Afghanistan Under Soviet Occupation

BY NAKE M. KAMRANY
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“The future of Afghanistan depends largely on what happens to the Soviet occupation, how soon and in what form.”

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In the early 1980's, Afghanistan's Marxist government, led by Babrak Karmal, could not survive without the presence of several Soviet divisions in Afghanistan. Estimates of the number of Soviet soldiers and military equipment there vary considerably, because Western newsmen are barred and most resistance occurs in the countryside, far from diplomatic contact. Western sources estimate that in early 1982 there were 10 Soviet divisions in Afghanistan, between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers; the freedom fighters estimate that there are more than three times that many. In addition, many Soviet military operations originate inside the Soviet Union, which makes counting more difficult. For instance, air operations in northern Afghanistan originate from air bases in Soviet Turkestan. According to one count, the number of Soviet tanks destroyed so far in the valley of Pandjshir alone was more than 200; others estimate the total number of Soviet tanks in Afghanistan at fewer than 100.

Afghanistan and the Afghan economy suffered a major setback because of the Soviet invasion of December, 1979, and the continued Soviet occupation. The direct economic loss has been estimated at $2 billion a year. But the cost of the war has been incalculable in terms of human lives, the destruction of hundreds of villages, and the cost in lost opportunity. About one-fifth of the population has vanished or emigrated. Many factories have shut down; the transportation system has collapsed; the government is unable to collect taxes; the farmers have refused to plant crops; shortages and inflation are endemic. From 1970 through 1977, the inflation rate averaged 4.1 percent per year, but prices of many goods in Kabul increased by over 100 percent between 1980 and 1981. The price of wheat increased by 400 percent, cooking oil by 500 percent, meat by 500 percent and wood by 200 percent. Moreover, a great deal of Afghanistan's capital equipment and many factories have been destroyed by the resistance movement in order to undermine the existing Marxist government. This has reduced the country's production capacity, and it presents enormous lost opportunities for the future of the Afghan economy. Even after hostilities cease, it will take years to restore the Afghan economy to its pre-invasion level.

In the meantime, the Afghan economy will become more and more dependent on the Soviet Union, and the process of Sovietization, the economic integration of Afghanistan with the Soviet Union, will increase rapidly. Today, more than 90 percent of Afghanistan's foreign aid is provided by the Soviet Union, in contrast to about 40 percent in the pre-invasion period. The Soviet venture is clearly costly in the short run, although its implications for the long run are incalculable. However, there is no doubt that any representative Afghan government will be very hostile to the Soviet Union.

Over the last quarter century, great strides were made in the modernization of Afghanistan. Between 1955 and 1980, over $3 billion in foreign aid was invested under a series of five year economic plans; the first plan was initiated in 1956. Beginning in the mid-1950's, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in every conceivable kind of nonmilitary competition in Afghanistan—mass media propaganda, technical assistance, exchange scholarships, infrastructure building, and a host of other cold war techniques. The concerted efforts produced some positive and some negative results. On the positive side, a network of much needed infrastructure was created, including a system of paved roads connecting the major cities. The system of education was expanded substantially from the elementary to the university level, and student enrollment increased by over 1,000 percent over the last 25 years. Many hospitals, several airports, and a meager system of communications were established. Major irrigation and power projects in the southwest (the Helmand Valley Project) and in the east (the Naghu project) were completed. Mineral and resource surveys revealed rich resources in Afghanistan, especially in natural gas, iron ore, zinc and oil. Substantial quantities of natural gas were exported to the Soviet Union although at prices far below international prices or the prices the Soviet Union charged its West European customers.

In their search for economic improvement, the Afghans viewed East-West competition in Afghanistan as beneficial, hoping that complementary projects would yield overall economic development. But in spite of

1Afghanistan Times, vol. 1, no. 2 (April, 1980).
independent country under various names, like Ayana, Bactria and Khorasan. Modern Afghanistan was founded by Ahmed Shah Ba Ba in 1747. British and Russian intervention started in the 1830's, when the country was caught in a civil war and rival rulers sought outside assistance. This pattern of civil war and foreign intervention in Afghanistan has continued. 3

BRITISH INTENTIONS

The British objective in Afghanistan was security for India against Russia. In pursuit of this objective, the British invaded Afghanistan, and this led to the Anglo-Afghan wars of 1839-1842 and 1878-1880. At the same time, the Russians were expanding southward. The Russians occupied the Caucasus, the Trans-Caspia, Turkestan (Turkmenia) and the Khanates of Central Asia. In this process of expansion, Russia came within the sphere of British interests, especially when it occupied Turkestan on the northern border of Afghanistan and occupied an Afghan border town in 1885. 4

