border tribes under the Ghaznawids began a tradition of Afghan leaders relying on foreign conquests, usually in India, to generate sufficient revenues to cement their tribal federations. This pattern was repeated by rulers until the expansion of the British Empire prevented further Afghan incursions. With insufficient command over domestic resources, Afghan monarchs since Dost Muhammad have been unable to maintain control of the country without significant foreign support.

As Afghanistan attempted to build a modern state in the late nineteenth century, these trends continued to inhibit state formation.
Chapter 4

“A beautiful monument without a foundation”:
State Building in Afghanistan from 1880 to 1978

Under the byline “Record stores, Mad Men furniture, and pencil skirts—when Kabul had rock ‘n’ roll, not rockets,” Foreign Policy magazine recently published a collection of photographs from Afghanistan during the 1950s and 1960s. With images of girl scouts, lab technicians, and hydroelectric dams, the essay portrayed an Afghanistan that, only fifty years before, seemed to be on the cusp of modernity.

According to the article:

Afghan women pursued careers in medicine; men and women mingled casually at movie theaters and university campuses in Kabul; factories in the suburbs churned out textiles and other goods. There was a tradition of law and order, and a government capable of undertaking large national infrastructure projects, like building hydropower stations and roads, albeit with outside help. Ordinary people had a sense of hope, a belief that education could open opportunities for all, a conviction that a bright future lay ahead.¹

While the Foreign Policy essay correctly points out that Afghanistan’s urban society and economy had donned the trappings of modernity, its nostalgia for Afghanistan’s

¹ Qayoumi, Mohammad, “Once Upon a Time in Afghanistan…” Foreign Policy, May/June 2010.
mid-twentieth century milieu ignores that the state structure of the time remained a relic of the *qawm* politics of the nineteenth century. The Afghan government modernized its military, education system, and infrastructure, but did not engage in a political strategy that aimed at replacing tribal governance structures. By the 1970s, the government was not equipped to respond to political crises that were provoked by the country’s growing politically conscious elite. The result has been almost four decades of state collapse and foreign occupation. To understand how Afghanistan entered the twenty-first century a failed state, we must first explore how the idealized Afghanistan of “Mad Men furniture and pencil skirts” came to be.

**Laying the Foundation of a Modern State**

The roots of the current Afghan political system reach back to the Second Anglo-Afghan War and the rise of Abdur Rahman at the end of the nineteenth century. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the 1878 British invasion of Afghanistan was largely the result of the Conservative British government’s forward policy towards confronting Russia in Central Asia. After defeating Sher Ali, the British initially set out to follow the Swiss Cheese approach by governing the parts of Afghanistan most important to the defense of India while leaving the rest of the country to local rulers.\(^2\) However, when the Liberals took control in London in 1880, the British government began pursuing a more restrained strategy in the region. Rather than dividing the country and ruling parts of it directly, the British supported the candidacy of Abdur Rahman to the throne on the condition that he accept British

control of Afghan foreign policy. Abdur Rahman had recently returned from exile in Samarqand and was fighting a civil war against his cousin, Muhammad Ayub, for control of the country. With his political future uncertain, he accepted the British conditions and the emirship.

Abdur Rahman would prove to be one of the most significant figures in Afghan political history. Like many of his predecessors, he inherited a country that, through civil war, weak leadership, and foreign invasion, had fallen back onto feudal patterns of governance. In his biography, the “Iron Emir” later described the political atmosphere when he assumed the throne, “Every priest, mullah, and chief of every tribe considered himself an independent King, and for about 200 years past, the freedom and independence of many of these priests were never broken by their sovereigns.” Undeterred by this persistent fission, Abdur Rahman embarked on a series of military campaigns and administrative reforms designed to weaken the power of local rulers and move Afghanistan towards becoming a modern state.

After defeating his cousin and consolidating his control of the monarchy, Abdur Rahman began a campaign of “breaking down the feudal and tribal system and substituting one grand community under one law and one rule” that would characterize his reign. Between 1881 and 1896, Abdur Rahman launched seventeen internal military campaigns, the result of which was usually the “wholesale executions and deportations” of the defeated groups. While previous monarchs

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4 Gregorian, 129.
depended on persuasion and shifting alliances to consolidate state power, Abdur Rahman expanded his control through “force, bloody reprisals, matrimonial alliances, bribes, and intrigues.”8 With a political style closer to Genghis Khan than Sher Ali, Abdur Rahman relied on a monopoly of violence to implement a political program that did not allow for local variance or deviation.

The Iron Emir’s tactics were as brutal and discriminatory as they were successful. He relied on internal colonialist policies, notably the ethnic cleansing of non-Pashtun communities, such as the Hazara and the Kafiris and the forcible relocation his Ghilzai Pashtun rivals to the north, where their collocation with Tajiks and Uzbeks ensured their primary identification would be ethnic and not tribal.9 In Turkestan, Panjsher, Herat and the Ghilzai areas, Abdur Rahman “destroyed countless local communities by decimating their leadership through executions, confiscation of properties, exile or imprisonment in the capital.”10 The Emir repopulated these severely weakened communities with Pashtuns, whom he felt were the only ones who could “be relied on in the borderlands.”11 With British artillery and rifles, Abdur Rahman was able to project the military power to promote a centralized Afghan state unlike any of his predecessors.12

Abdur Rahman’s project of centralizing political power was implemented administratively, economically, culturally, and militarily. Much like Stalin would do in Central Asia forty years later, the Emir redrew provincial and sub-provincial

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8 Gregorian, 132.
boundaries to divide tribes, making “different segments of a tribe answerable to
different provincial governments.”¹³ He also developed a Kabul-centered civil
administration which endured, albeit in a modified form, until the Soviet invasion in
1979.¹⁴ Abdur Rahman formed a loose constitutional government, with a Supreme
Council and a General Assembly, both advisory bodies with no authority, but which
served as precursors to a cabinet and legislature.¹⁵

The Iron Emir also attempted to weaken the power of local leaders through
modernizing and centralizing the Afghan economy. He replaced regional currencies
with a single monetary unit, regularized tax collection, and invested in light industry
(including weaponry).¹⁶ He expanded road networks and modernized the postal
system to integrate isolated markets with Kabul. He also largely normalized trade
with his neighbors, even as relations with India, Central Asia, and Persia became
increasingly sensitive to Great Game rivalries. Despite these reforms, however,
Abdur Rahman was wary of the encroaching foreign powers and enacted policies to
isolate Afghanistan economically. He blocked attempts to integrate his country into
Russian and British rail and telegraph networks and forbade foreign investment.¹⁷ His
decision may have been strategically correct, but it retarded Afghanistan’s economic
development and long-term stability.

As part of his reform program, the Iron Emir also brought the powerful
religious establishment under his control by requiring judges to pass state

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¹³ Robert Canfield, “Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan,” in The State
(Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 92.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Gregorian, 134.
¹⁶ Ibid, 142.
¹⁷ Barfield, 153.
examinations and nationalizing the religious *waqf* endowments.\textsuperscript{18} He further weakened the political role of the clerics by claiming the sole authority to interpret Islamic laws and issue religious edicts. \textsuperscript{19} With the new title, “Defender and Champion of the Islamic Faith in Afghanistan,” Abdur Rahman used Islam as another means of expanding his political authority, especially in areas controlled by non-Sunnī groups, such as the Hazara and the Kafirs.

By 1895, Abdur Rahman had succeeded in incorporating all of the territory of modern Afghanistan, except one. Straddling the Hind Kush with access to Lâghman, Jalalabad, and Panjsher, Kafiristan posed a threat to Abdur Rahman’s Afghanistan. With the Russians advancing into the Pamir and the British tightening control east of the Hindu Kush, the Iron Emir feared that Kafiristan would eventually fall into the British or Russian orbit.\textsuperscript{20} In order to prevent the Kafirs from obtaining external assistance, the Emir waited until winter, when the passes were closed by snow, and launched his attack on the valleys of Kafiristan. He dispatched armies to Kunar, Panjsher, and Badakhshan to attack Kafiristan from the north, west, and south. Although the Kafirs were known as fierce fighters, they still relied on primitive weapons, such as bows and arrows, and were hopelessly outgunned by the British-armed Afghan army. Within forty days, Abdur Rahman conquered the Kafirs. Displaying the same type of bandwagoning behavior that led their ancestors to join

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}, 160.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Gregorian, 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ludwig W. Adamec, \textit{Dictionary of Afghan Wars, Revolutions, and Insurgencies}. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 139.
\end{itemize}
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Alexander’s army, the Kafiris converted to Islam and many joined the Afghan army.\textsuperscript{21} In 1906, the area was renamed “Nuristan,” or “Land of Light.”

Abdur Rahman’s victory in Kafiristan, and indeed his consolidation of independent qawm groups throughout Afghanistan, was facilitated by his modernization of the military, which Gregorian calls his “single greatest achievement.”\textsuperscript{22} Though leaders since Dost Muhammad had attempted to modernize the Afghan army, the force which Abdur Rahman inherited was distinctly “tribal and feudal in character.”\textsuperscript{23} Because it relied on qawm-based levies, the monarchy was never able wrest military control away from local leaders. To weaken the power of these leaders, Abdur Rahman instituted the hashtnafari system, wherein each qawm group sent one in every eight men to the Emir’s army. Unlike his predecessors, Abdur Rahman succeeded in creating a standing army with salaried and uniformed soldiers and an officer corps. The Afghan army, however, was still a long way from achieving Prussian efficiency. Concerned over British influence, Abdur Rahman did not accept foreign advisers or promote military exchanges. As a result, his military lacked the technical training necessary to become fully independent of tribal levies.

**The Enduring Legacy of Abdur Rahman**

Though the Iron Emir’s reforms seem modest by contemporary standards, his policies have had a lasting impact Afghanistan’s political culture. In expanding the power of the monarchy, Abdur Rahman established some of Afghanistan’s first government institutions. His military, civil service, judiciary, cabinet, and tax code

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Gregorian, 139.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
would become the foundation of Afghanistan’s “golden age” in the mid-twentieth century. Some of the Iron Emir’s policies, however, hindered long-term state building. His economic isolation partially preserved Afghanistan’s independence, but it did not bring development or stability to his country.

Abdur Rahman’s most enduring legacy, however, is the flawed model of centralized governance which has persisted since his death in 1901. As Barfield points out, because Abdur Rahman’s form of governance “went against the grain of [the] Afghan tradition” of strong local governance structures, most of his achievements were short-lived.24 While he enjoyed political and military successes, Abdur Rahman’s state-dominated centralization empowered the very local leaders that he was trying to undermine. As Shahrani explained in Chapter 2, the state’s policies of internal colonialism aimed at undermining the identity and autonomy of political rivals led non-Durrani groups to develop “community-based parallel power structures” that endured and challenged the supremacy of the state into the next century.25

Habibullah: A Less-Than-Iron Emir

After the death of Abdur Rahman, the throne passed to his son, Habibullah. Like his father, the new emir sought to modernize Afghanistan and strengthen the power of the central government. The methods Habibullah used to enact his policies, however, differed greatly from those of Abdur Rahman. Rather than implementing his will by force, Habibullah attempted to gain the support of tribal and religious

24 Barfield, 160.
25 Shahrani, 225.
leaders by loosening some of his father’s more oppressive policies. He offered amnesty to political prisoners and exiles, curtailed the monarchy’s control of the clerics, abolished his father’s domestic spy network, eased compulsory military service, and tried to promote generally positive relations between the state and local qawm leaders. These reforms, initially undertaken from a position of strength for the monarchy, contributed to the gradual erosion of state authority that occurred throughout Habibullah’s reign.

As Habibullah reoriented the state’s approach to qawm authority, he also sought to modernize his country. His greatest influence in this regard was Mahmud Tarzi, who had spent most of Abdur Rahman’s reign in exile in Ottoman Turkey. Tarzi was among a group of prominent exiled families, including the future Musahiban kings, who “brought new ideas, both secular and religious,” to Afghanistan after the death of Abdur Rahman. Observing the rise of the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, Tarzi returned to Afghanistan convinced that a socioeconomic transformation of his country was necessary to “reinforce the authority and power of the monarch, contribute to the stability of the country, and stave off external threats.” Habibullah agreed and adopted the “Young Afghan” approach of wedding Islam, nationalism, modernization, and secularism to the promotion of the Afghan state.

Tarzi became a key adviser in Habibullah’s government and encouraged the monarch to implement several reforms that he believed would modernize Afghanistan. He established the country’s first newspaper, which published both

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26 Gregorian, 181.
27 Barfield, 175.
28 Gregorian, 164.
domestic and foreign news, in order to inform the long-xenophobic Afghans of the “intellectual, scientific, and technological achievements” of Europe and the West. Tarzi translated European literature—especially Jules Verne, who he hoped would generate interest in science—and Turkish works on international law and the Russo-Japanese War into Persian. He also published articles that cut against deep traditions by advocating for women’s rights and the modernization of the Afghan economy. Under Habibullah, Afghanistan’s industrial workers rose from 1,500 to 5,000, although industrial growth was still “slow and difficult.”

One of Tarzi’s most enduring contributions to Afghan political culture was the introduction of European-style nationalism into Afghanistan’s education and political discourse. He promoted the status of Pashto, which he regarded as the “true national language,” instead of Persian, which had long been the official government language. Like Abdur Rahman, Habibullah and Tarzi promoted an Islamic nationalism. Tarzi relied on well-established Sunni jurisprudence to argue that, since Afghanistan was an Islamic kingdom, service to the nation (watan) was a religious obligation. Modernization, which allowed the king to better protect the country’s sovereignty, was not only accepted, it was a religious requirement.

