

CONTEMPORARY AFGHANISTAN

Conflict and Peace-building



Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata

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In memory of
my loving sister, Rai (1976-2008)
whose courage and determination
will always remain a source of inspiration

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Glossary of Terms

al-Jazeera

[Arabic: al-gazîrâ,], meaning “The Island”, referring to the Arabian Peninsula) is a television network headquartered in Doha, Qatar. Initially launched as an Arabic news and current affairs satellite TV channel with the same name, Al Jazeera has since expanded into a network with several outlets, including the Internet and specialty TV channels in multiple languages, and in several regions of the world

al-Qaeda

alternatively spelled al-Qaida, al-Qa’ida or al-Qa’idah, (Arabic: transliteration: al-qâ’idah; translation: The Base) is an international Sunni Islamic organization, or alliance of such organizations, founded in 1988 by Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (later replaced by Osama Bin Laden) and other veteran “Afghan Arabs” after the Soviet War in Afghanistan.

badal

vengeance in the pashtunwali

behijabi

venturing out of the house without wearing a veil

burqa

an all-enveloping garment worn by Muslim women. A burqa (also transliterated burkha, burka or burqua) is an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions for the purpose of cloaking the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing (often a long dress or a shalwar kameez) and removed when the woman returns to the sanctuary of the household.

Khan

generally a landowner at the head of a large family with dependents, for whom he provides food and loans. The leader of a tribal faction (clan or tribal sub-group)

lashkar

armed body formed by the mass uprising of the tribes

pir

“the old one”. Sufi spiritual master, whose authority derives from the fact that he is a link in a chain of people who have been spiritually initiated.

qazi

a religious judge who applies the Sharia

jehad

holy war by Muslims against unbelievers or any bitter war or crusade for a principle or belief

jirgas

tribal Assemblies which brings together all those who have been engaged in fighting or only the malik and the revered elders.

Loya Jirga

Loya Jirga is a "grand assembly," a phrase taken from the name of large meetings held among certain Central Asian peoples, such as in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Mongolia. In the Afghan (Pashtun) society the Loya Jirga is still maintained and very strongly practiced, mostly in front of tribal chiefs or with them to solve internal and external tribal problems or disputes with other tribes.

madrasa

Islamic religious school

mehmannawazi

hospitality

mujahideen

Holy warriors. A Mujahid literally "struggler") is a Muslim involved in a jihad, The plural is Mujahideen. The word is from the same Arabic triliteral as jihad ("struggle"). In Islamic scripture, the mujahid contrasts with the qaid, one who does not join the jihad.

munkrat

Religious police

pashtunwali

code of conduct of the Pashtun ethnic groups

pardah

Veiling

shari'a

The code of law based on the Koran.

shuras

Community Councils or consultative assemblies

ulema

Clergy

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I

Introduction

The book explores the nature of conflict and attempts of re-creation of the state of Afghanistan from political and historical perspectives, to find out why and how Afghanistan has remained a conflict-prone country. It highlights the comprehensiveness of destruction in Afghanistan through different phases and records the social, political and economic consequences. More often than not Afghan conflicts are regarded to be the consequence of the involvement of the external actors. This study attempts to establish that conflicts are endemic to the traditional Afghan system, conflicts are a daily reality that Afghans must address and external actors act as catalyst to this potential, exacerbating them beyond means of conflict management. Further by studying the sequence of events in the country leading up to the Bonn Agreement, the book attempts to highlight the challenges the country now faces in terms of peace and stability. It analyses the progress and pitfalls of the process within a theoretical framework of peace-building and finally, comes up with suggestions in the forms of workable responses to the problem.

Located at a very significant geo-strategic position, Afghanistan is at the crossroads of a region which has always invited contest between neighbours—the Central Asian Republics to the north, China and India to the east, Pakistan to the south and Iran to the west. Afghans have not been strangers to foreign interventions. Since the 3rd century A.D., they have been invaded by the Arabs, Iranians, Turks and the Mongols. Czarist Russia and imperial Britain played out a ‘Great Game’ of seeking ultimate control of the buffer lands of the Afghans. Afghans have also been accustomed to power struggle amongst themselves in their own homeland and in the capital city of Kabul. Afghans have generally resisted radical reforms which they felt did not conform to their traditions and belief systems. For example, King Amanullah’s (1921-29) ambitious

modernisation programme encountered waves of protests from the conservatives and clerics. However, it provided some solace to the *Amir* (king) that his efforts were appreciated in the outside world and Afghanistan was acknowledged as a worthy new member of the League of Nations.

