THE 2013 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

IN RECOGNITION OF WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE UNDERGRADUATE FIELD OF STUDY

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 22, 2013
Explaining Endless War: International Intervention and Centralized Power in Afghanistan

Benjamin Mercer-Golden

Political Science 215
Explaining Ethnic Violence

James Fearon
Political Science
Explaining Endless War: International Intervention and Centralized Power in Afghanistan

Introduction

After American troops arrived in Kabul in November 2001, effectively forcing the Taliban into exile only a number of weeks after invading, the international community seemed optimistic that Afghanistan could put decades of conflict behind it. On December 5, 2001, a UN-backed conference of political factions named Hamid Karzai Chairman of the Interim Administration. Eleven years later, Afghanistan’s political landscape is defined by an embattled Karzai Presidency, a resurgent Taliban, and considerable uncertainty surrounding the anticipated 2014 withdrawal of NATO forces. Journalists report that many, if not most, Afghans believe another civil war is inevitable when international troops leave the country (Khan, 2012).

On the surface, conflict in Afghanistan appears ethnic, with most political and military groups organizing along such lines. The country is deeply divided between the ethnic groups of the Dari-speaking north and the Pashtun-dominated south and east, where the Taliban have a strong foothold. It is easy to look at Afghanistan’s recent history—the country has been in nearly perpetual conflict since the Soviet Invasion in 1979—and create a narrative of explanatory factors common to countries associated with ethnic tensions: a diverse and large population, widespread poverty, rugged geographical and topographic features (Barfield, 2011). But the political reality in Afghanistan is considerably more complicated. These characteristics are constants, defining Afghanistan’s entire history, meaning they cannot explain large national changes. Chief among these changes is the transition between decades of nearly total peace from the 1930s-1970s to an ongoing 33-year civil war. If Afghanistan has always been poor, geographically divided and ethnically diverse, how can we explain the causes of long stretches of
peace and equally prolonged periods of war, the latter of which seems likely to continue well into the future?

In this paper I will argue that the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) fundamentally changed Afghan politics by leading to the arming, by the U.S. and Pakistan, of ethnic exclusionist Islamicist groups that previously had little power in the country. This would render ethnic power sharing over the last few decades more difficult than at any point in the country’s modern history. Afghan governments after this turning point have been further undermined by a commitment to a highly centralized form of government completely inappropriate for the country. A balanced narrative, giving weight to both local-personal motives and national/international-level cleavages, is essential.

Existing explanations of conflict in Afghanistan center around four broad themes\(^1\): regional and international interventionism, a “weak state syndrome,” cultural/ideological conflicts raised by modernization and an inappropriate political structure. None of these arguments alone can fully explain the political and military events of the last century. Their largest failure is that, in isolation, they fail to provide a convincing explanation for changes during the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Only through combining (and dismissing) elements of all of these hypotheses, relying in particular on the importance of foreign interventionism and an inappropriate vision of government, can we arrive at a satisfactory understanding of Afghanistan’s tumultuous modern history.

On the basis of this analysis, I will further argue that when the U.S. leaves Afghanistan in 2014, the political situation will likely descend into near-anarchy. The main reason follows the lines of a “commitment problem” as outlined by James Fearon. In order to have a viable national

\(^1\) All of which do overlap and partially rest on one another, though essentially can be viewed in isolation.
government in Afghanistan there needs to be a certain degree of power sharing between ethnic
groups. But when international troops leave, there will be no effective party that can guarantee
that the rights of Tajiks or Hazaras will be respected by Pashtuns (or vice versa), and so there is a
high probability that certain groups, anticipating gaining a marginal advantage from fighting
instead of taking their chances with a new government, will take the violent route. Unlike many
scholars—and the majority of the international community—I will therefore argue that the
United States must push back its 2014 exit date and keep troops in the country, meanwhile
helping shift the political landscape towards a federal government that gives regions (and
therefore ethnic groups) strong autonomy.

In constructing this argument, I will first provide a historical background and explain the
major ethnic and religious groups that make up Afghanistan today. I will then discuss the four
chief existing explanations of the case of Afghanistan, followed by my own argument, which
integrates various elements of these positions. Finally I will apply the argument to the likely
post-2014 situation—total or fragmented civil war—and provide a brief analysis of the
implications for national government policy and U.S. involvement.