Many religious and qawm leaders rejected this reasoning and resented government intrusions into Afghan society, especially efforts that weakened their internal legitimacy by encouraging the secularization of education and promotion of women’s rights. Abdur Rahman probably would have overcome these objections by killing those who voiced opposition. Habibullah, however, had retreated from his

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29 Ibid, 170.
31 Ibid, 175.
father’s heavy-handed policies, and was unable to implement his modernization programs outside of the capital. While “the legacy of Abdur Rahman was still strong enough” to forestall popular revolts, by the second decade of the twentieth century, political power in Afghanistan still did not center on the government in Kabul. When Habibullah was murdered by an unknown assassin on a hunting trip in Jalalabad 1919, he left behind a country that was just beginning to modernize elements of its economy and society. The core of Afghanistan’s political system, in contrast, was just as diffuse and qawm-centric as it had ever been.

Amanullah and the Trappings of Modernity

The death of Habibullah was followed by a brief power struggle between conservative and reformists forces within the elite. Habibullah’s brother, Nasrullah Khan rallied the support of the religious and tribal leaders and declared himself the new Emir while still in Jalalabad. However, the centralizing reforms of his predecessors had shifted some key components of state power to Kabul, where Habibullah’s son, Amanullah, was acting as vice-regent in his father’s absence. Controlling the Kabul garrison, arsenal and treasury, Amanullah was able to push aside his uncle and secure the throne. Intra-Durrani qawm politics also played a key role in the ascendance of Amanullah, whose mother, Ulya Hazrat, rallied her powerful Barakzai clan to support her son.

As the father-in-law of the new Emir, Tarzi and his Young Afghan movement had long been an influence on Amanullah. Shortly after becoming king, Amanullah

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32 Barfield, 179.
33 Gregorian, 227.
challenged Afghanistan’s status as a British protectorate and appointed Tarzi foreign minister. In April 1919, he declared a war of independence against Britain, which rallied his conservative and tribal opponents to *jihad*.34 Though the Third Anglo-Afghan war lasted only two months and was a military disaster for the Afghans, the British, who were recovering from the First World War, conceded their control over Afghanistan’s foreign policy.

Amanullah’s victory over the British enhanced his prestige with his conservative critics and enabled him begin a period of ambitious educational, administrative, and social reforms. The Emir first focused on education, which he hoped would “cultivate an enlightened intellectual class in Afghanistan…and provide a group of able administrators for the monarchy.”35 Under Amanullah and Tarzi, the government began recruiting foreign teachers, established German and French schools in Kabul, sent promising students abroad for university education, and introduced “modern” subjects–math and geography–into traditional school curricula throughout the country.36 In 1921, the government even began building public schools for girls and sending female students abroad to continue their education. Amanullah’s desire to improve the status of women in Afghanistan was not restricted to his education policies. During his reign, Afghanistan outlawed child marriages, extended greater legal rights to women, and encouraged women to abandon the veil, which he felt “hid half of the Afghan nation.”37

34 Barfield, 181.
35 Gregorian, 240.
Amanullah also expanded his father’s administrative reforms. He codified Afghanistan’s criminal laws, continued to centralize the judiciary, introduced a process for clemencies, banned torture by the police, abolished slavery, and extended government protection over private property.\textsuperscript{38} The government under Amanullah also introduced a new tax law and Afghanistan’s first national budget.\textsuperscript{39} The most important of Amanullah’s administrative reforms, was the introduction of Afghanistan’s first constitution in 1923. While it institutionalized the hereditary absolute monarchy, it also increased the consultative role of \textit{qawm} leaders in the government. Two advisory councils, the Durbar Shahi and the Khawanin Mulki, were established to represent the Durrani tribal leaders and \textit{khans} and \textit{maliks} of other groups. Membership in the Durrani “upper house” was hereditary, while half the members of the “lower house” were elected and half were appointed by the Emir.\textsuperscript{40}

Amanullah’s reform program incensed rural religious and tribal leaders, whose livelihoods depended on their continued role at the center of Afghan social and political life. The religious establishment feared an erosion of their societal role and opposed his education policies on the grounds that they challenged the primacy of the Qur’anic schools and replaced clerics with secular teachers. From the beginning, the religious establishment was suspicious of Amanullah’s desire to emulate Ataturk’s Turkey and Reza Shah’s Iran. After the abolition of the caliphate and the consolidation of Soviet control over Central Asia, Afghan clerics began to see the walls closing in on them.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Gregorian, 249.
\textsuperscript{39} Barfield, 182.
\textsuperscript{40} Gregorian, 251.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid}, 262.
In 1924, for the first time in over thirty years, the centralizing and modernizing policies of the government sparked an armed revolt. Centered the Khost, the rebellion was led by the eastern Pashtun Mangal tribe, which had long resisted foreign interference. While they cloaked their motivations in religious terms, the rebels were chiefly concerned with the penetration of state authority–manifested in taxation, conscription, and new family laws–into their lives. The rebellion, which lasted for nine months, exposed the weakness of the central government, which had neglected the military to fund its other reform projects. This military ineffectiveness forced Amanullah to seek an alliance with conservative religious and tribal leaders, who conditioned their assistance on the annulment of some of the monarch’s social reforms. The government’s acquiescence to competing sources of power would have been unimaginable under Abdur Rahman. Though the Khost Rebellion is only a blip on the radar of Afghan history, it demonstrated the weakness of the monarchy relative to local leaders and “punctured the aura of military invincibility that the Afghan state had nurtured for two generations.”

Between 1924 and 1928, Amanullah was forced to slow down his reforms. In late 1928, however, after returning from an eight-month tour of Europe and the Middle East–unprecedented for an Afghan king–Amanullah’s modernizing zeal was rekindled. After observing the technologically advanced European militaries and economies, and the modernization of secular Turkey and Westernized Iran, the Emir returned to Kabul determined to bring his country into the modern era. He proposed replacing the two consultative chambers, “which had long represented the interests of

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42 Adamec, 147.
43 Barfield, 183.
44 Ibid, 187.
the feudal lords and the powerful Afghan tribes,” with an elected parliament. He upgraded the military’s weaponry and proposed to make military service compulsory. While these policies were begrudgingly accepted, the Emir’s social reforms, including raising the marriage age to eighteen, providing Western education to girls, forbidding the asylum of clerics from Soviet Central Asia, and restricting clerical revenues and endowments led “the priesthood to go wholeheartedly against him.”

Opposition to Amanullah’s reforms also grew among other groups. The higher taxes needed to fund government development projects had alienated the urban and peasant classes, the religious establishment, and the tribal leaders. The Afghan state was not viable without the support of these elements of society. In November 1928, when another tribal uprising occurred among the Shinwari, the army became bogged down and the government’s tribal levies deserted. As the internal balance of power shifted and the government appeared weak, groups that had previously bandwagoned with the Durrani monarchy abandoned their alliance. Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik bandit from Kohistan, took advantage of the power vacuum and attacked and briefly occupied sections of Kabul. With the monarchy in jeopardy, Amanullah compromised with his opponents and nullified many of his previous social and administrative reforms. The scope of the repeal of Amanullah’s reforms was staggering:

- The Afghan girls studying Constantinople were to be recalled, and the schools for girls in Afghanistan were to be closed; the ulama of Deoband [a center of conservative thought] were to be allowed free access to and the right of residence in Afghanistan; women were not to go unveiled or cut their hair; the mullahs were no longer to be required to obtain teaching certificates; compulsory military

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45 Gregorian, 259.
recruitment was to be abandoned and the old tribal system reinstalled; *mutasibs* were to be appointed for each province to ensure that religious precepts were observed. The Amir also cancelled his order making it mandatory (after March 31, 1929) for all Kabulis and visitors from outlaying areas to wear Western dress, including hats…

These concessions were not enough and, on January 14, 1929, when Kalakani again attacked Kabul, Amanullah abdicated the throne to his brother, Inayatullah. After Kalakani had captured the city three days later, Inyatullah also fled and Kalakani proclaimed himself Afghanistan’s first non-Pashtun Emir.

If Amanullah had stayed in power and garnered enough political support to continue his reforms, there is a strong chance that Afghanistan would have developed into a country that would be unrecognizable today. Instead, the enduring legacy of his rule is the illustration of the weakness of the central government relative to *qawm* groups. Fifty years after the Iron Emir began centralizing Afghanistan by force, political authority had returned to the “priests, *mullahs*, and chiefs” that Abdur Rahman had excoriated when he assumed the throne. This reversal illustrates the saliency and intractability of *qawms* in Afghan politics. While Abdur Rahman succeeded in enforcing the supremacy of the monarchy over local leaders, he did not transform Afghanistan into a unitary state. Rather, he bequeathed to his successors a tribal country that possessed merely the trappings of a modern state. Amanullah failed because his attempted cultural, economic, administrative, and social reforms were not supported by sufficient political or military authority. As Mahumd Tazi put it, “Amanullah has built a beautiful monument without a foundation. Take out one brick

48 Gregorian, 264.
and it will tumble down.”⁴⁹ The lesson of 1880-1929 is that Afghanistan can only be governed in a manner alien to its political history by an “Iron Emir.” A leader who lacked the capability or will to govern with force sufficient to suppress qawm rivals would be better adopting a “hands off” approach. Afghanistan’s next rulers, the Musahiban dynasty, understood this lesson well.

The Rise of the Musahiban

Habibullah Kalakani’s reign lasted only nine months before he was overthrown by Mohammad Nadir Khan in October 1929. A descendant of both the Mohammadzai and Sadozai Durrani lineages and the third cousin of Amanullah, Nadir Khan had served as Afghanistan’s commander-in-chief until he was exiled (as ambassador to France) for his opposition to the tempo of Amanullah’s modernization programs. Nadir Khan believed that the Emir’s tribal opposition should be mollified through intra-tribal jirgas and appeasement, rather than through force.⁵⁰ After the fall of Amanullah, Nadir Khan and his brothers, collectively known as the Musahiban, gathered an army of Mangal, Jaji, Jadran, Ahmadzai, and Tota Khel Waziri Pashtun tribes and launched a series of assaults on Kabul from India.⁵¹ By October 1929, Nadir Khan had dislodged Habibullah Kalakani from the capital and convened a jirga to validate his accession to the throne. Recognizing his ascension as a tribus ex machina, Nadir Shah relied heavily “on the cooperation of the religious establishment

⁵⁰ Gregorian, 282.
⁵¹ Dupree, 459.
and the [Pashtun] tribes” to consolidate the monarchy’s control over Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{52}

Even as he made concessions to conservative groups, Nadir Shah moved ahead slowly with modernization programs.\textsuperscript{53} He re-opened secondary schools in Kabul and sought to expand elementary education throughout the country. Newspapers began publishing, commercial air travel was introduced, and telephone and telegraph lines were expanded. Nadir Shah also established a national bank and enacted policies that encouraged private investment in trade and the industrial economy, which had previously been dominated by the government. These policies, however, were superficial and did not affect the bulk of Afghan society. The rural economy remained overwhelmingly feudal and women were still barred from education. For Nadir Shah, modernization was “not more important than preserving the internal stability of Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{54}

Even after Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933, stability remained the chief imperative of the Musahiban brothers, who supported the accession of the king’s nineteen-year old son, Zahir Shah. Political power, however, rested with the young monarch’s uncles, who alternatingly served as regents for the next twenty years. While Afghanistan under Amanullah had been with Turkey and Iran at the forefront of modernization in the Islamic world, under the Musahiban brothers, modernization in Afghanistan was limited by bargains the monarchy had struck with \textit{qawm} leaders to consolidate their political position.\textsuperscript{55} As a result, attempts by the government to expand state authority were more tempered than under previous rulers.

\textsuperscript{52} Gregorian, 294.
\textsuperscript{53} Dupree, 463.
\textsuperscript{54} Barfield, 198.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid}, 200.
Muhammad Hashim, Nadir’s brother who served as prime minister from 1933 to 1946, sought to enhance the position of the central government by promoting Afghan nationalism and modern education. Like Mahmud Tarzi and the Young Afghans, the new nationalists sought to establish a common history that was rooted in the imagined linguistic, ethnic, and religious unity of various the peoples of Afghanistan. Ignoring the heterogeneous history described in the previous chapter, the government promoted a “softer” form of internal colonialism by promulgating ideologies that denied the role of non-Pashtuns in Afghan history. The government, for example, promoted the theory that that Afghans were descendants of the ancient Aryans and that the Bactrian kingdom was actually Pashtun. These historians, who were well-received by their “Aryan cousins” in Berlin, sought to prove that Pashtuns “demonstrated state-building qualities long ago, and that modern Afghanistan is the product of a continuous historical process, not simply a ‘political accident.’”

The government also elevated the status of Pashto, which although widely spoken, was not the dominant language. Linguistic theories began circulating that Pashtu was actually the source language of Persian. Beginning in 1937, the Ministry of Education rewrote curricula to include mandatory Pashto instruction, which was problematic since Pashto was not traditionally a written language. The success of these Pashtun-centric nationalist policies was limited. Inventing a history and changing the official language was not an adequate substitute for institution-building or political reform.

In spite of the revival of nationalist rhetoric, the Musahiban approach towards modernization remained subdued. Rather than enact national programs, as Amanullah

56 Gregorian, 347.
had done, the Musahiban rulers introduced programs quietly in Kabul before expanding them throughout the country.\textsuperscript{57} While this strategy minimized \textit{qawm}-based opposition to the monarchy, it also contributed to the increasing bifurcation of Afghan society between the urban elite and rural population. This became evident when Afghanistan first experimented with parliamentary democracy.