More than forty years of relative peace prevailed until a bitter feud erupted in 1973, among Afghan leaders, to put an end to the monarchy. In 1978 another coup occurred in Afghanistan—this time with a difference—as outside influences were playing a catalytic role in the domestic conflict and helping it to worsen further. An Afghan protégé of the USSR, Hafizullah Amin, dismissed as many conservatives as he could find, and formed a Revolutionary Council in Kabul to initiate Marxist programme of ‘scientific socialism’. This was a prelude to the full-scale conflict of December 1979, as 50,000 Red Army soldiers from the USSR marched into Afghanistan. Moscow immediately installed in Afghanistan their favourite Babrak Karmal as the President. In response, the US entered into the scene and poured in a large amount of aid in order to assist the Afghans opposed to the communist rule in that country. This aid was channelled through Pakistan during General Zia-ul Haq’s time to the thousands of *Mujahideen* (holy warriors) who were undergoing training to fight the Soviets. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the eventual break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, several efforts were made to agree on an effective governing mechanism, but time and again these efforts failed. Civil war broke out among the various rival factions and no mechanism on power-sharing agreement could be instituted. Eventually, the *Taleban*, a group of radical Islamic students emerged in the Afghan political scene in 1994 and within a stint of two years, established control over ninety percent of Afghan territory.

Much criticised by the international community, for their radical policies, unadulterated and dogmatic adherence to and imposition of the *Sharia*, particularly the policies of gender discrimination, the *Taleban* did not enjoy recognition by the international community except by three countries viz. Pakistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The conflict continued between the *Taleban* and the Northern Alliance who wanted to hold on to the small bit of territory under their control. The net result of

such a protracted conflict was the gradual and complete breakdown of the state structures as well as the destabilisation of the society. Generations of children grew up rootless, without Afghan identity¹ or reason to live except to fight. Adults were traumatised, uprooted, brutalised exposed only to war and the powers of the warlords. The enormity and criticality of the problem seemed unfathomable.

This conflict had resulted in crisis of legitimacy, massive human rights violations, large scale population displacement, and sustained interference by foreign powers and far-reaching environmental damage. A *Taleban*-controlled government could neither bring about economic and social recovery nor could it represent the entire Afghan population as it essentially represented the Pashtuns. Moreover, it had a radical ideology that had a politically destabilising impact all over the region. Being unrepresented ethnically and socially, the *Taleban* faced a continuing need to put down the local challenges to their power. Consequently, neither the *Taleban* nor its opponents had proved themselves capable of arriving at a negotiated outcome to bring the protracted civil war to an end.

The US-led war in October 2001 within less of a month after the destruction of the World Trade Centre was the latest of the series of foreign interventions in Afghanistan. This intervention resulted in the collapse of the *Taleban* administration who happened to be the hosts to the *Al-Qaeda* in Afghanistan, the main suspect of the 9/11 attack on the US soil. The international community then announced its plan to build a 'stable Afghanistan' and installed an interim administration led by Hamid Karzai, and the UN Security Council by its resolution 1386 (2001), authorized the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul and the surrounding areas. The Bonn Agreement, a blueprint for the political, social and economic reconstruction designed by the international community brought forth several critical issues and dilemmas. In an overtly politicized environment, reconstruction could contribute to the creation of 'politically neutral' space for the civil society to thrive and mature and contribute positively to any on-going peace-negotiations. Bringing Afghans to the centre-stage in the decision-making was a crucial pre-requisite.

The path to a reconstruction and democratic transition is obstructed by acute dilemmas and crucial challenges. Long-term political

commitment to the process from both internal as well as international actors is imperative for a successful transition. There is perhaps no magic formula to set the right course for Afghan transition. While foreign formulae may be denounced for being non-Afghan and imposed from outside, it must be kept in mind that there is no Afghan national consensus for Afghanistan's future reconstruction and development priorities. While the Bonn Formula assumes that such an Afghan vision is reflected in their agreement, the fact remains that there is a huge, shifting kaleidoscope of differing expectations and regional aspirations, which has been shaped by the collective experience of twenty three years of intense conflict.

