Afghan nation-state
Myth or reality?

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The recent disturbances have shaken the belief that Afghanistan had a nation-state. In the following pages I want to briefly survey the events surrounding the state and nation in contemporary Afghanistan and in conclusion discuss what part of the title holds.

The title has three distinct concepts: Afghan, nation, and the state. These are of course historical concepts, and subject, therefore, to change and evolution. Of the three concepts that of the Afghan is the oldest with a long history of evolutionary process. In recent times it has become so much inclusive that it now embraces all those who are citizens of Afghanistan. Until recently it denoted only the Pashtuns.

Very briefly in Sanskrit the Afghan was noted as Asvaka or Asvaghana, in middle Persian as Abgan, or Avagana, in Chinese as O.Po-Kien. In Arabic sources as well as in recent Persian sources it has been noted as Afghan or Augan. Even now Dari speakers generally say Augan not Afghan. The name applied not only to the Pashtun people, but also to the land on which they were settled. It is a combined word meaning horse, and place, or the land of horse riders. It is with this specific meaning that after Alexander the Great Greek historians noted them both as Aspazis and Asvaka. The word aspa can be found in a number of other names also referring to the Pashtuns. The Pashtuns excelled in horse riding. A name referring to both a people and a land was a common practice among them. The practice is still very much alive in the names such as the Shinwar, Mohmand, and Afraday referring to people as well as the land in which they live.

Until a century and half ago the Pashtuns did not refer to themselves as Afghans. In the middle of the nineteenth century the French traveler Frerier noted that “...they even refuse to acknowledge their right to the title of Afghan.” They spoke of themselves only as Pashtuns. From then on, however, the word Afghan gained currency gradually but steadily among them also. This was probably because the Pashtuns as well as most other groups of people particularly the Tajiks came to share a common experience in opposing the British invaders. The latter were cautious to differentiate them, but at the same time they also called them Afghans when they had to refer to them collectively. This practice became common or almost common after the country’s boundaries were demarcated for the first time in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the demarcated land with recognized boundaries was officially recognized as Afghanistan and its people as Afghans. It did not mean that all ethnic groups merged in the larger Afghan entity abandoning their particular ethnic identity. Rather, it meant that they considered themselves Afghans vis-a-vis foreigners whereas among themselves they referred to the ethnic group to which they belonged. Ethnic identity is strong in present day Afghanistan. The significant thing to note is that by the end of the nineteenth century all the people of Afghanistan found a common identity in addition to the fact that for
centuries almost all of them shared the same religious beliefs. This common identity had much to do with what is usually called the Afghan nation.

When the phrase Afghan nation or Afghan nation-state was used for the first time is not known. What is known is that in Afghanistan people have lived for thousands of years. Also in this ancient land waves of people have come and settled throughout its history. But with the political rise of the Pashtuns in the eighteenth century large scale immigration of people in Afghanistan have not taken place. An exception was in the beginning of the twentieth century when about half a million of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turcomans fled the Soviet intrusion in their lands and were allowed to settle in northern Afghanistan.

All this time the nature of the state differed. So did the relationship of the rural communities with it. In imperial Afghanistan, that is, from 1747 to 1818, the rural communities enjoyed autonomy, while its dependencies were connected to it through their rulers. With the rise of the Mohammadzays to power when the empire had disintegrated and Afghanistan constituted the land from the Oxus to the vicinity of Peshawar there was a corresponding change in the rural communities and the state. The change became particularly distinct in the reign of the second reign of Amir Sher 'Ali Khan and Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This period saw the emergence of nation-state in Afghanistan as the following indicates.

Under these two rulers particularly under the latter Afghanistan as a country was defined as its boundaries were agreed upon by international agreements and demarcated for the first time. Afghanistan emerged as a country with recognized and defined boundaries but at the loss of territories in its hinterland. Within this land scales of measurement, weight, as well as coins were standardized. Likewise the same laws and rules whether based on the Islamic Sharee'a or promulgated anew were applied and enforced throughout the land by government appointed officials. Also a high rate of taxes on lands of all types was introduced and collected mainly through government agencies. With the expansion of bureaucracy the Persian language assumed the status of official language, while Pashto remained the language of the majority as before. These languages as a whole served as lingua franca throughout or almost throughout the land where more than two dozens of local languages were also spoken.