Anglo-Russian arrangements with regard to Afghanistan necessitated a series of agreements to create an Anglo-Russian detente. Discussions were held in London (1885), Khamiab (1886), St. Petersburg (1887), Chehil Dukhtar (1893) and Pamir (1895). A series of protocols concerned the borders of northern and northwestern Afghanistan. The Granville-Gortchakoff agreement of 1873 defined the northern frontier of Afghanistan as the (Amu Derya) Oxus River. The last of the meetings between Great Britain and Russia was held in 1907. In the Anglo-Russian Convention of St. Petersburg, Afghanistan was declared to lie outside the Russian sphere of influence, and Great Britain promised to refrain from annexation or interference in Afghan affairs.

In 1919, King Amanullah launched the third Anglo-Afghan War, which resulted in the Treaty of Rawalpindi, in which Afghanistan's full sovereignty was acknowledged. At the same time, the Bolshevik Revolution swept through Russia, and a Communist regime was established in that vast country. The government of King Amanullah and the Bolshevik regime both craved international recognition. The Soviet Union was first to recognize Afghanistan as a sovereign nation, and its action was reciprocated by Afghanistan. An Afghan-Russian treaty of friendship was signed in August, 1921.

TREATY ARRANGEMENTS

According to the treaty, the Soviet Union guaranteed the independence of Bokhara and promised to return Panjdeh to Afghanistan. In 1926, at Paghman, Afghanistan signed another treaty of neutrality and nonaggression with the Soviet Union. A group of Afghan students were subsequently sent to Moscow for flight training, and they formed the core of Afghanistan's air force for the next 30 years. Agreement for

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air service between Kabul and Tashkent was reached in 1927.6

During the same period, King Amanullah sent a
mission to Washington, D.C. But the mission was not
officially recognized nor was the United States per-
suaded to recognize Afghanistan.6

From the 1930's through the mid-1950's, Afghan-
istan's economic, political and social relations with
the Soviet Union were minimal. In 1953, Sardar Mo-
hammed Daud became Prime Minister; and in 1956,
he launched Afghanistan's first five year development
plan and sought Soviet economic and technical sup-
port.7

In the 1950's, the United States was providing only
marginal aid to maintain its presence. The United
States had zeroed in on "palace and politics" and had
supported the status quo. But eventually all United
States efforts to encourage the development of a dem-
ocratic process in Afghanistan failed. Although some
beginning was made during the 1963-1973 constitutio-
nal period, the formation of political parties was not
permitted by King Zahir, and the educated elite failed
to unify and rally behind a single leadership.

During this period, the United States refused re-
peated Afghan requests for military assistance, largely
because of its treaty commitments to Pakistan and the
regional dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan
over Pashtunistan. The United States kept Afghan-
istan out of its security pacts, namely the Central Treaty
Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty
Organization (SEATO) in the 1950's; it consistently
viewed Afghanistan as outside its security perimeter.

**SOVIET INFRINGEMENT**

At the same time, the Soviet Union was planting the
seeds of the subsequent Soviet takeover. Soviet per-
sonnel infiltrated the military, providing military hard-
ware and training for junior officers. Pragmatic aid
programs gave the Soviet Union a four-to-one edge
over the United States. Soviet leaders were careful to
bind the Afghan economy to that of the Soviet Union
through a series of barter agreements and programs
providing massive training of junior executives espe-
cially designed to convert them into loyal members of
the leftist parties, Khalq and Parcham, which received
steady and strong Soviet support.

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6Arnold Fletcher, *Afghanistan: Highway of Conquest* (Ithaca:
Cornell University Press, 1965); L. Dupree, *Afghanistan*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Hasan Kakar,
*Afghanistan History* (Houston: University of Texas Press,
1979) and Ludwig Adam, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the
Mid-Twentieth Century* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press,
1974).

7Pouliot, "Afghanistan and the United States: The Crucial
Years," in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2 (spring,

8Kamrany, *Peaceful Competition in Afghanistan* (Washington,

Afghan interest in marxism had developed out of
sheer frustration. Although Afghan Marxists were few
in numbers, they had become strong zealots. They had
a very superficial understanding of marxism and they
viewed the world as belonging either to the Marxist
Soviet sphere or the capitalist American sphere. Be-
cause the Soviet Union was promoting a shake-up of
the status quo, the leftists saw their opportunity to grab
power and topple the monarchy.