Building up a war-torn nation does not merely require scaling up of relief for physical reconstruction. To rebuild a war-torn nation, several diverse interconnected strategies are required - support for livelihoods, small communities, demobilized soldiers, women, people with disabilities, reinstating cultural heritage and structures, are vital to the assistance and reintegration of different war-affected groups. The kind of changes brought about by conflict needs to be identified and incorporated in any reconstruction strategy. Therefore, there is an acute need for reliable and up-to-date base-line data, a basic prerequisite for defining the needs and also for planning, designing and evaluating reconstruction efforts. Any effort at peace-building during this transitional phase will require the efficient tackling of spoilers like warlords, the *Taleban* and other irritants. People of Afghanistan need to take control effectively in order to contribute to the nation-building process and the international community and the regional powers have to assist them in the process.

Effort at peace-building in Afghanistan is a challenging task and the current efforts seem to be partial and lopsided. The project of establishing a new government as well as social reconstruction have been driven by the demand to create a political order that is compatible with the western global strategies. Other peace-building efforts devoted to democratization and development have been geared towards supporting military and diplomatic activities. Reconciliation and social rehabilitation remain distant goals until the ongoing hostilities and armed conflicts come to an end. The resurgence of the *Taleban* happens to be the most formidable

challenge to the process right now. Afghanistan was once described as a 'bleeding wound'. Hence, it should be remembered by all parties involved in this power game within and outside Afghanistan that if a wound is not treated, it becomes infected and infectious. So instead of playing politics with the country, the leaders of the current political dispensation and the international community should work towards a workable solution for its reconstruction.

Identification of the consequences of the conflict in Afghanistan, its effects and probable remedies is important so far as international politics is concerned. Because a stable Afghanistan is important to the region and the globe, strategies to address the Afghan conflict and evolving an effective peace-building strategy becomes an important purpose of academic pursuit. The importance of the study also lies in the fact that it takes a measure of the regional and global implications of threats emanating from this country. Hence the process of conflict resolution and peace-building in Afghanistan assumes significance as an area of academic research.

The history of Afghanistan is fairly well-explored (Gankovsky, 1982; Sirdar Ikbal Ali Shah, 1927; Martin, reprint 2000; Dorn, reprint 2000; Olesen, 1995). Overview of the land and people (Elphinstone, 1815; Dupree, 1973, Bellew, 1891, reprint 2000) and insights into the geography, boundaries, mountains, the people, their customs and habits have been presented by the scholars both from the west and the east. The ethnic mosaic of the country, the cause of most internal tensions has been dealt with significantly (Bellew, 1891; Mousavi, 1998). Descriptions on Soviet intervention including motives of Soviet occupation (Arnold, 1985), the Afghan resistance (Farr and Merriam, 1988), the Afghan response to the communist rule (Roy, 1998), the covert dealings of the Cold War game (Yousaf and Adkin, 1992) and intentions of the superpowers (through a first-hand testimony) (Anwar, 1988) and the diplomatic process leading to the Soviet withdrawal (Khan, 1993) provide significant understanding of the nature of conflict that has impaired the country. External interferences in Afghan have been significantly dealt with (Maass, 1999; Amin, 1994; Maley 1998). Issues of state formation and collapse (Rubin, 1995 a) and the international

politics of negotiation over Afghanistan (Rubin, 1995 b) analyse both specific patterns of state formation and particular problems of regime change. Analytical and contemplative works on the rise of the *Taleban* (Matinuddin, 1999), mass mobilisation, civil war and the future of the region (Nojumi, 2002; Maley, ed., 1998) are genuine attempts to find out whether *Taleban* was an Islamic revolution of the Pashtuns (Rieck, 1997) or a phenomenon exporting fundamentalism and terrorism (Rashid, 1999).

The challenges and dilemmas of post-war state-building (Barakat, 2002; Their and Chopra, 2002; Ozerdem, 2002) and peace-building in post-conflict societies (Jeong, 2006) are fairly speculative. The progress and pitfalls of the Bonn process (Waldman, 2008) including elections (Wilder, 2005), constitution (Goodson, 2004), and security issues (Rhode, 2007) have been specific analytical works on the current Afghan scenario.