By the 1940s, the government’s investment in foreign education had produced a growing class of liberally educated and politically conscious elite. Shah Mahmud, who had succeeded his brother as prime minister in 1946, was encouraged by this development and opened the political system to parliamentary elections that were relatively fairer than previous votes. In 1949, this opening resulted in the election of the “Liberal Parliament,” which consisted of between forty and fifty (out of 120) reformist members.\textsuperscript{58} This bloc, unlike previous legislators, attempted to exert oversight of the government ministries. They also succeeded in passing a law establishing the freedom of the press, which led to a flowering of newspapers critical of the government. Inspired by the new liberalism, Kabul University students formed a student union and met to debate contemporary social issues. Some students even performed plays that satirized the royal family and Islam.

These liberal openings were short lived window dressings for a political system that still belonged to the previous century. In the run-up to the 1952 parliamentary election, the government began closing down newspapers and arresting opposition leaders. The facility with which the government put down the liberal

\textsuperscript{57} Barfield, 201.
\textsuperscript{58} Dupree, 494.
opposition illustrated the discontinuity between elite civil society and the real centers of political power—the conservative qawm forces that buttressed the monarchy.

**Daoud’s Great Leap Forward**

Shah Mahmud’s initial support of the “Liberal Parliament” had harmed his credibility with the royal family and the Musahiban leadership, who feared that liberalization was a prelude to instability. In 1953, these groups overthrew the prime minister in a bloodless coup and appointed General Muhammad Daoud Khan, a cousin of King Zahir Shah and the Commander of the Central Forces in Kabul, in his place. Barfield characterizes the relationship between Zahir and Daoud as *tarburwali*, which “connotes something along the lines of ‘cousin competition’ and is used to describe the endemic gamesmanship, rivalry, and sometimes open hostility that is thought to exist inevitably between the sons of brothers.” Indeed, the rivalry between Zahir Shah and Daoud would define Afghan politics for the next twenty years.

Rather than focusing on opening the political system, Daoud concentrated his pursued policies aimed at modernizing the Afghan military, economy, and education system. A generation earlier, Amanullah attempted to pay for his similarly ambitious reforms by imposing land and livestock taxes that contributed to his unpopularity among the rural population. Wishing to avoid a similar fate, Daoud financed his reform projects by turning to a strategy which reached back to the Ghaznavid period—extracting money from foreigners. With the Cold War in full-swing, Daoud found

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59 Ibid, 498.
willing patrons for his development projects and military assistance programs in the United States and the Soviet Union. This strategy proved so fruitful, that, by the 1970s, direct taxation comprised less than one percent of government revenue.\footnote{Barfield, 205.}

During Daoud’s term as prime minister, the American government financed coal exploration in Pul-i Khumri, irrigation projects in the Helmand Valley, and the construction of Qandahar International Airport.\footnote{The airport cost $15 million and was designed to be a refueling stop for piston aircraft travelling across the Middle East and South Asia. Before the project was finished, the introduction of commercial jet engines had rendered the airport virtually useless. Dupree, 513.} American aid to Afghanistan, however, was limited by the Afghan government’s unwillingness to sign a mutual security agreement with the United States and normalize relations with Pakistan, America’s main ally in South Asia. Daoud instead turned to the Soviets, whose aid projects dwarfed the American programs. Among the most ambitious of the Soviet projects was the construction of the ring road linking Kabul with Herat via Qandahar, the exploration of natural gas near Sheberghan, and the construction of the Salang Pass Tunnel, which connected Kabul to the north of the country and was the highest tunnel in the world at the time it was finished.

Although Afghanistan officially pursued a neutral (\textit{bi-tarafi}, literally without sides) foreign policy under Daoud, his government became increasingly Soviet-oriented. When the US government refused several requests for military assistance in 1953-55, Afghanistan purchased $25 million worth of T34 tanks, MiG 17s, Ilyushin-28 jet bombers, helicopters, and small arms from the Warsaw Pact.\footnote{Ibid, 522.} These purchases significantly increased the capability of the Afghan government to project force.
However, as foreign aid comprised an increasing percentage of government expenditures—forty percent from 1958 to 1968—Afghanistan became a rentier state.

By 1959, the government was secure enough in its position to begin implementing social reforms, the most radical of which was the voluntary unveiling of women. Unlike Amanullah, who pursued a broad platform of social policies that were designed to change Afghan life, Daoud’s reforms were aimed at the urban elite and largely did not take hold outside of the capital. Contemporary observers gushed at the veneer of modernization that took hold in the capital. “Today it is impossible to go into a government office or many private offices in Afghanistan without seeing women behind typewriters, or, in rare cases, actually working in administrative positions,” wrote Dupree in 1973. Such attitudes evolved into the type of “Pencil skirts and Mad Men furniture” nostalgia for Daoud’s rule illustrated in the introduction to this chapter.

Nostalgia aside, Daoud’s government still relied on qawm politics for legitimacy outside of Kabul. The government pursued a policy of gradual encapsulation, rather than confrontation, by directing foreign aid through the Ministry of Tribes to reward loyal qawm leaders. Salzman explains that such government subsidies decrease the tribal leaders’ dependence on the support of their fellow tribesmen and created a rift between the leadership and the tribe. Tribal structures endured, however, because, despite the modernization of state institutions, the

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64 Rubin, 65.
65 Barfield, 202.
66 Dupree, 533.
government was limited in its ability to compete with tribal leaders in providing services (security, education, employment, etc.) directly to the people. As a result, *qawm*-based parallel power structures remained an inhibition to the rural penetration of state authority.  

Barfield’s observations from his fieldwork in Imam Sahib in the mid-1970s describe the relationship between the state and parallel *qawm* structures:

Despite its pervasive presence in the town and easy proximity to the valley’s villages, the Afghan government seemed remote to the local residents. There was no organic connection between them and the government-appointed officials. The enforcement of decisions below this point depended ultimately on the threat of force because the tribesmen and peasants rarely volunteered their cooperation…Common practice was for government officials to deal with villagers by means of local intermediaries.  

The political relationship between the government and the local *qawm* groups that Barfield observed illustrates the gap between state and society in Afghanistan which endured through both Daoud and Zahir Shah’s modernization programs and political reforms.

**Flirtation with Constitutional Monarchy**

In 1963, after bringing Afghanistan into a deadlocked border dispute with Pakistan, Prime Minister Muhammad Daoud was forced to resign. King Zahir Shah promised to open the political system and appointed an interim government to draft a new liberalized constitution. The next year, the king convened a *Loya Jirga* (which Rubin calls “probably the freest and most effective such body ever convened by the

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68 Rubin, 72.
69 Barfield, 222.
70 Dupree, 566.
state”) to ratify his government’s changes. However, rather than quickly adopt the king’s proposals, the members of the constitutional jirga engaged in serious debate and even rewrote sections of the document. After eleven days of deliberations, on September 20, 1964, the delegates submitted the new constitution to the King.

The Constitution of 1964 was a landmark political development in Afghanistan. Supporters of the reforms hoped that that the constitution would usher in an era of “New Democracy” for Afghanistan. Indeed, the Constitution increased the representative nature of the Afghan government by establishing a bicameral parliament, provincial councils, and limiting the power of the monarchy by preventing members of the royal family from serving in parliament, as prime minister, or on the Supreme Court. Even forty years later, when Afghans again adopted a new constitution after the fall of the Taliban, the 1964 Constitution was considered an ideal type of Afghan democracy and sections of it were copied wholesale.

In spite of these aspirations, the Constitution of 1964 failed to transform the political landscape for several reasons, all of which continue to plague the state-society relations in Afghanistan. First, while the Constitution provided a parliament, the government prohibited the establishment of political parties. As a result, the legislative branch remained weak and power rested with the executive and his immediate family members. In other states during the same period, political parties served as a conduit for tribal leaders to develop national networks and become further

71 Rubin, 73.
encapsulated by the central government. This did not occur in Afghanistan. Second, the reforms illustrated the growing separation between the urban elite, who were enthusiastic about democratization, and the remaining “ninety-five percent non-literate Afghans living in villages and nomadic camps [who] knew little and cared less about the new Constitution and ‘New Democracy.’” Finally, as with previous efforts to “modernize” Afghanistan’s political system, the new Constitution failed to take hold because it attempted to implement a system of centralized governance that was anathema to the patterns of diffuse political authority that characterize Afghan political culture and history. Declaring that “the administration of Afghanistan is based upon the principles of centralization,” the Constitution failed to incorporate local qawm-based governance structures into the national system. Barfield’s observations above, made ten years after the promulgation of the new Constitution, illustrate the persistent failure of centralized regimes to penetrate competing local centers of political authority.

**Setting the Stage for State Collapse**

King Zahir’s flirtation with parliamentary democracy ended in 1973, when Daoud overthrew the monarchy and established the Republic of Afghanistan. Unlike the tarburwali coups of the nineteenth century, Daoud did not use a tribal army, but instead relied on leftist activists and “a group of Soviet-trained military officers” to

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74 Dupree, 587.
75 Title 8, Article 108 of the 1964 Constitution. A near-identical provision occurs in Title 8, Article 137 in the 2004 Constitution.
seize power. After declaring himself Afghanistan’s first president, Daoud abolished the monarchy and nullified the 1964 Constitution. Communist and Islamists parties, which had operated underground during Zahir’s “New Democracy,” suddenly became significant players in national politics. Within the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), two factions emerged; the Khalq (Masses), which was comprised largely of Ghilzai Pashtuns, and the Parcham (Banner), which drew from the bureaucracy and universities. In response to the growth of leftist student groups, Islamist students formed the Muslim Youth Organization, which drew inspiration from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and translated the writings of Sayyid Qutb into Persian. Several members at the core of this organization—Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—later played major roles in the anti-Soviet resistance and Civil War.

While the government initially attempted the limit the growth of the Islamist groups and the PDPA, by 1978 these antagonistic factions defined Afghan political life. When a Parcham-affiliated police officer was assassinated in early 1978, the PDPA charged that Daoud (under the influence of SAVAK and the CIA) ordered the killing and led massive demonstrations in Kabul. The government responded to the unrest by arresting PDPA leadership. In response to the crackdown, several officers of the Soviet-trained and equipped military who were sympathetic to the PDPA launched a coup on April 27, 1978. Daoud was killed and power was transferred to

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76 Rubin, 74.
77 Barfield, 213.
79 An estimated 4,100 officers and non-commissioned officers were sympathetic to the PDPA. Rubin, 105, n. 63.
a military council headed by Nur Muhammad Taraki, “a politburo member responsible for Parcham’s military network.”80 After over 150 years of almost uninterrupted rule, the Mohammadzai dynasty ended.

No single policy or event was responsible for the thirty years of state collapse and civil war that followed Afghanistan’s “golden age.” Rather, the fragility of the Afghan state was a product of several trends which continue to plague Afghan politics. Successive Afghan leaders pursued policies aimed at centralizing state authority, but no ruler after Abdur Rahman possessed sufficient military force or political strength to implement his program. As a result, two Afghan societies developed: the urban, educated governing elite and the pastoral villagers, tribesmen and nomads. The increasing elitism of national politics divorced the majority of Afghan society from the state’s governing institutions and led to the reification of qawm-based governance structures. In the words of Mahmud Tarzi, Afghan rulers had “built a beautiful monument without a foundation. Take out one brick and it will tumble down.”

80 Ibid.
Chapter 5

Invasion, Civil War, and Extremism:  
The Collapse of Central Power in Afghanistan from 1978 to 2001

Afghanistan’s most recent period of internal conflict and state collapse has its roots in the 1978 Saur Revolution. Although the communist PDPA espoused revolutionary ideologies, they pursued policies similar to their monarchical predecessors. Like Abdur Rahman, Amanullah, and Daoud, the Khalq Republic (as it became known when it purged its Parcham faction) targeted ethnic minority groups, pushed for gender equality, and attempted to restrict clerical power while promoting secular nationalism and strong economic and military ties with the Soviet Union. However, unlike successful Afghan leaders, the Khalq government attempted to implement its new policies by discarding the traditionally consensual relationship between the state and the various qawms. Previous monarchs had maintained the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state over non-Durrani groups by permitting the authority of local leaders, especially in social and religious matters. While some efforts had been made under Amanullah and Daoud to transform the rural society, the
scope of these reforms was limited by the monarchy’s imperative to maintain stability. With the expansion of state institutions and the modernization of the military during the 1950s and 1960s, the revolutionaries in Kabul believed that political power had irreversibly shifted from the qawms to the center.¹ Ignoring the persistence of parallel qawm power structures, the Khalq Republic under Taraki adopted a heavy-handed approach to qawm groups that consequently delegitimized the central government and ushered in over three decades of state failure.²

**Unrest in Nuristan**

The Khalq government’s antagonistic policy towards traditional leadership structures provoked its first serious backlash in Nuristan. Before the Saur Revolution, the Nuristanis had enjoyed a privileged relationship with the ruling Mohammadzais, who trusted the Nuristanis because of their distance from intra-Pashtun rivalries. During the 1947 Safi Pashtun revolt, for example, the government relied on Nuristani tribal levies to defeat the Safi rebels. When Daoud established the Republic of Afghanistan in 1973, he named Qadeer Nuristani his Interior Minister, the highest national post held by a Nuristani. Qadeer was later killed with Daoud during the Saur Revolution.³

Shortly after the PDPA seized power, however, the government detained around three hundred Nuristani military officers, civil servants, and intellectuals in

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² See Chapter 2, page 68.
Kabul. The arrests were explained to their kinsmen as a temporary precaution to avoid a counter-coup while the new government consolidated power. However, as the detentions lingered into July 1978, many believed that the Khalq government was attempting to exclude Nuristanis from their previously privileged political position.