But in 1973, it was the military officers influen-
ted by the Soviet Union who overthrew the monarchy
and established the first leftist government under Sardar
Daud, their figurehead. Subsequently, when Daud
tried to consolidate his power and move away from
the Soviet sphere, the military toppled him and estab-
lished a more reliable leftist regime, headed by Nour
Mohammed Taraki, a Marxist, who was named Pres-
ident of the "Democratic Republic of Afghanistan."
The Soviet Union tried to popularize Taraki as the
"great teacher," but his only credentials lay in an article
he wrote about the conditions of work and the work-
ers, for which he was awarded the Lenin Prize, in-
cluding some $70,000 that had helped him organize
his party.

By all accounts, the 1978 coup was engineered di-
rectly by the Soviet Union, and Soviet pilots dropped
the decisive bombs on the palace. The Taraki regime
subsequently met with stiff popular resistance and civil
war. Over time, the regime weakened and, acting on
Soviet advice, Taraki finally tried to eliminate his de-
puty, H. Amin, who was the real force in the Khaliq
organization; Amin had also served as a liaison be-
tween the party and the military, thus enlarging his
personal power. In the struggle, Amin had the upper
hand; he was tipped off about the Taraki plan by
Taraki's head of security, S. D. Taloq. Thus in Sep-
ember, 1979, Taraki was murdered, and Amin took
over.

Amin was fully aware of his precarious predica-
ment. In subsequent months, however, Amin's rift
with the Soviet Union grew, but he had already
preempted his options. The end came in December,
1979. While the United States was caught off balance
in Iran, the Soviet Union launched its invasion, sum-
marily executed Amin, and installed Babrak Karmal,
head of the Marxist party, Parcham, as President.

There were several reasons for the 1979 Soviet in-
vansion. Soviet leaders wanted to counter United States
forces in the Indian Ocean, exploiting a political op-
portunity while the United States was distracted by the
hostage crisis. If they did not act, they feared a reversal
of Soviet gains in Afghanistan over the past 30 years.
Soviet leaders also wanted to take advantage of poten-
tial economic gains by capturing Afghanistan's mineral
resources and making Afghanistan a "bread basket"
for the Soviet Union. Soviet paranoia over the Chinese
border threats was also a factor. And, finally, the Soviet
Union was responding to its historical drive, looking
toward expansion to the south and warm water ports.8

THE AFGHAN RESISTANCE

Although the Soviet Union succeeded in penetrat-
ing the Afghan army and the air force and eventually
established a Marxist government, since the invasion
it has not been able to attract popular support for the
Marxist government, nor has it been able to quiet the
resistance. In February, 1982, in what The Economist
(London) called an “unusually frank account of the
war,” the Soviet army newspaper Red Star reported
that Soviet soldiers have a “very, very difficult life” in
Afghanistan; and a report from Delhi declared that a
Soviet general had been killed in a helicopter shot
down by a guerrilla rocket.9 All told, the number of
Soviet deaths has been estimated at between 15,000
and 30,000 soldiers, with more than 1,000 tanks de-
stroyed.10 Soviet leaders are reported to be considering
doubling the number of soldiers in Afghanistan, now
totaling some 100,000.

Moreover, the Soviet Union has had no success in
building any support for the regime of Babrak Kar-
mal, in spite of the fact that most of Karmal’s unpop-
ular modernization programs have been canceled, in-
cluding plans for land reform, adopting a new flag,
and returning confiscated properties.

Afghan resistance has broad grassroots support.
Hundreds of schoolgirls have challenged the Soviet
occupation by demonstrating in the streets of Kabul
on several occasions. Over 2 million Afghans have left
their villages and have settled in the border areas of
Pakistan and Iran.11 Military officers and troops have
turned against the Soviet forces, defecting with large
supplies of military hardware, including tanks. Even
Marxist Afghans in the government have begun to
turn against the Soviet Union, either through defe-
tion or cooperation with the resistance. School teach-
ers, shopkeepers, farmers, university professors, diplo-
mats and Afghans from every walk of life have joined the
resistance. This is a national response with historical