Literature on the different phases of conflict in Afghanistan and the post-2001 rebuilding in the country happens to be quantitatively substantial. A considerable amount of literature has been produced after the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan and with an outpour of western discourses denouncing the intervention. With the pullout of the Soviet troops, Afghanistan's politics had acquired a critical dimension and the interest in Afghanistan continued unabated. With the *Taleban* consolidating their position in Afghanistan, comments were made in abundance on their activities in Afghanistan, the US's changed strategy related to Afghanistan and Pakistan and the former's strategic importance. Notwithstanding the richness of the existing plethora of literature, they do not take a comprehensive view of current Afghan impasse and do not focus on the dynamics and fate of the Afghan state in this contemporary phase of transition. What is needed is a comprehensive analysis of the progress and the pitfalls of the process and suggest some workable responses to the problem of Afghanistan, which is the basic objective of this research.

To achieve the above-mentioned objective, the work seeks to answer the following questions.

- What were the causes of protracted conflict in Afghanistan and how was it perpetuated?

- What are the consequences of such prolonged conflict upon the state institutions and infrastructure of Afghanistan?
- How have external actors helped perpetuate the conflict?
- What are the major challenges for nation-building in contemporary Afghanistan?
- Are the peace-building efforts in Afghanistan addressing the issues of reconciliation and social rehabilitation, effectively, to end ongoing hostilities?
- What are the measures that would constitute a workable response?

Although the study looks back into the history of conflict, yet the timeframe of the study is kept limited to the high-intensity period of the conflict from 1979 till 2001, i.e. the period of Soviet intervention, phase of *Mujahideen* rule and the *Taleban* regime. However, conflict in Afghanistan cannot be ascribed to Soviet intervention of 1979 as is often erroneously done. It analyses the 9/11 phenomenon and also looks at the post-2001 developments to analyse the process of conflict resolutions, nation-building and peace-building initiatives adopted till date.

The first half of the book is a historical survey to understand the problem of the Afghan state and the dynamics of state formation, collapse and state-building in Afghanistan has been attempted through a descriptive-analytical method. The same methodology is also used to study the Afghan conflict, politics of global interests, and the regional politics which have helped perpetuate the conflict.

In the later half, the attempt is to search for a workable response to end the current crisis and to build sustainable socio-political and economic institutions. The framework of analysis here has been the theoretical paradigm of peace-building which takes into account security and demobilisation, political transition, economic development, social empowerment and rehabilitation. In examining the complexities of peace-building, the book explores the objectives and conditions under which peace-building has been implemented in Afghanistan. It explores security and demilitarisation, political transition, development, reconciliation and social rehabilitation. The analysis draws on the progress and pitfalls of the process, strategies and experiences of peace-building and suggests areas where existing strategies and approaches need to be reconsidered.

It will not be out of place to add a few words on the data source and constraints of research. Two trips to Afghanistan have helped shape my thinking on the subject. The first trip in October-November 2007 was a field trip to study challenges and dilemmas to state-building in post-2001 Afghanistan. The objective was to study the process of political, economic and social transition in Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan did not allow extensive field work across the length and breadth of the country. Therefore, information were generated through the process of interviews with Afghan and foreign officials working at several UN bodies like United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNDP-Afghanistan Sub-national Governance Programme (UNDP-ASGP), UN Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (UNMACA) and government bodies like Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) office. Interactions at academic Institutes like the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) the Afghan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), the Department of Political Science and Law, Kabul University also proved to be useful.

The second opportunity that came my way, when I was invited to be a part of the Indian government delegation that visited Kabul for a bilateral engagement with the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (May-June 2008). This gave me the opportunity to interact with scholars from the Centre of Strategic Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), parliamentarians, media persons and Indian and other Embassy officers at Kabul. These interactions provided significant inputs to my understanding of the current situation of this country. The information obtained from the two trips was supplemented by other primary and secondary literature available on the subject. Lack of firsthand information from the provinces, along with many others, remained the most crippling constraint for this research.

The first chapter of the book explores the conflict in Afghanistan from a historical perspective and also touches upon the ethnic, local and geo-political factors to find out why and how the conflicts had led to the collapse of the Afghan state and its indigenous political systems. The focus in the second chapter is to highlight the comprehensiveness of the destruction in Afghanistan through the different phases of conflict and to project the interconnectivity of the different categories of consequences.