The majority of Afghans who had fought together the British invaders during the first and the second Anglo-Afghan wars had shared common experiences and felt much closer to one another than at any time before in the names of Afghanistan, Afghan and Islam. Besides, the presence in their neighborhood of the infidel British and Russian powers as standing menaces produced much the same effect especially after they had grabbed large parts of their hinterlands. The incorporation of Kafiristan and the forced conversion of its inhabitants contributed to the consolidation of the Afghans as a nation. The recruitment of a high number of Afghans in the army and the entry of a considerable number of their educated ones in the bureaucracy and the judiciary brought the government and the people still closer to each other. The autonomous type political structure that operated in imperial Afghanistan or even the structure which operated during the reign Amir Dost Mohammad Khan was no longer in existence. On the contrary, Afghanistan under Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan came to mark the beginning of a centralized political structure headed by an absolute monarch. A Mohammadzay dynasty was accepted as the ruling dynasty of all Afghans. Most of these measures were
accompanied by force, and at times segments of the people here and there rose in rebellion against the tyranny of the government and its officials. It was at this time that a new dimension of contrariness between the government and the people emerged, but the nation as a whole came to accept the government as the government of Afghanistan no matter how harsh it had been over them some time.

The harsh nature of the Afghan government began to soften particularly after a constitution was promulgated in 1921 in the reign of the reformist King Aman Allah. His reign, in fact, marked the emergence of a civil society in Afghanistan when all Afghans were declared equal before the law. The vestige of slavery was done away with in theory as well as in practice. The king started to rule by the principle of consensus and consultation. For this purpose he summoned loya jirgas of the notables of the whole country several times in the course of his ten-year rule. Modern education which had been introduced with the turn of the century became the center of special attention, and now included both boys and girls as students. Male students were sent for higher studies to Europe, at the same time that some female students were sent for the same purpose to Turkey. The king and his queen even started a kind of feminist movement by compelling women in cities particularly Kabul to unveil. Afghanistan began to modernize itself almost in all fields, including cultural and social. In clothes and appearance even Europeanization was attempted. The country’s long isolation came to an end, and Kabul became the center of international attention and activity for the first time in its long history.

The king became involved with the reforms so much that he was identified with them. Not only he neglected the army; he also overlooked the sensitivity of his conservative subjects, and went ahead with his programs with full zeal and speed especially after he returned from a six-month long tour of Europe. It was as if he wished to make Afghanistan a modern country overnight and that too with the support of a relatively small group of reformist constitutionalists. Consequently, just as the modernization programs were rather dramatic so was the backlash. The backlash was directed not only against the modernization schemes, but, more important, against the person of the king. He was then relatively easily ousted from the country for good, and Afghanistan became the scene of a nine-month long period of civil war which ended with the rise to power of another Mohammadzay dynasty, the dynasty of King Mohammad Nadir Khan.

King Mohammad Nadir Khan was a gradualist reformist, but after his assassination in 1933 his powerful brothers concentrated on security and order and run the country more or less as Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan had done in the late nineteenth century. But they kept Afghanistan neutral in World War Two. After that particularly during the cold war Afghanistan gradually came out of isolation for good. Modernization schemes were introduced in the decade long period of premiership of Mohammad Dawud Khan (1954-1963). The planned modernization schemes were in line with those of King Aman Allah. The present ones were, however, more comprehensive but carried on essentially with caution. The build up of a wide range infrastructure was carried on along with the introduction of extensive modern education for both sexes principally with the credit and technical assistance of the Soviet Union and the United States. What marked the decade was the irredentist issue of Pashtunistan which Afghanistan had earlier raised with the newly instituted state of Pakistan for the territories she had lost to British India.
in 1893. All these developments were to fundamentally change the Afghan state, nation and politics in the decades to come.

The fundamental change was that that occurred in the state structure in the constitutional decade (1963-1973) that began after Premier Mohammad Dawud had resigned. In the new constitution members of the ruling Mohammadzay dynasty were debarred from holding high state positions. The king Mohammad Zahir Shah had agreed constitutionally to exclude members of the dynasty from engaging in politics. This restriction applied on the former premier also who was the king’s cousin and brother-in-law. More important was the democratic nature of the state which called for an elective parliament and freedom of the press and associations. The parliament was given the power to give or not to give the vote of confidence to the executive.

The expansion of modern education, which had resulted in the emergence of an assertive middle class composed mainly of the non royalist leftists and religious rightists, caused now a change in the morphology of politics. The educated middle class, particularly the leftists were actively involved in the politics of opposition at the expense of the traditional players of politics, that is, landowners, community elders, spiritual leaders and mullas. But these young and impatient players acted on the view that to discredit the government and bring about the desired change they had to misuse the democracy and keep the situation on turmoil. That was what they actually did throughout the decade. The construction of the wide network of roads, and the convenience which the modern means of transportation and communication had brought made their task much easier. Indeed, the modern means of transportation and communication and the power of voting accompanied by the unrestricted movement of people to an unprecedented degree did away with the natural and official constraints that had kept the rural heterogeneous communities voiceless and in relative isolation. It was uplifting for peasants to meet with candidates for parliament in their shacks canvassing for votes. Not only cities but even remote regions became havens for the hippies and tourists of the 1960s.