After the district governor in Kamdesh prevented soldiers at his garrison from attending evening prayers during Ramadan, many Nuristanis began to feel that the new government was also intending to restrict Islam. Believing their political role and religious practices under pressure from the government, leaders from Bashgal, Wama, Parun, and Waygal Valleys met in Nangalam and convened a *jirga* that declared a *jihad* against the central government.

The first rebellion against the communist regime began on July 20, 1978, when around two hundred men “armés de cinq cents vieux fusils (beaucoup datant de plus d’un siècle), de pistolets et de frondes (redoutables dans le mains des bergers)” attacked the Manogay district governor’s compound, which was defended by 400 government soldiers. After three days of fighting, the post fell to the rebels. Around the same time villagers in Kamdesh also revolted against the government, cutting the telephone lines and capturing the district governor. In response, the Khalq regime bombed several rebel villages and dispatched a force from Jalalabad to put down the revolt. The military response did not prove effective, and by October 1978, the Khalq government was effectively expelled from Nuristan. In November, the government

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6 Schneiter, 238.
organized a counteroffensive with the Nuristanis’ tribal rivals, the Gujars, Mishwanis, Gawars, and Pashtuns from Shinwar. Reaching back to a strategy first employed by the twelfth century Ghaznavids, the government militarized the border tribes with the promise of loot from the defeated Nuristanis. The combined regular and tribal forces broke through the rebel defenses and pushed up the Bashgal Valley past Kamdesh to Mandagal. The irregular forces burned Nuristani villages and looted most of the livestock and the stores of the previous harvest. The Nuristanis regrouped, and in January 1979, a group of Parun montagnards trekked through the snow to launch an attack against the government troops at Mirdesh. After the commander of the pro-government tribal levies was killed in the attack, the Gujars quit the field and the Shinwaris began negotiations with the Nuristanis. Deprived of their tribal allies, the military was forced back to Barikot, a town which remained the limit of the government’s advance towards Nuristan for the next decade. Just over eighty years after Abdur Rahman conquered Kafiristan, the changing balance of region led local leaders to break with the central government.

Social Transformation and the Mujahedeen

Elsewhere in Afghanistan, the government’s new policies were provoking similar resistance. In a speech in November 1978, Taraki announced the abolition of the brideprice in Afghanistan. While seemingly progressive, the reform undercut the economic and political role of marriage in rural society. Tapper explains:

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8 Strand, 90.
9 Schnieter, 242.
The heaviest expenses any household has to bear are concerned with marriage. In other words, production is directed largely toward reproduction – toward acquiring wives who will produce sons who will produce labor and political support in defense of productive and reproductive resources, especially land and women.\footnote{Nancy Tapper, “Causes and Consequences of the Abolition of the Brideprice in Afghanistan,” in Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives, ed. Nazif Shahrani and Robert Canfield. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984), 298.}

Families who had counted on the brideprice of their daughters suddenly found their “investments” devalued by an average ninety-nine percent.\footnote{Under the reform, brideprice was capped at 300 Afs. The average brideprice in 1971-2 was 65,000 Afs. Cf. Ibid.} In addition to drawing the ire of rural families, many religious leaders viewed the policy as an assault on traditional Islam. As during Amanullah’s reforms, these perceptions pressured societal leaders to reevaluate their stances towards the central government in order to maintain their internal legitimacy.

In the same speech that he announced the brideprice reforms, Taraki also declared his government’s intention to launch a series of land reforms that proved to be particularly destabilizing for rural society. The program aimed to distribute 3 million acres of farmland seized from large landowners to around 300,000 poor farming families.\footnote{Nancy Peabody Newell and Richard S. Newell, The Struggle for Afghanistan. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 81.} The effects of the redistribution were felt across the country, as approximately ninety percent of the population was engaged in agriculture or herd-based economic activity.\footnote{Louis Dupree, Afghanistan. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 146.} As many of the expropriated landowners were also qawm chiefs, the severance of the economic bond between master and serf weakened the role of the qawm leaders.\footnote{Newell and Newell, 77.} Many landowners who objected to the new policy were kidnapped and executed, leaving their communities without social or political
leadership. Salzman explains that leaderless tribal groups are generally more difficult for external forces to subdue because power is diffuse. In Afghanistan, the dominant external power traditionally interacts with a *qawm* through an intermediary, called a *malik*, *qaryadar*, or *arbab*, who is chosen by the group. This figure is not necessarily the group leader or a large landowner, but this is often the case. When the Khalq government removed a group’s intermediary, either by force or by eroding his socio-economic ties with his *qawm*, it also eliminated the only established form of interaction between the state and most of the rural population.

With the internal legitimacy of traditional economic-based leadership weakened, younger, more radical and more militant leaders emerged among Afghanistan’s rural communities. Many of these new *kamandan*, or commanders, were educated in Kabul during the 1960s and early 1970s, a time of “increasingly raucous” confrontation between leftist and Islamist student groups. After the Saur Revolution, several of the Islamist students, influenced by their exposure to political and militant Islamic philosophies from the Arab world, returned to their provinces and began fomenting opposition to the Khalq Regime. One of those students was a young Islamic-minded Tajik from the Panjsher Valley who would go on to become one of Afghanistan’s most celebrated and notorious *mujahedeen* commanders.

**The Rise of Ahmad Shah Massoud**

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16 Rubin, 115.
The son of an army officer, Ahmad Shah Massoud was born in Bazarak in the Panjsher Valley in 1953. He attended the French-sponsored Lycée Esteqlal and Kabul Polytechnic University, where he joined the Muslim Youth Organization. Under the tutelage of future mujahedeen commanders Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf and Burhanuddin Rabbani, Massoud was exposed to the writings of Sayid Qutb, which Rabbani had translated into Dari.\textsuperscript{19} After the Daoud coup, Rabbani encouraged members of the Muslim Youth Organization to begin actively opposing the new government. In 1974, Daoud cracked down on the group and Massoud, Rabbani, future mujahedeen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and about 5,000 other students fled into Pakistan. The Pakistani ISI welcomed the group and began providing them with military training.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1975, the ISI infiltrated the group back to Afghanistan with the aim of again revolting against Daoud. In what became known as the Panjsher Valley incident, thirty-six Islamists under Massoud’s command seized one district and two subdistrict compounds. Before the revolt, Massoud sought, but did not receive, the support of the qawm leaders. Within twenty-four hours, the students were forced to retreat and Massoud again fled into Pakistan.\textsuperscript{21} The failed revolt demonstrated to Massoud the importance of qawm leadership.\textsuperscript{22} After returning to Pakistan, tensions between Rabbani’s Jamaat-i Islami and Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i Islami led to a split between the organizations. Massoud stuck with Rabbani’s mostly Tajik faction while

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 113.  
\textsuperscript{21} Rubin, 103-4.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 233.
Hekmatyar’s Hezb, which was mostly comprised of eastern Pashtuns, went on to become the ISI’s main Afghan clients.23

In 1978, Ahmad Shah Massoud returned to the Panjsher with the aim of continuing his insurrection against the Khalq regime. Unlike in 1975, the land and marriage reforms, which were brutally enforced by the military and state security, had delegitimized the regime and contributed to popular discontent in the valley. In July 1979, after forces loyal to Ismail Khan mutinied in Herat, Massoud led a rebellion against the Khalq government in Panjsher and Salang. While he was eventually defeated, he established his credibility as the preeminent kamanda in the Panjsher Valley. As the Islamist and qawm-based opponents of the communist regime continued to grow across the country, Massoud prepared his forces to join a national resistance against the regime.

**Enter the Soviet Union**

On Christmas Eve 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and ignited three decades of internecine conflict and state collapse. According to declassified KGB and Politburo records, the decision to invade was taken after Taraki was overthrown by rival PDPA leader Hafizullah Amin in September 1979. Moscow feared that Amin, who had studied at Columbia University, was in league with the CIA to reverse the progress of communism in Afghanistan.24 Beginning in early December 1979, the Soviets began quietly increasing the number of advisers and KGB officers in the country. Babrak Karmal, an exiled member of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, was

23 Coll, 114.
24 Ibid, 49.
selected to replace Amin and secretly flown to the Soviet airbase in Bagram. On December 24, as Soviet paratroopers captured Kabul International Airport and tanks from the 40th Army crossed the Amu Darya on pontoon bridges, KGB paramilitary officers disguised in Afghan army uniform attacked the Presidential Palace and killed Amin. By the next morning, Karmal was installed as Afghanistan’s new president.25

Despite the growing unrest outside of Kabul, the resistance did not pose a serious threat to the new regime.26 Rather, the Soviet’s largest challenge was reconstructing state institutions that had been dismantled by the Khalq government, who, in their post-revolutionary zeal had “disposed of the institutions in favor of generalized violence.”27 The Soviet’s state building, however, was hampered by the persistence of the Parcham-Khalq rivalry.28 The conflict paralyzed the PDPA and left the Soviets with the final decisions on policy, a development which contributed to the delegitimizing perception that the Soviets were controlling the government.

The Erosion of Traditional Leadership in Nuristan

Beginning in the spring of 1980, the Soviet Union expanded its military presence to over 100,000 troops as it sought to crush the local rebellions that were metastasizing into a national revolt. In Nuristan, the increase in Soviet pressure contributed to the empowerment of the mujahedeen commanders at the expense of traditional leaders, such as Muhammad Anwar, the chief of the Kom village of Kamdesh. Anwar had served in the civil service under Zahir Shah and was briefly

26 Rubin, 122.
27 Ibid, 123.
28 Newell and Newell, 120.
imprisoned by the Khalq regime before leading the first anti-government revolt in 1978. After expelling the central government, Anwar organized areas under his control along traditional Kom governance structures:

Anwar established a hierarchy of civilian leadership linking the various Kom villages. In each village, he appointed a wurjeṣṭ, who, in addition to enforcing traditional community regulations, would assure that all men served their allotted military duty and that no one took advantage of the families of men away on such duty. The wurjeṣṭs also serve as representatives to a tribal parliament which meets when the need arises to discuss the general conduct of the conflict…Parallel to the system of village leaders, Anwar established the role of military leader for each village to command the fighters from the village. Men from each village serve military duty according to sazi [50-person kinship group] affiliation, as is traditional.

This parallel civil-military governance structure, while successful in resisting the Soviets, came under pressure from U.S. and Pakistani-backed mujahedeen groups, especially Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i Islami. Shortly after the Soviet invasion, Hekmatyar began establishing ties with fundamentalist mullahs in Nuristan whom he directed to recruit fighters to his organization. Anwar’s Nuristan Front, which did not receive substantial external support, could not compete with Hekmatyar, and, by 1984, the Hezb-i Islami emerged as the dominant force in southern Nuristan.

To the north, Nuristani Islamist mullah Maulvi Muhammad Afzal established the “Islamic Revolutionary State of Afghanistan” in the upper Bashgal Valley, near Bargi Matal. Supported financially by Saudi Arabia, Afzal’s mini-state acted as a bridgehead for Arab fighters (and their Wahhabi ideology) in northeast Nuristan. Afzal’s religious orthodoxy did not prevent him from playing on the tribal rivalries

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29 Strand, 86-8.
30 Ibid., 90-1.
31 Ibid.
between the Kata, who lived in the northeast, and the Kom, in the Hekmatyar-controlled south of the valley, to expand his control by killing and exiling traditional Nuristani leadership.33

The growth of the Islamist parties in eastern Afghanistan was facilitated by influx of American and Saudi aid, which was funneled through the Pakistani ISI. Almost immediately after the Soviet invasion, President Carter authorized the shipment of arms—mostly antiquated .303 Lee Enfield bolt-action rifles and RPG-7s—to Pakistan for distribution among the resistance. As the war progressed, the US provided more sophisticated weapons, including the notorious “Stinger” shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. These arms shipments were turned over to Pakistan’s ISI for distribution to the anti-Soviet fighters. The CIA was instructed “to defer to Pakistani priorities” in the operation.34 The ISI had maintained Hekmatyar as a client since early 1970s and did its best to support the Hezb-i Islami. Even after the CIA pushed the ISI to distribute aid to other commanders, the Pakistanis still focused their support on the seven official Islamist parties based in Peshawar.35 During Congressional hearings in 1987, CIA officers testified that Hekmatyar and Rabbani received about fifty percent of the American and Saudi aid.36 While the US government was satisfied as long as their arms found their way to anti-Soviet fighters, the foreign aid also enabled the Pakistanis to encourage the replacement of traditional leadership structures with Islamist groups.

34 Coll, 58.
35 In addition to Jamaat-i Islami and Hezb-i Islami, the ISI recognized the Hezb-i Islami Khalis (which broke from Hekmatyar’s group in 1979), the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan under Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, the National Islamic Front for Afghanistan, the more moderate Afghanistan National Liberation Front under Mojaddedi, and the Islamic Revolutionary Movement.
36 Coll, 165.
“The Lion of the Panjsher”

With traditional leaders already weakened by the communist government, the mobilization of the anti-Soviet resistance after 1980 further redistributed intra-qawm political authority towards the kamandan. According to Dorronsoro, during the 1980s, there were “several thousand commanders in Afghanistan, whose influence varied substantially, ranging from Massoud, the organizer of an army of more than 10,000 men, down to a village notable at the head of a handful of mujahedeen.”37 In some areas, local commanders received sufficient external support to create parallel governing structures to traditional society. This was the case in eastern Nuristan, where Hekmatyar’s foreign support enabled him to be openly hostile towards tribal elders.38 Other commanders, such as Massoud, did not receive significant external support and had to rely on qawm leadership for legitimacy.