It also shows that an action has chain reactions and has spill-overs leading to a vicious circle of uncertainty and chaos. The motivation and involvement of the external actors in Afghan affairs, that generally draw a distracting picture of the situation where regional powers like Iran, Pakistan and some of the Central Asian states and major powers like the USA and erstwhile USSR, who share considerable responsibility for the protracted conflict and breakdown of state institutions forms the subject matter of the third chapter. After studying the speculations associated with the 9/11 attack, the response of the US, Pakistan and the *Taleban*, the fourth chapter studies the repercussions of the Operation Enduring Freedom which led to the fall of the *Taleban* and the signing of the Bonn Agreement, a blueprint for political, economic and social reconstruction designed by the international community. It also highlights the major issues facing Afghanistan since 2001.

Chapter 5 looks into the complexities, nuances and inter-relations of the enormous challenges facing Afghanistan since 2001. The attempt is to discuss all these challenges to nation-building under three specific but overlapping categories namely social, economic and political. An analysis of the progress and pitfalls in contemporary Afghanistan is made on the theoretical paradigm of “peace-building.” The discussion in the sixth chapter revolves around certain important aspects of peace-building like security and demilitarisation, political transition, the concept of democracy, public perception of state institutions, economic recovery, social rehabilitation and empowerment.

Finally, the conclusion proposes workable responses to the Afghan conflict dynamics. It argues that failing to provide solutions to the root causes of the problems that generate conflict and war, will allow new conflict dynamics to undermine the peace process currently underway under international guidance. After proposing community peace-building, peace-building within a regional framework and federalist solutions, the book contends that unless an endogenous mechanisms for governance are developed, a symptomatic peace-building unrelated to the nuances of the society at large will not work in the case of Afghanistan.

NOTES

¹The term Afghan identity is still illusive as it continues to be defined in terms of primordial elements namely clans and communities and also perhaps religious factionalism.

2

Conflicts and Collapse of the Afghan State: A Backgrounder

Afghanistan, stands as an “excellent case” with which to explore ‘weak state syndrome’.¹ Several factors, historical, geo-political, ethnographic, political and economic are responsible for making it a weak as well as a conflict-prone state. Afghanistan has been subjected to countless invasions and incursions throughout its history leading to an indelible imprint on its territorial identity and marked social and demographic transformation. This has been largely a result of its geographic location since it is situated at the “crossroads of empires.” Apart from its geo-political location, the rugged topography isolate it internationally and magnify the distance between the people and the state and is also partially responsible for its lack of economic development. Afghanistan’s population is also divided by deep and multifaceted cleavage along ethnic, linguistic, and also sectarian, tribal and racial lines. Apart from these factors, Afghanistan’s location among meddlesome neighbours and the Cold War rivalry have all combined to help sustain Afghanistan as a ‘weak state’. This chapter explores the state of Afghanistan from a political and historical perspective and also touches upon the ethnic and geo-political factors to find out why and how Afghanistan has remained as a conflict-prone country and how the conflicts had led to the collapse of the Afghan state and political systems by the end of the 20th century.

1. AFGHANISTAN: THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

The modern Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (*Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Afghanistan*), situated in South–west Asia, is a landlocked country of 647,500 square kilometers. It is surrounded by Pakistan in the south and east over 2,430 km, by Tajikistan (1,206 km), Uzbekistan (137 km),

Turkmenistan (744 km) in the north and northwest and by the Islamic Republic of Iran (936km) in the west and China (76km) in the northeast² (see Map on “Location of Afghanistan in the Region”). Due to the absence of reliable information and figures on Afghanistan it is impossible to reach accuracy and most estimates on population are based on pre-1979 statistics. The massive outflow of the population to the neighbouring countries following the Soviet intervention in 1979 and the turmoil thereafter killing hundreds of thousands lead to further inaccuracy.³ However, estimates indicate a population figure of around 32,738,376.⁴