**Background: A History**

Modern Afghanistan is made up of approximately 30 million people, divided into seven
major ethnic groups: Pashtuns (the largest group, who make up about 45% of Afghanistan’s
population), Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaqs, Turkmens and Baluchis, as well as many smaller
ones (Goodson 2001: 14). Each region of Afghanistan is populated with a clear ethnic majority:
Pashtuns dominate the south and east of the country, Tajiks in the northeast and west, Hazaras in
the center and Uzbeks in the northwest (Barfield, 2011). Though homogenous in the sense that it
is nearly an entirely Muslim country, religious divides remain: approximately 85% of Afghans are Hanafi Sunni, while the remainder is Jafari (Twelver) or Ismaili (Sevener) Shia. These religious distinctions map reasonably well to ethnic groups; Pashtuns and Hazaras are, for example, overwhelmingly Hanafi Sunni and Shia, respectively (Goodson 2001: 17).

For most of Afghanistan’s history, from the sixth century BC to the mid-18th century, Afghanistan was divided among Turkish and Persian dynastic empires. These dynasties gained legitimacy by establishing relationships with local elites who served as co-rulers of regional territories. Much of the poor and isolated mountainous and desert communities in Afghanistan were ignored by these empires. In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani took control of Afghanistan and founded a Pashtun dynasty, though he and his successors largely followed the same strategy as the Turkish and Persian empires: they ruled from Kabul, but appointed regional governors to preside over territories with considerable autonomy (Barfield, 2011).

This pattern was fundamentally and irrevocably shifted when Emir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901), known as the “Iron Amir,” pursued a series of brutally violent campaigns against eastern Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen in the name of establishing a strong centralized state (Shahrani 2002: 718). Afghanistan officially received independence from the British in 1919. During the early 20th century and up through the 1960s, its political leaders largely followed the model of a centralized state structure introduced by the Iron Amir (Conflict Monitors, 2011).

From 1933 to 1973, Afghanistan experienced its most peaceful period in modern history under the regime of King Zahir Shah. Following Shah’s introduction of significant constitutional changes—(limited) freedom of the press, some allowances of political organizing—in the 1960s, he was ousted in a coup by his cousin Mohammed Daoud, supported by officers of a faction of
the newly created People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). In 1978, in another coup, members of the PDPA killed Daoud and his family and installed a communist regime. A year later, in the wake of nearly total popular resistance, the regime asked the Soviet Union to intervene, leading to a civil war that lasted until 1989 (Shahrani 2002: 719). Ultimately unable to defeat the United States-backed mujahedeen, a large alliance of traditional and Islamist political factions, the Soviets withdrew, setting the stage for a battle for power between various mujahedeen groups. Though these groups continued to fight bitterly between 1989-1994, Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, was elected president in 1992. During this period of continued civil infighting, a new group emerged: the Taliban, a group of mostly ethnic Pashtun students who were educated in—and supported militarily and economically by—Pakistan. With Pakistani support, the Taliban took control of most of the state by 1996, spreading a conservative (and often repressive) ideological interpretation of Islam. Following the acts of September 11, 2001, perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, a terrorist group supported by the Taliban, the United States (as well as the U.K., France and Australia) invaded Afghanistan (Barfield, 2011). Despite the removal of the Taliban from power by December 2001, the U.S. War in Afghanistan has continued through 2012, marked by a subsequent revival of the Taliban. NATO is expected to withdraw most combat troops by December 2014 and hand over control to a democratically elected Afghan government and Afghan security forces (Spetalnick, 2012).