Learning from his failure in 1975, Massoud regularly consulted with Panjsheri elders and religious leaders during the Soviet war.39 Because he lacked initial external support, Massoud launched regular attacks on the neighboring Salang Pass, which was the main artery for Soviet supply convoys. Not considering an attack successful unless his troops brought back supplies, Massoud quickly earned the enmity of the Soviet army.40 Between 1980 and 1982, the Soviets launched six major attacks into the Panjsher, all of which were repelled by Massoud’s fighters. In 1984, the Soviets

39 Rubin, 233.
40 American intelligence officers were prohibited from travelling to Afghanistan and did not support Massoud until 1984. Cf. Coll, 123.
launched a 20,000-man invasion of the Panjsher Valley. After a week of high-altitude bombing, the Soviets, supported by up-armored Mi-24 attack helicopters and Spetznaz special forces troops, entered to area to find it deserted. Massoud had evacuated 40,000 Panjsheris from the valley.\textsuperscript{41} His successful resistance against the Soviet army earned him the sobriquet the “Lion of the Panjsher,” and brought his fighters limited support from the British and French, whose agents travelled to the Panjsher disguised as journalists.\textsuperscript{42}

In 1986, Massoud founded the Supervisory Council of the North (\textit{Shura-i Nazar-i Shamali}) to coordinate Jamaat-i Islami’s forces in northeast Afghanistan. The SCN consisted of mainly Tajik commanders and came to control parts of Kapisa, Parwan, Kabul, Kunduz, Baghlan, Balkh, Takhar, and Badakhshan provinces.\textsuperscript{43} Massoud’s organization incorporated, rather than replaced local and religious leaders, ensuring a more stable relationship between the military command and the societal leaders than existed in other regions. This internal stability allowed Massoud to transform the SCN from a military command to quasi-state that provided services (such as military training, education, dispute resolution, medical aid, etc.) to its civilian population.\textsuperscript{44} As the Soviet war drew to a close, Massoud’s military successes and inclusive leadership style positioned him to emerge as a national political figure. Massoud’s leadership of the \textit{jihad} in northeastern Afghanistan, however, was contested by his longtime rival Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Beginning in 1985, Hekmatyar

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid}, 122.
\textsuperscript{42} The word \textit{panjsher}, itself means “five lions,” referring to five brothers during the Ghaznavid period who protected the valley. Massoud’s title is itself a Persian superlative, as he is “The Lion of the Five Lions.”
\textsuperscript{44} Rubin, \textit{The Fragmentation of Afghanistan}, 237.
began attacking Massoud’s forces so often, that American intelligence analysts “feared he might be a secret KGB plant whose mission was to sow disruption within the anti-communist resistance.”45 Once the common Soviet enemy was defeated, the intensity of these intra-resistance fights would lead Afghanistan towards civil war.

**Soviet Withdrawal and the Beginnings of Civil War**

By the mid-1980s, the war in Afghanistan, which had begun as a quick operation to support a faltering communist ally—à la Czechoslovakia 1968–had become the Soviet Union’s Vietnam. After seven years of operations, 115,000 Soviet troops struggled to hold the major urban areas and highways while irregular forces controlled over eighty five percent of the country.46 Over 12,000 Soviet soldiers had been killed and billions of dollars spent propping up the Karmal regime. When Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, he recognized that his ambitions to reform his country’s stagnant political system and economy required closing the “bleeding wound” that the Afghan war had become. In a Politburo meeting in November 1986, Gorbachev instructed his commanders to “help speed up the process so we have a friendly neutral country, and get out of there.”47

Afghan President Babrak Karmal did not share Gorbachev’s enthusiasm for a speedy Soviet withdrawal. When the two leaders met, Karmal indicated that he was “expecting that [the Soviets] will be in Afghanistan for a long time, if not forever.”48 Karmal’s reliance on the Soviet military to prop his regime led Moscow to question

45 Coll, 120.
47 Coll, 158.
his post-withdrawal survivability. In May 1986, under pressure from the Soviet Union, Karmal resigned (for “medical reasons”), and, after a brief interim presidency, Muhammad Najibullah was installed as president. An Ahmadzai Ghilzai Pashtun from Gardez, Najibullah had served as the head of the Khedmat-i Etala’at-i Dawlati (KhAD) Afghan intelligence service since 1980. With advice and technical support from the KGB, Najibullah had developed KhAD into one of the Afghan government’s most feared institutions, with “virtually unlimited powers for tracking down enemies of the Communist regime.”\footnote{The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, “Afghanistan - Security Services in Communist Afghanistan (1978-1992), AGSA, KAM, KhAD and WAD.” April 26, 2001, p. 19.} Shortly after taking power, Najibullah was instructed by Gorbachev to plan for a Soviet withdrawal within eighteen months to two years.\footnote{Coll, 160.}

In order to strengthen his political position, Najibullah attempted to reach out to the resistance by proposing a coalition government of the major \textit{kamandan}, including Massoud, who was offered the Defense Ministry.\footnote{Barfield, 239.} Although the ISI-backed \textit{mujahedeen} leaders in Peshawar rejected the offer, Najibullah still attempted to burnish the rural legitimacy of the government by easing his predecessors’ antagonistic policies towards traditionalism and religion. Clerics were put on the government payroll and mosques were rebuilt. Nationalism, not communism, was promoted as the new ideology and the PDPA was reorganized into the Hezb-i Watan, or Homeland Party.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} The Soviet military supported Najibullah’s reconciliation attempts by curtailing major combat operations in early 1987. Between 1987 and

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
1989, Soviet operations were focused primarily on reacting to enemy attacks, supporting Najibullah’s forces, and providing route security for withdrawing troops.\textsuperscript{53}

Wishing to avoid the fate of the retreating British army in 1842, the Soviets began negotiating safe passage with Massoud, whose forces were well-positioned to strike at the Salang Pass, through which the Soviets planned to move over 30,000 troops out of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{54} Massoud agreed to let the Soviets pass in exchange for money and the promise of a cease-fire. When Najibullah learned of the deal, he appealed directly to the Soviet Defense Minister, who ordered the commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Boris Gromov, to abrogate the cease-fire. On January 23, 1979, the Soviets launched Operation Typhoon, a three-day bombing campaign of the Panjsher. While the Soviets reported heavy losses among Massoud’s forces, it is likely that Massoud learned of the attack in advance from his well-placed intelligence sources in the Afghan army.\textsuperscript{55} Operation Typhoon did not support the Soviet withdrawal, but instead, in keeping with the balance of power calculations described in Chapter 2, was designed to weaken one of Najibullah’s main rivals.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Najibullah Maintains Power}

On February 15, 1989, General Gromov walked across the Friendship Bridge, spanning the Amu Darya into the Uzbek SSR, as the last Soviet soldier to leave Afghanistan. While the Soviet war in Afghanistan came to a close, the conflict

\textsuperscript{53} Grau, 245.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 251.
\textsuperscript{55} Coll, 117.
\textsuperscript{56} Grau, 254.
between the *mujahdeen* and the government continued. The CIA and the ISI believed that the Soviet withdrawal fatally weakened Najibullah and encouraged their Afghan clients to maintain pressure on the regime. Najibullah countered by employing similar political strategies to those adopted by successful Afghan leaders since the eighteenth century—ceding power to local leaders and securing sufficient external revenue to subsidize the government. Building on the national reconciliation program begun in 1987, Najibullah reformed the constitution to provide for a multi-party system and more representative state institutions, including an independent judiciary and a legislature. Non-PDPA members were permitted to join the government as ministers and parliamentarians. The new constitution also recognized Islam as the official religion and prohibited laws which contravened *Shar’ia*. These efforts, taken with the departure of Soviet forces, improved the perception of the government among conservatives and gave societal leaders greater leeway to bandwagon with the state while preserving their internal legitimacy.

The Peshawar commanders, however, were not interested in reconciling with a regime whose days they believed were numbered. In March 1989, less than a month after the Soviet withdrawal, 10,000 fighters from Hezb-i Islami, Sayyaf’s Islamic Union, and several Arab organizations launched an attack on Jalalabad, where they hoped to install an interim government under Hekmatyar. Despite logistical support from the ISI and CIA, the *mujahdeen* proved unsuccessful in conventional warfare and failed to capture the city. While Najibullah’s reconciliation program had earned him the loyalty of some tribal and ethnic militias, his success in repelling the

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mujahedeen was owed to significant military and economic aid Afghanistan received from the Soviet Union. Before departing, the Soviet army transferred 15,000 tons of ammunition, 990 armored vehicles, 142 artillery pieces, 43 multiple rocket launchers, and 1706 rocket launchers to Afghan forces. After the withdrawal, the Soviets continued to support the Afghan government with around $300 million a month in military and economic aid flown in to Bagram and Kabul.

By relying on foreign aid to maintain power, Najibullah was following a pattern established by the first Afghan monarchs who cemented their tribal coalitions with wealth obtained from raiding India. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Afghan government turned to securing foreign aid by playing its great power neighbors against each other. While the foreign subsidies allowed leaders in Kabul to rule without imposing significant taxes, it also tied regime stability to policies and events outside the control of the Afghan monarchy. When external revenue was cut off, for example when Punjab was absorbed into the British Raj, Afghanistan experienced an erosion of state power and the reemergence of local leadership. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 proved no different.

**Civil War**

As political unrest in Moscow gradually choked off Najibullah’s foreign support in late 1991, his control over Afghanistan began to ebb. In February 1992, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the communist-allied commander of the Uzbek Junbish-i Milli militia, defected with 40,000 of his troops to Massoud’s SCN. Dostum brought tanks,

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59 Coll, 194.  
60 Grau, 260.  
61 Coll, 194.  
artillery, and aircraft to Massoud’s ranks and shifted the military balance in the north in favor of the SCN. 63 Massoud, who had been receiving over $200,000 a month from the CIA to gain support from traditional leaders in the north, consolidated his forces and moved on Kabul. 64

Massoud’s efforts were challenged by Hekmatyar, who took up position to the south of the capital and also prepared to dislodge the Najibullah government. Tensions between the two commanders were high, and despite the attempted mediation by a young Osama bin Laden, Hekmatyar would not agree to share power with Massoud. 65 On April 25, 1992, Massoud and Dostum’s forces preempted Hekmatyar’s attack on Kabul by infiltrating the city and seizing the airport and several ministries. The Hezb-i Islami forces, supported by Arab fighters and the ISI, launched a counter-attack against Massoud, but failed to wrestle control from the better-positioned SCN. By April 30, Kabul was firmly in Massoud and Dostum’s control. Furious over his defeat, Hekmatyar pulled back and unleashed a barrage of tens of thousands of rockets at Kabul. The Afghan Civil War had begun.

Shortly after the attack on Kabul, Najibullah was captured while attempting to flee and placed under house arrest in the UN compound. The mujahedeen commanders in Peshawar, all except Hekmatyar, agreed to form an interim government led by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, the commander of the Afghanistan National Liberation Front. In June, power was transferred to Rabbani, who was chosen by a shura to become the first president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan.

63 Coll, 234.
64 Ibid, 198.
65 Ibid, 236.
Rubin best describes the new state: “Perhaps this entity was Islamic, but it was hardly a state, and it certainly did not rule Afghanistan.”

From the onset, the Islamic State of Afghanistan was plagued by the same ethnic and qawm divisions which had long defined Afghan politics. The rise of non-Pashtun leaders, such as Dostum, Massoud and Rabbani, allowed Hekmatyar to portray his opposition as a form of Pashtun nationalism. The new state, despite its Islamic moniker, was also a reflection of Pashtun qawm politics. During the collapse of the Najibullah government, several Mohammadzai Parcham military officers defected to the SCN, while Khalq-affiliated Paktiawal and Ghilzai commanders and ministers joined forces with Hekmatyar. The tension between the two belligerents thus took on the mantle of the well-established intra-Pashtun political rivalries. In December 1992, more cracks emerged in the coalition when Massoud’s forces fought Iranian-backed Shi’a militias for control of Kabul University. The main Shi’a party, Hezb-i Wahdat, and Dostum’s Janbish militia allied with Hekmatyar against Massoud.

The protracted struggle between the rival militias resulted in the devolution of central power to externally supported regional ethnic leaders. Uzbeks and Ismailis under Dostum received support from Uzbekistan and dominated in the north around Mazar-e Sharif. Massoud’s SCN controlled the Tajik northeast and established relations with opposition fighters in Tajikistan. The Iranian-backed Hazara Shi’a ruled the center of the country and Ismail Khan governed Herat and the surrounding areas. Hekmatyar maintained control in the east, although Nuristan was still under the influence of Maulvi Afzal.

While the mujahedeen commanders consolidated their control in the non-Pashtun and Islamist-dominated regions of Afghanistan, political power remained diffuse in the Durrani south. After the overthrow of Zahir Shah in 1973, the Durrani were squeezed out of national politics. As none of the major CIA and ISI-supported mujahedeen leaders were Durrani Pashtuns, once the Soviets withdrew, no group emerged as a dominant power in the south. By 1994, the power vacuum had resulted in a chaotic social and political environment marked by “banditry, brutality against local residents, and offenses against local values, such as nang (reputation) and namus (local honor with respect to women)” committed by former mujahedeen.67 The collapse of political and social order in the south opened the door to the rise of a new political movement that promised to restore stability and Islamic values to Afghanistan.