The communities were now fused with a sense of significance and national consciousness despite their traditional and poor conditions. The free and usually critical free press by raising national issues likewise drummed for national solidarity. The irredentist Pashtunistan issue was officially somewhat toned down, but was still kept very much alive by most of the free press and the opposition. Afghanistan was no longer the traditional land it had been and had entered a new stage of modernization and nationhood.

The democratic gains along with the constitution were suddenly shelved in 1973 when the former premier Mohammad Dawud made a coup with the help of junior military officers including pro-Moscow leftists. The monarchy was overthrown, and Afghanistan was declared a republic. Initially the leftists were raised to high posts, but slowly their known figures were either dismissed or demoted to insignificant posts. But the military officers of the new modern army who had increased many fold in the decade long period of Mohammad Dawud’s premiership felt that the time had come for them to play a role in politics. It was actually after the coup that the officers of the Khalq faction of the pro-Moscow party, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, were secretly trained for grabbing power. President Mohammad Dawud had in effect shown them by his coup how to seize power. In fact he had introduced an element of instability in the
society that was otherwise developing democratically and peacefully. Meanwhile he had alienated most of his old companions in the military and civilian fields by making the coup with the help of leftist officers as well as by suppressing a number of assumed or real coups against him. Just at a time when he was trying to change the course of policies toward the West and the Arab world and away from the Soviet block countries the pro-Moscow military officers of the Khalq faction made a successful but most bloody coup in April 1978. The country was declared the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

The Democratic Republic that was officially called to be the fruit of the April Revolution falls into two stages: the Khalq period (April 1978 to December 1979), and the Parcham period (1979-1989). In the latter period the Soviet Union had occupied Afghanistan. From 1989 to 1991 Afghanistan, though run by a coalition of parties led by the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan now called the Fatherland Party, was now named the Republic of Afghanistan. The events of these periods are well known, and are covered in my book: Afghanistan, The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response. Here I want to make only a few remarks.

During the seventeen months of the twenty-month long period of the Khalq rule Afghans made so many uprisings that had no parallel in Afghan history in a comparable period. The uprisings were made by civilians and the military nationwide, and showed the intense dislike of the people of communism and the Soviet Union, and the tyranny exercised over them even though the government had not declared to promote communism or socialism. Patriotism and nationalism had coalesced with Islam and the Afghans in consequence felt that they could not be coerced into accepting what they did not want. The government was, however, still in control of the whole or almost the whole country in spite of the additional appearance of split not only between the two factions of the official party, but even among leaders of the same Khaqil ruling faction. It was the force of this feeling that Hafiz Allah Amin, who grabbed high state power in September of 1979 as a result of his second successful coup this time against his own pro-Moscow comrades, defied the Soviet Union by expelling its ambassador, and tried to rule as an independent ruler and change the course of affairs the way the late Mohammad Dawud had unsuccessfully tried. By then Ameen's patriotism and nationalism had prevailed over his communism. This was, however, unacceptable to the Soviet leaders who by military intervention overthrew his government and installed instead the internationalist compliant Parcham faction to power.

From the start the Afghans opposed the Parcham regime initially by popular uprisings that started in cities. It was the first time in their history that the Afghans opposed the invaders and their puppet regime so soon. It was also the first time that they resisted them simultaneously nationwide or almost nationwide. In the second stage of the national resistance the cause of the Afghan nation was taken by the mujahideen, or fighters of the Islamic Tanzimat. Afterward some countries of the West notably the USA as well as Arabia and Egypt assisted the mujahideen with weapons, cash and varieties of logistics. Pakistan served as the front line state from the start. The regime had no alternative but to rely on the Soviet army and the latter had no alternative but to fight with the mujahideen. It looked as though the cold war had turned into hot war fought on Afghan soil with conventional weapons and spearheaded by the iron will of the mujahideen, supported by the Afghan nation. The prospect for a quick military fix looked dim.
As a way out the Parcham regime as directed by the Soviet advisers chose Mazar in northern Afghanistan as its capital in its contingency plan. The several other complementary measures taken there showed that the Soviets had planned to place in an appropriate moment the region north of the Hindu Kush nominally under the Parcham rule but actually under their own thumbs as a dependency of their empire. This was to be the first step in the eventual division of Afghanistan, a view that the Tsarist Russia had first entertained. It was about this region that Leonid Brezhnev had verbally clashed with President Mohammad Dawud in Moscow in 1977. But finally the new Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev had no alternative but to withdraw his army from Afghanistan in 1989 as part of the Geneva Agreements. Even though President Najeeb Allah of Afghanistan had dismantled the special arrangements for Mazar Federal Russia’s agents there still worked for the cession plan after the Soviet Union had disintegrated in December 1991. It was over this subject that Najeeb Allah warned Russia’s ambassador in Kabul about his counsel’s activities in Mazar. But after the fall of Najeeb Allah and the take over of Kabul by the Islamic Tanzimat particularly with the start of the civil war the Afghans became more concerned about their national solidarity, their state, and their country.