Existing Explanations for Conflict

Though there are dozens of micro-explanations for enduring conflict in Afghanistan, there are four major “thematic” arguments advanced by modern Afghanistan scholars, all of which provide some meaningful contribution to my own argument:
The “Weak State Syndrome” Hypothesis: Of all of the international relations and South Asia experts to ground their analysis of Afghanistan in the concept of a weak (or failed) state, Larry Goodson is the most prominent and articulate. For Goodson, weak states are powerless “to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources and appropriate or use resources in determined ways” (Migdal 1998: 4, in Goodson 2001: 11). Afghanistan is, in that light, the ultimate weak state. For centuries, its political leadership has, in Goodson’s view, been tasked with the unenviable challenge of constructing a meaningful central government for a population “characterized by deep and multifaceted cleavages.” Of these, the most significant are ethnic/linguistic (further exacerbated by various ethnic-linguistic groups organizing into different regions of the country); religious (the country may be Muslim, but Afghan Islam is so blended with local-tribal customs that the country is nonetheless divided by hundreds of religious variations); social (most Afghans are more loyal to their local / tribal social groups and legal codes than any kind of national government); and geographical (the Hindu Kush mountains and Afghanistan’s rugged topography isolate vast areas of the country from Kabul and other important administrative centers) (Goodson 2001: 13). In this way, the weak state argument primarily employs deeply held, fundamental constants (religion, tribalism, geography, etc.) as a means of explaining the civil divisiveness of Afghanistan. And though, as previously claimed in this paper, such an argument fails to fully account for dynamic change in the Afghan situation over the last 30 years, Goodson attempts to explain such a shift using a pre/post-Cold War argument. During the Cold War, weak states managed to stay reasonably peaceful “because of the relative rigidity of the international system,” whereas since then, “both globalist and local pressures” have made weak states more prone to failure (Goodson 2001: 11).
The “Cultural/Ideological Conflicts Due To Modernization” Hypothesis: In a nation as fraught with schismatic forces as Afghanistan, most scholars give some weight to the idea that tensions extend beyond political power-jockeying among rival elite factions. Thomas Barfield and Barnett Rubin illustrate an ideological divide with the variable of social change—modernization pitting traditional and progressive visions for the country against one another—acting as the driving force behind violence. Rubin develops a theory of a deep ideological and cultural division between political elites, mostly based in Kabul, and the country’s rural population. Throughout most of the 20th century, Cabinet members under Pashtun regimes were educated in the West and shared a worldview only held by groups concentrated in Kabul and a few other cities where most of the foreign assistance (and therefore where most of the country’s wealth) went (Rubin, 2002). Therefore, there was always an unresolved conflict between modernizing elites in Kabul and the rest of the country (mostly made up of conservative and rural inhabitants) and so full-scale war was set into motion when the PDPA proposed radical reforms that angered rural Afghans in 1978 (Barfield, 2011). Beyond ethnic conflict, Barfield cites a “progressive Persian-speaking intelligentsia in Kabul opposed to conservative Persian-speaking villages” (Barfield, 2011). The most common situation leading to conflict, often repeated in Afghan history, is a regime coming to power, a powerful opposition forming across various regional and ethnic lines under the banner of ideology, and then ethno-regional conflicts emerging in the “vacuum after state collapse” (Barfield, 2011).

The “Inordinate Centralization” Hypothesis: Nazif Shahrani, among others, makes the claim that the policies of Abdur Rahman (ruled 1880-1901) fundamentally altered the form of
government in Afghanistan, creating a state structure in violation of the rights and desires of its people (Shahrani 2002: 718). Before Rahman, the “Iron Amir,”

ruling dynasties either appointed powerful local elites to rule as their agents when their power was limited or sent an agent of their own to rule directly when they were strong. It was a fairly robust system, which buffered the regions from the consequences of political collapse at the center… Rahman destroyed this… when he stripped the regions of their autonomy and deprived them of economic resources. [Barfield 2011: 162]

Rahman created a policy of internal colonialism, resettling Durrani Pashtun nomads from the south to pastureland in central Afghanistan formerly controlled by Hazaras; current ethnic conflicts can be explained by decades worth of policies by Pashtun autocrats carrying out these internal colonialist policies at the expense of non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Only a Pashtun supremacist could claim that these were normal or necessary policies associated with state building; for all others, they were horrific acts of state-sponsored violence and terrorism. Under the Iron Amir, entire Hazara villages were massacred or enslaved, with men often being skinned alive; in the east (Kafiristan), Rahman forcibly converted the local people to Islam. These same patterns of violence applied to the quelling of resistance movements among Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik peoples in the north, and have been continued to a much lesser extent by Rahman’s successors (Shahrani 2002: 719). After civil war broke out in 1979, Shahrani argues that the perpetuation of conflict (often along ethnic lines) for the last three decades has been in response to these violent policies. Furthermore, in the 1990s, when various mujahedeen commanders were fighting for power, he argues that all of them had been indoctrinated into a misguided vision of what a government should look like: “A centralized state in which the ruling faction could impose itself on the rest of the unwilling communities in the country with help from their close kinsmen and friends and support by a foreign sponsor” (Shahrani 2002: 719). In both the form of the Taliban (a group well-known for policies of ethnic cleansing, most notably of Hazaras in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif) and the U.S.-backed Karzai regime, Shahrani and others see the
continuation of a governmental structure that is designed to establish all power at the center, rather than giving regions (and thus ethno-regional groups) considerable autonomy (Winchester, 2000). In a deeply divided nation like Afghanistan, this vision of government is inappropriate, viewed as illegitimate by the people, and the key variable in producing decades of conflict.