8These points were discussed in a conference on Afghan-
istan that was held at the University of Southern California
in February, 1981.
9The Economist (London), February 27, 1982, p. 54.
10For Western estimates of between 10,000 and 12,000,
see “New Outlook in the Afghan Fighting: Serious Trouble
11Mohib Shorish, “The Afghan Refugees in Iran,” Afghan-
12F. Kakar, “Understanding the Afghan Mind,” Afghan-
istan Times, vol. 2, no. 6 (July/August, 1981).
13Kamran, “Mujahiddin: Freedom-Fighters of Afghan-
istan,” Afghanistan Times, vol. 1, no. 4 (November, 1980). See,
also, “Afghanistan: New Lesson to the Soviets,” Afghanistan
Times, vol. 1, no. 2 (April, 1980).
14Eliza Van Hollen, “Afghanistan: 2 Years of Occupation,”
Report no. 91 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State,

precedent. The Afghans fought Alexander the Great,
Genghis Khan, and other invaders; the Soviet army is
no exception.

Moreover, the Afghan resistance to the Soviet oc-
cupation is a cultural-religious reaction to a military
technology. Afghanistan consists of 20,000 villages,
and the Afghan’s duty to protect his village is supreme.
The Soviet troops will have to fight in every village to
conquer the country. Soviet soldiers are regarded by
the Afghans as infidels; an Afghan who loses his life
on the battlefield is called a Shaheed, one who will be
rewarded by God.18

Quelling the resistance is made even more difficult
because its organization is decentralized. There are
hundreds of groups of freedom fighters (mujahiddin)
inside Afghanistan, and several groups are organized
in the border areas of Pakistan and Iran. (In Pakistan,
there are at least 28 groups.)

Cooperation is growing among these various
groups. Recently three major groups formed a union,
Haraketi-Inqilab Islami, Jabhi-i-Millie Nijat, and Ma-
haz-i-Millie Islami. Other major groups, like Hizbi-I-
Islam, Jamiat-e-I-Lami, and the Alliance, are in the
process of broadening their organizational structure to
find agreement for a united front. Thus, the Afghan
nationalist movement has demonstrated its resiliency
and is creating a viable alternative for Afghanistan.19

There has also been a persistent international pro-
test against the Soviet invasion and occupation of Af-
ghanistan. In three United Nations General Assembly
votes on Afghanistan, the Soviet Union was humiliated
and censured. In November, 1981, the United Nations
General Assembly voted 116 to 23 to demand with-
drawal of “the foreign troops” from Afghanistan.
“This margin represents an increase of four affirmative
votes over the tally in November, 1980, and an
increase of seven votes over the original ballot in Jan-
uary, 1980.”14

SOVIET STRATEGY

Since the invasion, the Soviets have followed two
strategies. A military strategy of attrition has attempted
to terrorize the entire population. Hundreds of villages
have been bombed, and the Soviet military has em-
ployed chemical and biological warfare. Casualty esti-
mates are close to one million dead, and some two and
half million Afghans have left their villages for refu-
gee camps in Pakistan and Iran.

In addition, the Soviet-backed government has in-
stituted a program of Sovietization to uproot every
Afghan institution. The university system, the educa-
tional system, city planning, national planning, do-
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mesic administration, the trade sector, the water, electricity and communications systems—and every other network—are all being redesigned to conform to the Soviet system. Those who do not cooperate are intimidated, harassed, imprisoned, executed or deported.15

There is no way to measure the costs to the Afghan people. The Soviet Union has been spending $15 million a day to suppress the Afghan resistance. But the Soviet Union cannot win the war, although Western observers believe that the Soviet military cannot be defeated. Nonetheless, although some one-fifth of the population has been displaced, the resistance has intensified.

Attempts at a political solution have thus far failed. On July 6, 1981, British Foreign Minister Lord Carrington sponsored an initiative calling for a two-stage international conference to resolve the Afghanistan question. The United Nations has also attempted to mediate, under the chairmanship of Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllare, and several scholars have proposed the possibility of Finlandization. The Afghanistan Freedom Organization has called for Soviet withdrawal and has suggested that United Nations troops be stationed in Afghanistan for a limited time until the Afghans elect a representative government.16

While the Soviet Union has not responded to these proposals, the European Parliament and most of the rest of the world, including the United States, commemorated March 21 (the first day of the Afghan New Year) as Afghanistan Day.

Meanwhile, Afghans are fighting all over the country to drive out the invading and occupying forces of the Red Army. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the Afghan resistance represent a turning point in the history of Afghanistan. And it is most likely that this factor alone will dominate the Afghan scene over the next half century.