Conflicting theories about the origin (racial, historical and geographical) of the Afghans has been put forward by various scholars. Many Pashtun historians are of the opinion that the Pashtuns originated from Israelites. Neamat Ullah,⁵ the historiographer at the court of the Mughal emperor Jehangir traced the lineage of the Afghans to Yehooda, the elder of Yacoub Israel's sons. Sir William Jones and Alexander Burnes also substantiate the Israeli origin of the Afghans. According to Jones, the Afghans are the lost ten tribes of Bani Israel mentioned by Prophet Isdras as having escaped from captivity and taken refuge in Asarah; identical with modern Hazarajat in Afghanistan.⁶ Alexander Burnes was also of the opinion that the Afghans had strong prejudices against the Jews and it was impossible, without a just cause if they desired to claim descent from the Hebrews.⁷ A later theory claimed the origin of the Afghans to Indo-Aryan tribes and argues that they were descendants of the ‘Pakhta’ tribes of north-western India (modern Afghanistan) to whom the Vedic scriptures also make reference.⁸

Till date, the archaeological knowledge about the history of the country before 500 BC still remains slim. Excavated items provide very little direct historical information about the history of the people, their language, their social organizations and other aspects of their lives. At best, they inform us about their material culture and producers. Archaeological evidence hinting at the material culture of the country, suggests a continuous cross-fertilization between local traditions and outside influences. They show a strong relationship between East and Southeast Afghanistan on the one hand and the hilly tracks along the

Indus in modern Pakistan on the other. All of these areas roughly correspond to the habitat of the modern Pashtuns. Vogelsang notes that the northern parts of Afghanistan formed part of a much wider cultural horizon that included lands to the North and the North-west, in present day Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. There were also indications of northern influence on the lands south of the Hindu Kush. Also interesting is the position of Sistan in Southwest Afghanistan, where influences of the earliest times can be detected from the North and the East, and especially from the (Iranian) west.⁹

The borders of Afghanistan were mainly drawn out of political and military considerations by the superpowers of those days. The British and the Russian Boundary Commissions pegged out Afghan borders neither along clear geographical features, nor on the basis of long-accepted historical tradition or ethnic factors. For all these reasons, ethnic problems still plague Afghanistan. One of the most prominent blunders was to cut straight through the traditional tribal lands of the Pashtuns by the Durand Line in 1893.¹⁰

Afghanistan is located in South-west Asia and constitutes the eastern part of the Iranian Plateau. Most of the country has a rugged topography (see Map on the "Topography of Afghanistan") The Highland zone extends from the Zagros Range in the West (along the modern Iran–Iraq border) to the banks of the Indus river in the East. It forms the connecting link between the Near East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and served as the thoroughfare for migrants' movement in the region. The Hindu Kush Mountains cover most of the North-eastern and the Central parts of the country.¹¹

There are four strategically crucial cities (Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat) that form a quadrangle (see Map on the "Location of Afghanistan"), which frames the central mountain close to the Iranian border. In the south is Kandahar, an easy road from Herat and accessible through the mountain passes from India. In the east is the Afghan capital Kabul. In the northern centre of the country, on a decent road from Herat and accessible from Kabul through high passes across the Hindu Kush, is Mazar-i-Sharif. The area around Kabul remains a strategically important place with Bagram lying forty-five miles to the north. It is connected by a

high altitude road to Bamiyan in the west from which farther passes lead to the north and Herat. Some eighty miles south of Kabul, on the route to Kandahar, is Ghazni, once the center of a great Afghan empire, and eighty miles to the east lays Jalalabad at the head of the Khyber Pass, the famous treacherous route to Peshawar in today's Pakistan and thence to India. Possession of Kabul does not translate into control of the entire country; but no one can hope to rule Afghanistan without holding Kabul.

Although most of Afghanistan is barren and mountainous, there are fertile plains and valleys as well. There is around 12.13 percent of arable land (as of 2005) and irrigated land of about 27,200 square kilometres (as of 2003). Principal agricultural crops include grains, rice, fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, cotton seeds and potatoes. In Afghanistan there are also mineral deposits of coal, copper, barite, *lapis-lazuli*,¹² emerald and salt. Until recently, Afghanistan was the largest producer of poppy. Despite regular clampdowns on opium production and trafficking, Afghanistan's farmers are being forced by poverty to revive the industry. With regard to forestry, in 1995, forests covered 2.1 percent of the total land area and timber production in 1999 was 8.28 million cubic metres. Fisheries are found exclusively in inland waters and the total catch in 2000 was estimated to be 1,000 tonnes.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries of the world, because of years of political instability and war that has ruined the economy. There was 40% of unemployment, as per the research conducted in 2005.¹³ Agriculture is the main source of income with opium, wheat, fruits, nuts, wool, mutton, sheepskins, lambskins; they have surplus to serve their own population and export as well. Afghanistan has 15 million strong labour forces, of which 80% are into agricultural industry. The rest 20 percent are in industry and services.¹⁴ The major industrial crops are cotton, tobacco, madder, castor beans and sugar beets. Afghanistan is also rich in natural resources with natural gas, petroleum, copper, coal, chromite, barites, lead, zinc, iron ore, sulfur, salt, precious and semiprecious stones. Other income sources are the small-scale production of textiles, soap, furniture, shoes, fertilizer, cement; hand-woven carpets; natural gas, coal and copper. The major trading partners are Pakistan, India, and U.S. and Germany.¹⁵ Major industries in Afghanistan include natural gas,