### The Rise of the Taliban

The popular narrative cultivated by the Taliban portrays the group as “a naïve, pious, determined band of religious students [who were] swept into power on a wave of popular revulsion over Qandahar’s criminal warlords.”68 In reality, the Taliban took power in the same way as previous Afghan regimes–by playing qawm and regional politics. In November 1994, a Pakistani truck convoy transporting goods to Turkmenistan was stopped at gunpoint at an extralegal Hekmatyar checkpoint on the Quetta-Qandahar road. The convoy was part of the Pakistani “transport mafia,” a group of ISI and army officers that shipped duty-free goods to Afghanistan and then

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68 Coll, 283.
re-exported them illegally to neighboring states.\textsuperscript{69} The incident provoked the Pakistanis, and later that month, two hundred religious students and fighters under the command of a local \textit{mullah} and veteran of the anti-Soviet resistance named Muhammad Omar, received Pakistani support to seize the Hekmatyar checkpoint.\textsuperscript{70} As the religious students, or \textit{taliban} in Pashto, began opening up more roads for commercial traffic, they garnered support from powerful Durrani merchants and tribal leaders. In late 1994, the leaders of the Durrani Ahmadzai and Popalzai tribes bandwagoned with the Taliban, signaling “that the student militia stood at the forefront of a broad movement–an uprising aimed at the enemies of Islam and also at the enemies of Pashtuns.”\textsuperscript{71} In their meetings with tribal leaders, the Taliban presented themselves as pious Pashtun nationalists who sought to restore the Durrani monarchy under the exiled Zahir Shah. They capitalized on the southern distrust of Massoud and Hekmatyar, who were perceived as usurpers to the traditionally Durrani throne.

As their tribal and Pakistani support grew in late 1994, the Taliban captured Qandahar and pushed into Helmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan provinces territory, driving out the \textit{mujahedeen} commanders and disarming the local militias. In early 1995, as Hekmatyar was forced to fall back from his stronghold in Chaharasyab, south of Kabul, Massoud attacked Hekmatyar’s Shi’a Hezb-i Wahdat allies, who then began fighting both Massoud and the Taliban. In the chaos, the SCN pushed both the Shi’a and the Taliban out of rocket-range of Kabul. In June 1996, Hekmatyar’s military strength and Pakistani support had so deteriorated that he was forced to join the

\textsuperscript{69} Nojumi, 104-6.
\textsuperscript{70} Ahmad Rashid, \textit{Taliban}. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 27.
\textsuperscript{71} Coll, 285.
Rabbani government. The Taliban continued their advance, and on September 27, 1996, they succeeded in capturing Kabul.\textsuperscript{72} Massoud pulled back to the Panjsher Valley and the Taliban proclaimed a new government – the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

\textit{Social Effects of Taliban Rule}

Shortly after capturing Kabul, the Taliban Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice issued a series of edicts to “advise people how to behave according to the Shari’a.”\textsuperscript{73} Many of the new laws, however, had no foundation in the Qur’an or in traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Women were banned from the working in all fields except medicine and made to wear a head-to-toe covering outside of the house. Men were forced to grow out their beards and prohibited from having “British or American hairstyles.”\textsuperscript{74} Social activities, such as kite-flying, pigeon keeping, playing music and even soccer were either banned or restricted. The Taliban’s antipathy for anything they perceived as un-Islamic would later lead to the destruction of two large statues of Buddha carved into the cliffs outside in Bamiyan. As the Taliban continued to consolidate its rule, its regressive social and cultural policies, implemented in such an American Cheese fashion, weakened the movement’s legitimacy among urban populations, non-Pashtuns, and the international community.


\textsuperscript{73} Rashid, 106.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibid}, 219.
Taliban Governance Style

In addition to imposing strict social regulations, the Taliban consolidated their power by co-opting Pashtun leaders. The Taliban were not motivated by qawm interests, but they successfully played on local rivalries to divide and control competing centers of political influence. Sinno identifies four Taliban tactics for expanding their power at the expense of tribal leaders. First, they approached the most vulnerable leaders in a regional power configuration. These leaders’ vulnerability made them more willing to join the Taliban to ensure survival. Second, the Taliban approached key clients before confronting their regional patrons. For example, during their fight against Hekmatyar, the Taliban preferred to co-opt his local commanders rather than confront the entire Hezb-i Islami directly. Similarly, the defection of one of Dostum’s lieutenants to the Taliban led to the fall of Mazar-e Sharif in 1998. Then, the Taliban calibrated their message to compete for the loyalty of local leaders’ rank and file. The impression that the Taliban were neutral religious figures who were providing stability and order was integral to their popular legitimacy. Finally, the Taliban were successful in consolidating their control because they focused on weakening the major tribal leaders and commanders who could challenge their power while permitting other, less important qawms to rule autonomously.75 This was especially evident in the Taliban’s approach to governing Nuristan.

75 Ibid, 80-5.
Taliban Rule in Nuristan

Unlike in much of the rest of the country, when the Taliban arrived in Nuristan in 1996, they did not attempt to disarm the local militias or rule the province directly. Instead, the Taliban formed alliances with local Islamist leaders, notably Maulvi Afzal, whom they allowed ruled autonomously. However, as these leaders were not “big and established strongmen with good self-governance skills” (i.e. traditional tribal leaders), political power in Nuristan became increasingly fragmented. In June 1998, a dispute over water rights between Kamdesh and Kushtoz erupted in violence between the two villages that resulted in the rocketing and destruction of Kushtoz. A similar dispute in the Waigal Valley in 2001 resulted in six deaths.

Klimburg characterized the Taliban approach to governance in Nuristan as reminiscent of the pre-Islamic political situation, when the area’s communities were entirely autonomous. The Taliban’s pursuance of a Swiss Cheese policy of local rule in Nuristan was conditioned by three factors: the region’s Islamic orthodoxy, strategic insignificance and neutrality in the fight against Massoud. As Sinno explains above, the Taliban derived much of their popular legitimacy from their perceived religious orthodoxy. The Nuristani religious leaders, many of whom had been educated in fundamentalist Pakistani schools in the 1960s and supported by Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, were suitable partners by the Taliban’s standards.

77 Klimburg, 59-60.
78 Ibid, 60.
79 On the rise of fundamentalism in Nuristan before the Soviet invasion, see David J. Katz, “Responses to Central Authority in Nuristan: The Case of Vaygal Valley Kalasha,” in Revolutions and Rebellions.
The Taliban approach to Nuristan was also influenced by the strategic unimportance and geographic inaccessibility of the region. While Nuristan would become a corridor for Taliban infiltration from Pakistan after the US invasion, in the late 1990s, the Taliban were still mainly supplied by the ISI via Quetta. The cost of invading and occupying Nuristan—heightened by the region’s mountainous geography—were not justified by the area’s lack of strategic significance to the Taliban. For Massoud’s fighters, however, Nuristan did hold strategic significance as another front to challenge the Taliban. Following the fall of Kabul, Muhammad Sarwar, who had served as Minister of Defense in Afzal’s “Islamic Revolutionary State” in the mid-1980s but was more recently allied with Massoud, returned to Nuristan to “regain influence for the sake of the Northern Alliance,” as Massoud’s forces had become known.80 After less than a year, he was captured by the Taliban and imprisoned in Qandahar. Taliban concerns over the influence of the Northern Alliance in Nuristan also shaped their policy toward Afzal, whom they prevented from collecting taxes for fear that it would drive the local population to support the Northern Alliance.81 The inability to collect taxes led to the decline of Afzal’s influence in the Nuristan, and he was forced to move to Pakistan.

The Northern Alliance

The Taliban were justified in their concerns over Massoud. After pulling back from Kabul, the Lion of the Panjsher created a balancing alliance with the other

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80 Klimburg, 59.
81 Van Der Schriek.
defeated ethnic militias in the north, including his former enemies Dostum and the Shi’a Hezb-i Wahdat. Massoud also reached out for financial and military support from Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and India, all of whom were threatened by the rise of the Taliban. The Northern Alliance established training camps in Tajikistan and, as the Taliban continued their advance, Massoud relocated his family to Dushanbe. In late 1996, Massoud renewed contact with the CIA, whose primary interest in Afghanistan had become buying up Stinger missiles distributed during the 1980s. The CIA did not put Massoud back on their payroll, but did provide him with some communications equipment to assist with the Stinger buy-back program.82

After the al-Qaeda attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the CIA increasingly focused its attention on the Saudi Islamist financier Osama bin Laden. When the Clinton administration authorized the capture of bin Laden, the CIA turned to Massoud, who was willing to help remove the Taliban’s key ally. Beginning in 1998, the CIA began make regular contact with Massoud’s forces in northeastern Afghanistan. American support was limited, however, and the administration prevented the CIA from providing assistance that would “fundamentally alter the Afghan battlefield” in favor of Massoud.83

In May 1998, despite continued pressure from the Northern Alliance, the Taliban captured Mazar-e Sharif and sent Dostum into exile. Within days of the city’s fall, Pakistan recognized the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose leadership viewed the Taliban’s religious conservatism favorably, followed suit. As the Taliban invaded the north,

82 Coll, 347.
83 Ibid, 466.
they subjugated the non-Pashtun populations to “a form of internal colonialism” that featured “large scale massacres” and population resettlement, tactics reminiscent of Abdur Rahman. Their ranks flush with over 10,000 Arab, Pakistani, and Central Asian fighters, the Taliban closed in on Massoud, shrinking the area of Northern Alliance control to less than ten percent of Afghanistan by early 2001.

The Lion is Dead

On September 9, 2001, two al-Qaeda operatives posing as North African journalists were granted an interview with Ahmad Shah Massoud at his camp in northern Takhar province. Shortly after the interview began, a bomb the men had concealed in their camera detonated, killing one of the attackers and tearing Massoud’s chest open with shrapnel. Unconscious, the Lion of the Panjshir was loaded into a helicopter and flown to a hospital in Tajikistan. He died minutes later.

The effects of Massoud’s assassination were not confined to Afghanistan. On September 4, 2001, the Bush administration instructed the CIA to provide the Northern Alliance with trucks, uniforms, ammunition, mortars, helicopters, and other equipment as part of a new policy of confronting al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The loss of Massoud called into question the political and military survivability of the Northern Alliance. After the September 11 attacks, it became clear that the timing of the assassination was designed to weaken the retaliatory capability of the United

States against al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{86}

Within days of the attacks, CIA paramilitary officers and Special Forces teams began infiltrating Afghanistan to prepare the ground for the U.S. response. Combat operations began on October 7, 2001 and have continued since.

\textsuperscript{86} Coll, 573-6.
Tribal Democracy: 
Contemporary Developments and New Approach to Governance

Along with the *pakul* hat, war rugs are one of the staple souvenirs for foreign soldiers, aid workers, and journalists visiting Afghanistan. Since the anti-Soviet *jihad*, merchants in Kabul’s Chicken Street have sold foreigners rugs that depict images of weapons, fighters, and military leaders. The rugs first featured images of the Soviets, then Najibullah, and more recently Massoud, Dostum, and Karzai. In late 2001, rugs with a new design began appearing in the Kabul markets–two airplanes flying into the World Trade Center superimposed by a dove and the US and Afghan flags. At the base of this popular version, fighter jets take off from an aircraft carrier and fly toward Afghanistan. During an exhibit in New York City, the carpets caused a stir among the American audience. Some thought the rugs were in poor taste, possibly woven in celebration of the September 11 attacks. However, as Mascelloni points out, war rugs, despite their inherent political content, do not convey an explicit political message, but rather serve as “soft and variable backdrops” of the environment in
which they are produced.¹ The 9/11 war rugs signaled the beginning of the latest chapter of the conflict between state and society in Afghanistan: the American invasion.

Like the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the American war began with the insertion of small paramilitary and Special Forces teams and evolved into a prolonged occupation sustained by over 100,000 troops. Despite initial successes in routing al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the initial U.S. strategy did not conform to the historical trends and theoretical approaches identified in the previous chapters. By maintaining a light footprint that focused on counterterrorism while leaving the establishment of security to the new Afghan interim government, the US inadvertently permitted the conditions for the resurgence of the Taliban by failing to alter the internal balance of power in Afghanistan. The new Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai has since pursued the same polices of internal imperialism, internal colonialism, and an American Cheese approach to governance as Afghanistan’s unsuccessful twentieth century rulers. While some attempts, most notably the National Solidarity Program, have been made to incorporate and encapsulate local leaders, the Afghan government retains a hostile attitude towards the official devolution of power that may be necessary for the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

Before turning to contemporary developments, however, this chapter will first examine the applicability of the theoretical approaches described in Chapter 2 throughout Afghanistan’s political history. After exploring Afghanistan’s recent political history through the lens of these theoretical approaches, this thesis will conclude by suggesting a successful model for state-society relations in Afghanistan.