During the four years of the Islamic Tanzimat (1992-96) Afghanistan in effect had no actual national government though the one headed by Burhan al-Deen Rabbani in Kabul claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole country. In actual fact Afghanistan was divided into several fiefdoms while Pakistan, Iran and to some extent also Uzbekistan acted like little Soviet Unions toward them. Through their Afghan proxies they followed their dangerous and conflicting agendas about Afghanistan. Had they including Russia refrained from supplying weapons to their proxies the war would not have continued as it did despite the fact that some Islamic Tanzimat had stored weapons during the resistance period.

As before Mazar became the focus of attention. Here the Russian and Iranian agents collaborated in helping the warlord Abd a-Rashid Dostum in consolidating his fiefdom, the largest in the country. Dostum called for a federal system for Afghanistan, which, considering the fact that Afghanistan is surrounded by countries some of which are ill-intentioned toward her meant its eventual division. Mazar even rivaled Kabul in that it had become, like some other cities, the headquarters of foreign counsels. But the so-called diplomats attached to the counsels actually worked as agents provocateurs. Iran even delivered weapons by planes which landed in the airfields of Shiberghan and Bamiyan. Dostum’s militias clashed not only with the militias of his neighboring warlords, but also with the militias of Kabul headed by Commander Ahmad Shah Mas’ud. It was essentially due to the extension of Rabbani’s term of office contrary to the stipulation of the Peshawar Agreement of 1992 that prolonged the war among the radical Tanzimat, Dostum’s militias and Mas’ud’s Supervisory Council. Rabbani’s regime lost whatever credits it had gained particularly after it failed to protect life, property, the honor of women, and maintain peace and stability not only in the country but even in the city of Kabul. As a government it failed in its most essential duties. During these four years it attempted no construction program. What the regime actually did along with its rival groups particularly that of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s was to cause destruction on a huge scale and death to thousands of innocent citizens. In a sense, after their war with the invaders and the Parcham regime they began war with their own
people. Theirs is another dark blot on the body of contemporary Afghanistan despite admirable record during the resistance period.

Had it not been so it would have been inconceivable for a bunch of village mullas from Kandahar and Uruzgan to dislodge them from their fiefdoms. Most took refuge in the neighboring lands. Rabbani and Mas’ud and their shadow, Abd al-Rab Rasul Sayyaf, head of the Islamic Union, were finally cornered into the remote part of north-east Afghanistan. Led by Mullah Mohammad ‘Omar, the mullas, known universally by the name of their militias, the Taliban, saved the Afghans from the tyranny of the fief holders and their armed rowdies, did away with many political and military centers, saved Afghanistan from the feared disintegration, neutralized the intrigues of the ill-intentioned neighbors and nearly unified the whole country. They all this at a time when the Afghans felt defenseless against the warlords while no other Afghan group dared to stand up against them, and the world just watched on. But after the mullas captured Kabul in late 1996 they showed that they were unable to administer even a village let alone Afghanistan. They were under the strong influence of mosque, having never before exercised state power. So with mosque outlook the triumphant mullas thought that it was for the good of the people to prepare them for the next world at the expense of real life in this world. For this purpose they tried to build a sort of militia by which to implement the puritanical Wahhabi views of Islam and to approach domineeringly as well as external issues with mosque mentality at a time of globalization when Afghanistan was no longer an isolated country but bound up closely with the outside world. That was why their allowing of “the Arab Afghans”, that is, Osama bin Ladin and his lieutenants within Afghanistan to hatch their terror schemes through their al-Qaeda organization against the Western civilization led to their easy downfall in late 2001 essentially by the technical military power of the United States. Thereafter a new phase with limitations on national sovereignty began for the people of Afghanistan nominally under the supervision of the United Nations Organization but actually under the supervision of the United States.