fertilizers, cement, coal-mining, small vehicle assembly plants, carpet weaving, cotton textiles, clothing and footwear, leather tanning, sugar manufacturing and fruit canning.¹⁶ Principal import and export items are as follows: exported products include, non-edible crude materials (excluding fuels), manufactured goods (raw material intensive), machinery and transport equipment, fruits, nuts, hand-woven carpets, wool, hides, precious and semi-precious gems. The major imports include foodstuffs and live animals, beverages and tobacco, mineral fuels, manufactured goods, chemicals and related products, machinery and transport equipment.

Afghanistan is a cultural mosaic. The principal ethnic groups of Afghanistan are Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara, Kyrgyz, Baloch, Brahui, Turkmen, Nuristani, Kohistani, Pashai and Gujar. Few of its ethnic groups are of indigenous origin. Most of these ethnic groups are transnational (see Map on the “Trans-border ethnic linkages”). All Pashtuns, for example, are not Afghan citizens, almost an equal number live in the Tribal Agencies and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Tajik, Uzbek, Turkoman and the Kyrgyz have their own presence in the north, beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Most inhabitants of extreme western Afghanistan, are geographically and culturally an extension of the Iranian Plateau. The Baloch and Brahui live in the south-western corner of Afghanistan, north-western Pakistan and South-eastern Iran. The Nuristani, Kohistani and the Gujar are farmers and cattle herders occupying the rugged mountain zones of eastern Afghanistan and Pakistani Chitral.¹⁷ (see Map on “Major Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan”)

Dupree has classified the Afghans into 3 ‘physical types’, namely, Caucasoid (mainly *Pashtun*, *Tajik*, *Baluch*, *Nuristani*), Mongoloid (mainly *Hazara*, *Aimaq*, *Turkomans*, *Uzbek*, *Kyrgyz*) and modified Australoid (*Brahui*).¹⁸ Similarly, their languages have been categorized into 4 major language families: Indo-European, Uralic-Altaic, Dravidian and Semitic.¹⁹ The major languages of Afghanistan are Persian (Dari), Pashto, Uzbeki, Turkmeni, Nuristani, Balochi and Pashai (see Map on “Major Languages of Afghanistan”) In Afghanistan apart from these composite ethnic communities, there exist ethnic grey zones. Long

contacts between the Caucasoid and Mongoloid groups, particularly among Tajiks and Uzbeks have led to red or blonde hair, blue or mixed eyes combination occur in association with epicanthic folds and high cheek bones. Many darker skinned Baloch or Brahui also have blue, green or mixed eyes. The people of Afghanistan are thus divided along ethnic and linguistic lines as well as sectarian, tribal and racial divisions. Although 90 percent of the population follow Sunni Islam as their religious faith yet local customs and tribal influences lead to variations in practice.

Goodson²⁰ argues that the creation and transformation of ethnic consciousness are rarely assignable to discrete causes or specific dates because groups have constantly re-examined and redefined themselves. Foreign invasions, especially the devastating Mongol and Timurid campaigns, altered the indigenous population profile both by inflicting heavy native casualties and by infusing new blood into the region. He argues that after the Durrani ascendancy in the mid-eighteenth century there was no substantial foreign presence in the country until the Soviets intervened in 1979, and it was in this period that the Pashtun tribes finally emerged as the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. This period in Afghan history according to him, was a period of anarchy characterised by the absence of any central authority with continuous power struggle between various clans and families of the Pashtun Durrani tribe. Tribal rebellion regularly threatened to destabilise the government in Kabul and created trouble for the British North–West Frontier of India (now Pakistan). Goodson regards the period of anarchy in the nineteenth century, which developed the growth of ethnic consciousness in Afghanistan led to foundations for ethnic relationships in Afghanistan today. However, he feels that these social pressures did not occur in a vacuum for there were tremendous political pressures from external sources as well. In Afghanistan it was apparent by the late 1990s that ethnic arguments were increasingly deployed in political agitations and there was a visible tendency towards ethnicisation of the conflict.²¹