Tribe-State Relations throughout Afghan History

The theories of Dupree, Barfield, Shahrani, Migdal and Waltz accurately describe the political behavior of state and societal actors throughout Afghanistan’s history. Dupree’s characterization of state formation as the building of an “internal empire” is observable in Afghanistan since 1747, when Ahmad Shah, the leader of a relatively weak tribe, was chosen by his fellow Pashtuns to lead the Durrani confederation. The selection of a monarch whose rule was contingent on the good will of the Durrani leadership ensured that “the monarch’s first task was to satisfy the interests of his own clansmen” before those of the state.\(^2\) Despite conquering Kabul, Peshawar, the Punjab, Herat, and Mashhad, the monarch’s power was continually checked by the “tribal-feudal socioeconomic framework,” which required the consent of the Durrani tribal chieftains.\(^3\) The empire held together until 1793, when the Durrani coalition weakened and power devolved to local leaders. In 1819, the pattern was repeated when Dost Muhammad built up support among his Barakzai kinsmen

**Figure 6.1 Fusion and Fission in Modern Afghanistan**

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Ahmad Shah Durrani</td>
<td>1747-1793</td>
<td>Fusion</td>
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<td>Zaman Shah, Shah Shuja</td>
<td>1793-1819</td>
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<td>Dost Muhammad</td>
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<td>Habibullah, Amanullah</td>
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<td>Musahiban</td>
<td>1929-1973</td>
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<td>PDPA</td>
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<td>Taliban</td>
<td>1994-2001</td>
<td>Fusion (in Taliban-controlled areas)</td>
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<td>Karzai</td>
<td>2001-2011</td>
<td>Fusion (in non-Pashtun areas)</td>
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\(^3\) *Ibid.*
and again began expanding the monarchy’s control through military conquest and “judicious marriages.”⁴ After his death in 1863, Afghanistan entered a period of political fission that lasted until the rise of Abdur Rahman in 1880.

Writing in the early 1970s, Dupree argued that the practice of internal imperialism ended with Abdur Rahman. A closer examination of the Iron Emir’s consolidation strategy—which relied on tribal alliances and perpetual conquest—and the subsequent devolution of political power under Habibullah and Amanullah indicate that his state was an internal empire. The Musahiban similarly relied on tribal confederations and the distribution of political power to qawm allies, such as the Nuristanis, to maintain their hold on Afghanistan. Once the monarchy collapsed, political power again became diffuse and remained so until the 1990s, when the Taliban gained control by unifying their Pashtun base and conquering the rest of Afghanistan.

Shahrani’s description of internal colonialism is similarly reflected in contemporary political developments in Afghanistan. As with the process of fusion and fission of central power, internal colonialism was evident under Ahmad Shah Durrani, who distributed landholdings and important state offices to leaders of the various Durrani subtribes. “Non-Durrani tribes received an insignificant amount of land,” despite paying most of the taxes and providing most of the soldiers.⁵ By not incorporating leaders from other groups, the Durrani Empire was a “mechanism by which the Pashtun tribes under [Ahmad Shah’s] command ruled over other

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⁴ Ibid, 74.
⁵ Ibid, 47.
Abdur Rahman continued the process of Durrani colonialism by conducting ethnic cleansing against the Hazara, forcing the conversion of the Kafiris, and relocating his Ghilzai Pashtun rivals to northern Afghanistan to ensure that their primary identification would be ethnic and not tribal. The Iron Emir’s military conquests were followed in the 1920s by the “Pashtunization” of the state under the guidance of Mahmud Tarzi. Pashto, which Tarzi regarded as the “true national language,” was elevated over Persian and textbooks depicted Afghanistan as a purely Pashtun creation, denying the historical contribution of non-Pashtuns. The combination of the violent suppression of non-leadership ethnic and tribal groups with the imposition of Pashtun-centric ideology was also evident during the rise of the PDPA and the Taliban.

The approaches of Dupree and Shahrani, while providing an account of how the state acts towards qawm groups, do not adequately consider the agency of societal leaders, and, as a result, do not provide a complete illustration of all of the conditions that bear on state-society relations in Afghanistan. However, by blending the approaches of Dupree and Shahrani with those of Midgal and Waltz, it becomes apparent that, in addition to the governance strategy employed by the state, the internal power distribution of Afghanistan is influenced by the perceptions and decisions of societal groups. The balancing and bandwagoning behavior of qawm groups reaches back thousands of years to the decision by the Sogdian and Kafiri

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8 Gregorian, 175.
tribes to ally with Alexander the Great. Similarly, the invading Umayyads, Shaybands, Moghuls, and Safavids all found local allies who assisted in their conquest of Afghanistan in order to advance their interests in the new empires. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, small powers in Afghanistan continued to bandwagon when the dominant power, the Durrani state, appeared strong. Beginning with Abdur Rahman, the state began to cultivate an “aura of military invincibility” that encouraged qawms to ally with the dominant power. This perception endured through Musahiban period, providing Afghanistan with four decades of stability earned, not through state-building, but through small powers bandwagoning with the monarchy. Small powers have also bandwagoned with the state against other small powers, such as the communist-encouraged Gujars, Mishwanis, Gawars, and Shinwari Pashtun attack on the rebellious Nuristani tribes in 1978.

Societal groups have also demonstrated a tendency to balance against the dominant power when it suited their interests. The 1709 revolt in Qandahar against the Safavids was an act of balancing against an empire whose distance and declining capabilities led to a successful outcome for Mir Wais and the Pashtun tribes. The national resistance against the British during the First Anglo-Afghan War did not begin until 1841, two years after the invasion, when the traditional powerbrokers “detected the weakness of their rulers.” During the rule of Amanullah, the Khost Rebellion signaled the monarchy’s waning capabilities and fostered a perception of weakness that led to a national rebellion in 1928. The balancing behavior of qawm

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9 Barfield, 187.
groups in Afghanistan became especially apparent after the Saur Revolution, when the bandwagoning-induced tribal peace of the Musahiban gave way to system-wide attempts to challenge the new government. While opponents of the communists may have cloaked their resistance in Islamist and nationalist ideology, they would not have challenged the dominant power if they did not believe it would advance their interests or security.

**Contemporary Afghanistan**

The same trends that are observable through modern Afghan political history continue to shape contemporary state-society relations. After beginning military operations in Afghanistan in October 2001, the US pursued a “light footprint” strategy that relied on Special Operations Forces and CIA paramilitary officers to direct airstrikes and coordinate supply drops while leaving the Northern Alliance to engage in most of the ground fighting. This approach was “cheap in dollar and manpower terms and driven by technology,” but it did not create the conditions necessary for the defeat of the Taliban by shifting the internal balance of power in Afghanistan.\(^{11}\) Rashid describes the political environment in the early days of the war:

> The Afghan people were literally on their knees begging for a greater international presence so that their benighted country could be rebuilt. Afghans were savvy. They knew that more foreign troops meant greater security, and also a greater commitment to reconstructing the country…Yet the lack of larger Western military presence meant that the warlords rather than the government remained empowered. Afghans understood well enough that without security there could be no economic development, and if the West was refusing to provide that security, and was instead

depending on the warlords, then it was also insincere about rebuilding the country.12

The Bush administration’s focus on building a case for war against Saddam Hussein in 2002 further diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan. The message to the warlords and the potential Taliban supporters was clear: The US is not serious about supporting the government in Kabul; the balance of power has not shifted.

In February 2002, the British-led, 6,500-man International Security and Assistance Force deployed to Kabul to provide breathing room for the new government. The force’s commander, General McColl, argued for the expansion of ISAF outside the capital so that international troops could replace the militia commanders and keep the peace. The proposal was rejected by Washington, which was pursuing an unstated strategy of leaving “Karzai ineffectual in the capital, protected by foreign forces, while relying on the warlords to keep Pax Americana in the countryside and U.S. SOF forces to hunt down al Qaeda…By following such a strategy, the United States left everything in place from the Taliban era except for the fact of regime change.”13

As the US was pursuing a strategy that could not pacify Afghanistan, the new Afghan government was falling into the same patterns of governance described by Dupree, Shahrani, and Barfield. In December 2001, after the fall of Kabul, leaders of the different Afghan factions met in Bonn to choose an interim government. Some of the delegates, such as proponents of restoring the monarchy under Zahir Shah, had not set foot in Afghanistan since the 1970s. The Northern Alliance delegation was

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12 Ibid, 196
13 Ibid, 133.
comprised mainly of Panjsheris. There were no southern Pashtuns.\textsuperscript{14} Karzai delivered the opening statement to the conference via satellite phone from Tarin Kot, in southern Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{15} His role as a charismatic leader who appeared to be able to unify the various powerbrokers in Afghanistan followed Dupree’s model of state fission. Unfortunately, in the years since Karzai’s election, he has followed the example of previous Durrani monarchs by placing the interests of his own clansmen ahead of those of the state.

In December 2003, a constitutional \textit{jirga} was convened in Kabul to decide on the shape of the future government. The debate centered on two approaches to restructuring the Afghan state: a unitary presidential model (American Cheese) or a federal parliamentary system (Swiss Cheese). Many Pashtun delegates supported the presidential model as a means to reestablish their dominance in the government after the advances made by the Tajiks.\textsuperscript{16} Conversely, ethnic minority leaders and regional commanders favored a more decentralized power arrangement. The \textit{jirga} attempted to reconcile these positions by suggesting a mix of the two systems that was reminiscent of Lebanese confessionalism – splitting the executive between a directly elected Pashtun president and a parliament-chosen non-Pashtun prime minister.\textsuperscript{17}

The proposal was rejected by the drafting commission in favor of a unitary presidential system. Rubin, who was an adviser to the constitutional \textit{jirga}, explains the commission’s rationale behind the adaptation of a presidential system:

\begin{quote}
Decades of internal warfare have left standing only the weakest of security institutions. The rule of law still does not extend over
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}, 103.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid}, 96.
\textsuperscript{16} Barfield, 298.
much of the country, and political parties are feeble and embryonic...The presidentialists' argument persuaded those who worry that that a parliament chosen under these arduous conditions is too likely to be a fragmented body dominated by warlords, local factions, and even drug traffickers. In his speech to the [Constitutional Loya Jirga]'s closing session, President Karzai cited post-1945 Italy and India since the Congress Party’s decline as negative examples. Afghanistan’s most urgent need is a functioning government. Presidentialism’s advocates – who are not all Pashtuns – say that such a system, with its greater potential for what Alexander Hamilton called “energy and dispatch,” is more likely to bring such a state about.

Abdul Liwal, a Karzai adviser who was one of the spokesmen of the constitutional jirga provided me with a similar explanation for the choice of centralism over federalism:

The priority is stability. Instability is not caused by not giving control to provinces. Real instability comes from our neighbors – from Pakistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan – who have their own proxies and interests here. Instability is also caused by lack of infrastructure that prevents economic integration. To build a state, we must first have stability. Then we must improve the public’s knowledge about democracy. Once we have a strong state, we can think about decentralization. 19

As with the Musahiban rulers during the previous century, the imperative of immediate “stability” overrode the long-term sustainability of the political order. The 1964 Constitution, which had been temporarily adopted at Bonn, became the primary guide for the new document. According to Barfield:

The appointment of governors, the right to taxation, and the provision of government services all remained the monopolies of the central government. The new constitution therefore had a strong monarchical flavor. In fact, it was later discovered that the original Persian version had failed to delete many references to the king in constitutional articles that were lifted wholesale from the 1964 document.20

The adaptation–almost directly–of the same qawm-state power configuration that had its roots in the internally colonialist American Cheese approach of Abdur Rahman

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18 Ibid, 13.
19 Interview with Abdul Liwal, Kabul, July 29, 2010.
20 Barfield, 298-9.
would prove to be one of the largest obstacles to state formation under Karzai because it did not reflect the political reality outside of Kabul. In a replay of the 1990s, foreign-supported commanders continued to maintain their militias and govern as they saw fit. A key difference from the previous decade was that the Panjsheris, who had guided the first CIA teams into Afghanistan, dominated the security structure of the new order. Mohammad Fahim, Abdullah Abdullah, and Mohammad Arif, all former Massoud lieutenants, were named to lead the Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and domestic security, respectively.

After the initial war against the Taliban, the relaxed US strategy institutionalized qawm divisions and left the government weak and irrelevant. In the southeast, for example, Gul Agha Sherzai, a member of the Barakzai tribe was appointed governor of Qandahar over the objection of Karzai. Sherzai played on qawm politics, including the rivalry between the Barakzai and the Popalzai that reached back to the Shah Shuja-Dost Muhammad power struggle, to empower his tribe at the expense of other groups.\(^{21}\) The intra-Durrani tensions in Qandahar illustrated a larger pattern of conflict among the American-supported militia leaders and the nascent Karzai government across the country.

**Taliban Redux**

The empowerment of regional and local militia commanders delegitimized the Karzai government and set the conditions necessary for the return of the Taliban in early 2003. Giustozzi explains that “The failure of the central government to keep providing sufficient discretionary funds for the governors to interact with elders,

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\(^{21}\) Rashid, 129.
clergy and other notables contributed decisively to undermine the administration.”

In short, the government was not able to convince regional powerbrokers to bandwagon with the state. The government’s lack of funds was driven by the independence of the regional militia commanders, who profited on import duties and the narcotics trade, but did not contribute to the national treasury. The inability of the government to even buy the loyalty of local leaders, combined with the institutionalization of the *qawm* rivalries described above, weakened the official subnational governance structures and provided an opening for the Taliban to reemerge.

Guistozzi estimates that, between 2002 and 2006, the Taliban’s ranks grew from around 4,000 to 17,000 fighters. This resurgence was made possible by four inter-connected factors: the paucity of US troops in Afghanistan, increasing support from Pakistan, the weakness of the central government, and the erosion of traditional

### Figure 6.2 Estimates of Taliban Strength (2002-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<tr>
<td>Core</td>
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<td>4,000</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>core (active)</td>
<td>500-1,500</td>
<td>800-2,000</td>
<td>1,200-2,500</td>
<td>2,000-3,000</td>
<td>3,000-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>core madrassa-recruited</td>
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<td>3,700</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>4,400</td>
<td>5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>core village-recruited</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-core village recruited</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average active (core + non-core)</td>
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<td>1,500-4,000</td>
<td>3,000-5,500</td>
<td>5,000-7,000</td>
<td>6,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>4,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,500</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,500</strong></td>
<td><strong>17,000</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Volunteers</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Guistozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, p. 35.

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tribal leadership. The deployment of less than 10,000 NATO troops—most of which were not engaged in stability operations—in 2002-2003, and the shift in focus towards Iraq signaled the Pakistani government that the US did not take the Afghan war seriously. The ISI encouraged the government to maintain ties with the Taliban so that Pakistan would be able to exert an influence in Afghanistan after the coming American withdrawal. Whether the increase in support for the Taliban after 2001 was approved by President Musharraf or conducted by rogue ISI commanders is not clear. The scope and coordination of the Pakistani support, however, indicates that it was likely approved by the senior military leadership. Beginning in 2002, retired ISI and Frontier Corps officers were rehired under contract and dispatched to Quetta and Peshawar. These contractors did not maintain contact with local ISI or the military and worked cover jobs as aid workers, bureaucrats, and university professors. These officers were the primary conduit of support and sanctuary to the Taliban in Pakistan, but evaded detection through their non-official cover.23

The increase in Taliban capabilities, unchecked by the low US troop levels contributed to a worsening security situation that inhibited the functions of the government in the south and east. With no guarantors of security, militia commanders refused to disarm and accept control by the Kabul government. At the same time, the continuing erosion of the power of tribal leaders, which began in 1978, weakened the organization of Afghan rural society. While tribal leaders supported the government, many young tribesmen fought for the Taliban, which provided them with “peace,  

23 Rashid, 221-2.
income, a sense of purpose, a social network” that their tribes did not. Foreign military operations, largely conducted autonomously of tribal and local government leaders, further undermined the legitimacy of traditional governance structures. This frustration with tribal leadership allowed the Taliban to recruit “members of rival tribes under a common banner for long-term political action.” As during the 1990s, the Taliban were not a representation of qawm interests, but a response to the anarchy produced by competing qawm groups and regional actors in the system.

**Encapsulation: A Successful Approach to Governance in Afghanistan**

Considering the failures of the past decade, a more successful strategy for altering the balance of power in Afghanistan would be encapsulation, or the gradual preemption of the economic and political independence of societal groups by the state. In the twentieth century, state leaders in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey successfully pursued strategies of encapsulation that weakened previously independent societal leaders. In Afghanistan, encapsulation was attempted under the Musahiban; however these efforts were interrupted by the 1978 Saur Revolution. Rubin explains the circumstances under which encapsulation developed in Afghanistan:

> Because the state did not depend directly on the khans, it needed neither to confront them (as Abdul Rahman or Amanullah had) nor mobilize them for conquest (as Ahmad Shah Durrani had). Instead, both khans and ulama were given symbolic roles without real power and allowed considerable autonomy in their local affairs.  

25 Guistozzi, 39.
In addition to positions within the state, societal rulers who bandwagoned with the monarchy were also rewarded with development projects and agricultural aid. Rubin’s description of encapsulation suggests that the approach empowered local leaders at the expense of the state. Salzman, however, argues that encapsulation weakens societal leaders in the long-term by heightening differentiation in economic power and political authority between tribal leaders and their fellow tribesmen. Citing Ottoman policies in Iraq, he writes:

Tribal chiefs were given title to tribal lands customarily under collective ownership. The resulting economic stratification was so great that the chiefs pulled out of the tribal system altogether in order to join the economic upper class, leaving the government with wealthy, but administratively useless ex-chiefs and a fragmented tribal populace.27

Anthropological studies of Afghanistan during the 1970s indicate that encapsulation was weakening the traditional role of tribal leaders. Strand, who conducted fieldwork with the Kom tribe in eastern Nuristan, observed that traditional local governance structures, or sazis, had become integrated into the Afghan administrative system and “served the Afghan government as a convenient system for gathering head taxes, military conscripts, and road repairmen.”28 Anderson made similar observations while living with the Ghilzai Pashtuns, when around 1966, the Afghan government began providing credits for rural farmers to purchase tractors. In most cases, the only farmers that could afford the tractors, even with the government subsidies, were the large landlords that held positions of leadership within the community. When the tractors were delivered, some leaders shared their tractors with

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their tribesmen, while others charged for their use. This commercialization of the leader’s patronage eroded respect for the traditional leadership. One tribesman explained his dissatisfaction with his leader: “Sahib Khan? He is no khan. He has a tractor by plows only for himself. It is that way now, with tractors. There are no khans anymore.”29 While anecdotal, Strand and Anderson’s observations indicate that the Musahiban encapsulation strategy was yielding results, and, if it was not interrupted by Daoud’s coup and the Saur Revolution, state-society relations in contemporary Afghanistan would look much different today.

A policy of encapsulation that empowers societal leaders, not military commanders, through economic development backed up by a military capable of imposing sanction on those who violate the rules of the system is in order in contemporary Afghanistan. Those who insist that Afghanistan is ungovernable are partially correct. Contemporary Afghanistan is ungovernable because the state is attempting to rule in a manner that is at odds with centuries of established political culture. Given the failures of the twentieth century, the path forward for Afghanistan is clear: a decentralized government that encapsulates, rather than fights with, societal groups.

Glossary

Abbreviations of Language Names
Ar. – Arabic
Carib. – Caribbean
Gr. – Greek
He. – Hebrew
Km. – Kom
Pash. – Pashto
Pers. – Persian
Ru. – Russian
Truk. – Turkic
Uz. – Uzbek

A Note on Transliteration
Throughout this work, foreign words have been transliterated to the spelling that is most common in similar scholarship. Most transliterated words have been italicized to visually distinguish these words and highlight foreign vocabulary. As much as possible, I have allowed for foreign words to take their English form. However, the lack of precise English equivalents for some words, such as qawm, has compelled me to use foreign terms throughout the text. Some of the italicized terminology, has, in fact, been incorporated into English dictionaries, yet I have chosen to differentiate these words with italicization nevertheless. By re-representing words like jihad as foreign, I hope to symbolically divorce such a term from the connotations it carries to encourage a rediscovery of its meaning in its original contexts.

agha: Turk. اقا “chief, master, or lord,” title for tribal chieftains, village leaders, and wealthy landlords in areas of the former Ottoman Empire.

arbab: Pers. ارباب from Ar. plural of رب, “lord, master, owner.” Used in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as a title for an influential individual who represents his community to an outside power.

asabiyyah: Ar. عصبية “group-feeling,” from عصب, “to bind together.” Used by Ibn Khaldun to describe kinship and tribal ties.

Barakzai: Pash. بارکزایی “sons of Barak,” one of the four major Durrani Pashtun descent groups.
Bashgal: Valley in northeastern Nuristan, center of Mulavi Afzal’s Islamic Revolutionary State of Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad. Populated by the Kata tribe.

bi-tarafi: Pers. بی طرفی “without sides,” used to describe the neutral foreign policy of Afghanistan under Prime Minister Muhammad Daoud Khan (1953-63).

cacique: Carib., person in a village or region who exercises political influence

Deoband: City in northern India home to the Darul Uloom Deoband, a center of conservative Islamic thought associated with transnational Islamist movements.

Durbar Shahi: Pers. شاهی دربار “Royal Council,” Advisory council established by Amanullah (1919-29) whose membership was comprised of Durrani tribal leaders.

Durrani: Pash. درنی from Pers. plural of در, “pearl,” one of the chief Pashtun tribal confederations. Known as Abdali until the establishment of the Durrani Empire in 1747.

effendi: Ar. أفندي, a corruption of the Medieval Gr. αφέντης “master”, effendi was a title of nobility used in the Ottoman Empire.

Fatwa: Ar. فتوا, a formal Islamic jurisprudential opinion.

Ghaznawid: Pers. غزنویان, a Persianate dynasty of Turkic origin which ruled much of present-day Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan from 975 to 1187.

Ghilzai: Pash. غرزی, one of the largest Pashtun confederations, historical rivals of the Durrani.

Hashtnafari: Pers. هشتنفری “eight-man,” a conscription system implemented under Abdur Rahman in which each qawm sent one of every eight men to serve in the national army.

Hazara: Pers. هزاره derived from هزار, meaning “thousand,” and referring to a military unit of 1000 soldiers in Genghis Khan’s army, of whom the Hazara ethnic group are said to be descendants. The Hazara are distinct in their Asiatic appearance and adherence to Shi’a Islam.

Hezb-i Islami: Pers. حزب أسلامی “Party of Islam,” Islamist organization under the command of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar active during the anti-Soviet jihad.

Hezb-i Watan: Pers. حزب وطن “Homeland Party,” official party established by Najibullah after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The Hezb-i Watan was essentially a reorganized PDPA which promoted more nationalist, rather than communist ideologies.
Hotaki: *Pash.* هوتکی, sub-tribe of the Ghilzai confederation. Under the leadership of Mir Wais, the Hotaki revolted against the Safavid Empire in 1709.

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI): The Pakistani foreign intelligence service.

Jamaat-i Islami: *Pers.* جماعت اسلامی, “Islamic Congregation,” Islamist organization under the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani active during the anti-Soviet *jihad.*

*jihad*: *Ar.* جهاد, from جهاد “to endeavor or strive,” a religiously sanctioned war.

*jirga*: *Pash.* جرګه, an assembly of elders in Pashtun communities that serves the functions of local governance, including dispute resolution and juridical matters.

Junbish-i Milli: *Uz.* “National Movement” ethnic-Uzbek militia commanded by Abdul Rashid Dostum.

Kafiri: From *Ar.* كافر, “disbeliever or infidel,” used to describe the communities of contemporary Nuristan that were not converted to Islam until 1896.

*kamanda*: *Pers.* فرمانده, from the Fr. “commander,” used during the anti-Soviet *jihad* to describe a military leader from outside of the traditional political structure of his group, e.g. Ahmad Shah Massoud.

*Khedmat-i Etala’at-i Dawlati* (KhAD): *Pers.* خدامت اطلاعات دولتی, “Government Intelligence Service,” Afghan intelligence service established in 1980 with advice and technical support from the Soviet KGB.

Khalq: *Pash.* خلق, “Masses,” faction of the PDPA primarily composed of Pashtuns. Following the Leninist model, the Khalq sought (over the objections of their Soviet advisors) to implement radical reform and create a working-class party. The Khalq government was overthrown by the Soviet invasion in December 1979.

*khan*: *Turk.* خان, “sovereign or military leader,” first used in medieval Tartary. In contemporary Afghanistan, a *khan* is used as an honorific, similar to *effendi,* and to refer to large landlords.

Khawanin Mulki: *Pash.* خوانین ملکی, “Landowning gentlemen” who comprised the lower advisory councils of Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) and Amanullah (1919-29).

Khorasan: From Middle *Pers.* خراسان, “land where the sun rises,” traditionally used by Persians to refer to greater Central Asia.

*kulak*: *Ru.* кулак, “fist” referring to “tight-fisted” rich peasants and wealthy independent farmers in the late Russian Empire who held economic, as well as local political authority.
malik: Ar. مالك “owner or possessor,” used in Afghanistan as a title for large landlords and village leaders.

Mohammadzai: Pash. محمد زی “sons of Mohammad,” one of the four major Durrani Pashtun descent groups.

Mujahedeen: Ar. مجاهدين “Those who engage in jihad”

mullah: Pers. ملا “vicar or master,” used as a title for religious leaders in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia.


mutasib: Ar. محسب “one who accounts,” title for individual who supervises bazaars, trade, and other aspects of public life to insure that business is conducted in accordance with Islamic law.

nang: Pash. ګنان “to protect one’s right,” honor

namus: Ar. ناموس “law, custom, honor,” He. נמוס “law,” Gr. νόμος “custom,” used in Afghanistan to describe the importance of protecting the virtue of women.

pakul: Pash. پکول round wool cap named for a settlement in Chitral, Pakistan, where it is believed to originate. The cap is one of the most popular men’s headwear in Afghanistan.

Parcham: Pers. پرچم “Banner,” faction of the PDPA primarily comprised on non-Pashtuns. The Parcham advocated a more gradual approach to socialism than their Khalq rivals and garnered greater support from the Soviet Union.

Parun: Valley in central Nuristan province.


Pashai: Dardic ethnic group that inhabits the border area of northeastern Afghanistan.

qaryadar: From Ar. قر “settlement” and Pers. دار “owner,” village headman.

qawm: Ar. قوم “kin, tribe, race,” used in Afghanistan as a gloss for social organizations based on tribal, clan, kinship, or locality ties. Sometimes used interchangeably with “tribe.”

sazi: From *Km.* “teams,” a fifty-man sub-tribal governance structure in Kom communities that fulfills the community’s obligations of justice, defense, and maintenance.

*Shar’ia: Ar.* شريعة “way or path,” Islamic jurisprudence derived from the Qur’an and the Hadith.

*shura: Ar.* شورى “consultation,” a decision-making body.


taliban: *Pers.* and *Pash.* plural of *Ar.* طالب “student,” used in Afghanistan and Pakistan to refer to religious student.

tarburwali: *Pash.* تربورولي “rivalry with male cousin on father’s side,” marked by endemic gamesmanship and sometimes open hostility.

Wama: Valley in southern Nuristan province populated by Ashku, Sanu, and Kata ethnic groups.

*waqf: From Ar.* وقف “to stop,” inalienable religious endowment administered by the clergy.

*watan: Ar.* وطن “homeland,” used to designate political entity, in contrast with religious and ethnic communities.

Waygal: Valley in eastern Nuristan inhabited largely by the Kalash Nuristani ethnic group.

*wurješt: Derived from *Km.* ješt, “leader or chief” in Kom tribal communities in eastern Nuristan.

*za’im: Ar.* زعيم “leader” with economic and political authority over his constituents.
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