Afghanistan is often dubbed as the “Crossroad of Empires.” Stephen Tanner²² notes that Afghanistan has always found itself at the hinge of imperial ambitions since the beginning of recorded history, from the

world's first trans-continental superpower, the Persian Empire (see Map on "The Persian Empire in 490 B.C."), to the latest, the United States. Regarded as the coveted prize of empires and a source of indigenous warrior kingdoms, Afghanistan had evolved through the modern era to the status of a buffer state, to a Cold War battlefield, and finally to a mere hideout of the so-called Islamic terrorist outfits. There is also a common concept that in between enduring or resisting invasions, Afghans have sharpened their marital skills by fighting amongst themselves in a terrain that facilitates division of power and resists the concept of centralized control. Afghans have thus faced continuous conflict for centuries. The passes of Afghanistan have borne witness to the armies of the Persians, Greeks, Mauryans, Huns, Mongols, Mughals, British, Soviets, and the Americans passing through them.

Its political importance however began to decline during the medieval period. Once the sea routes were discovered, the importance of Afghanistan declined from an essential passage between civilizations to a land-locked country with no maritime border. However, in the nineteenth century the world's greatest sea-faring empire (Great Britain) and the largest land power (Russia) vied for control of Afghanistan in a contest known in history as the "Great Game." Following that, the previous century was witness to the most gruesome battle fought over Afghanistan between the Cold War rivals, the USA and the USSR—the repercussion of which continue to beleaguer the country even today.

2. CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN (THE HIGH-INTENSITY PERIOD)

Conflict is a phenomenon quite common to Afghanistan's contemporary history and was of very high-intensity during the years 1979-1996. According to Sultan Barakat,²³ an analysis of the Afghan conflict needs to be underpinned by an understanding of the history of state formation and of its relationship with the society. The present borders of the country were established when the so-called great powers, Russia and Britain sought to establish a buffer between the then Russian and British Empires. In the view of some analysts, its identity is more indicative of the strategic needs of the former imperial powers than it is of any social or political structures within the formal borders of the Afghan state.²⁴

Afghanistan was a monarchy from 1747 until 1973 although the legitimacy of the state has always been somewhat precarious. Since independence in 1919, conflict was common between modernizers and more conservative Afghan factions, complicated by rivalries between the Pashtun and the non-Pashtun ethnic groups. The history of the country illustrates that, although those who held power claimed to represent the majority, their principal policy was one of 'divide and rule.' Another interesting phenomenon in Afghan political history is the significant influence of the neighbouring countries in imposing regimes in Kabul while the ordinary Afghans have had little opportunity to participate in the decision-making process that have affected their lives.

During the communist period from 1978-1992, there was growing tension between the traditionalists and those urban elites influenced by modern ideas. The latter had access to education and concepts of society that transcended both the local village-based hierarchies and those of the Islamic clergy, leading to growing tensions between traditionalists and modernizers. The government started to implement socialist programmes by issuing a series of eight decrees, including the land reform decree without much regard for consensus and social conventions.²⁵ As tensions grew within Afghanistan, so too did external pressures and influences upon the country. In the post-Second World War period, the USA emerged as the new and ascendant superpower as the result of which the "Great Game" of the previous century engaged in by Russia and Britain was replicated once more, this time between an expansionist USSR looking south, and the USA looking north from Pakistan, keen to influence events in Iran, Central Asia and China. It was during this period that a sizeable quantity of development assistance was poured into Afghanistan both by the USA and the USSR. The competition of the Cold War brought foreign aid from western sources as well as from the Soviet Union. Magnus and Naby rightly point out that, 'the broadest path, and ultimately the most important one, lay not in the ideological appeal to the discontented intellectual that created the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) but rather through economic, educational, and military modernization, some, though not all, achieved with aid from Soviet sources'.²⁶