The “Regional Intervention” Hypothesis: Due to its geostrategic location, Afghanistan has for centuries received a remarkable amount of international attention and manipulation for such an economically- and resource-poor nation. In modern times, regional and international powers—the Soviet Union/Russia, the U.S., China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—have all attempted to influence Afghan politics in some way. In that light, the “regional intervention” argument, most prominently made by Ahmed Rashid, is predicated on Afghan conflict stemming not from an ethnic or ideological divide within Afghanistan, but from international powers staging proxy wars through domestic political agents. Rashid’s essential claim is that “throughout Afghan history, no outsider has been able to manipulate Afghans” and yet all regional powers, the imperial British and the United States have tried to (Rashid 2010: 185). Dating back to disrespect for central government as a result of ineffectual pre-20th century British rule, Afghan people have always mistrusted governments seen as relying on international support for legitimacy. But given a relative lack of resources in Afghanistan and the country’s large size (and therefore high cost of governance), it is, however, not possible for political groups to maintain national appeal without foreign support (Rashid 2010: 5). Of primary importance to this paper is how the regional intervention hypothesis handles the Soviet war in Afghanistan and its latent effects on the country. After 1989, the utter devastation of the country in the wake of the previous decade of war and the absence of a clear Cold War dichotomy of Communists and
anti-Communists led to conflict being divided along ethnic lines. Zalmay Khalilzad and Daniel Byman claim,

> As the United States departed [after the withdrawal of the Soviet Red Army from Afghanistan], a vicious civil war spread throughout the country. Once the Soviet-backed regime fell, war, anarchy and fragmentation followed. The conflict became increasingly one of ethnic and sectarian groups, particularly Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and the Shia Hazaras… The war also became a proxy war between Iran and Pakistan, with each power backing different factions. [Khalilzad and Byman 2000: 67]

In that light, what may seem like an ethnic or ideological conflict in Afghanistan has its roots in the interference of foreign powers, which have attempted to implement their own agendas at the cost of three decades of civil war and the suffering of many Afghan citizens.

**An Unsatisfactory Answer: Flaws in Existing Explanations**

Taken on their own, none of these existing explanations provide a fully satisfactory answer for the perpetuation of seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan. All of them fail to simultaneously trace a broad, national narrative of political aspects of violence (the actions and ideologies of the major political groups and their armies/militias) and moderate such a view with aspects of Hobbesian logic, in which civil war allows for anarchical violence stemming from personal vendettas and local frictions. The need to define civil wars in both contexts is lucidly argued by Stathis Kalyvas:

> It is the convergence of local motives and supralocal imperatives that endows civil war with its particular character and leads to joint violence that straddles the divide between the political and the private, the collective and the individual. [Kalyvas 2003: 487]

All of these arguments fall too far on one side of the spectrum, which leads to a crippling collective failure mentioned earlier in this paper: an inability to account for change in the amount of violence over time, namely, the question of why Afghanistan saw mostly peace for decades before 1979 and mostly war after it.
For example, Larry Goodson is correct to argue that the Soviet invasion was a turning point in the history of Afghanistan, but he relies far too much on Hobbes. He largely makes the case that widespread physical destruction and death has led to opportunities for mass violence (“The Afghan War has erased the position of the Afghan state by eliminating or severely damaging most of its institutions… [Resulting in] national political fragmentation” he writes) (Goodson 2001: 21). Even much of the destruction and violence seen as coming from a unitary source, the Taliban, has been characterized by Goodson as rogue elements within the Taliban—soldiers acting out of personal or local gain instead of commitment to the Taliban as a whole (Goodson 2001: 124-5). But Kalyvas is correct to claim “civil war cannot be reduced to a mere mechanism that opens up the floodgates to random and anarchical private violence” (Kalyvas 2003: 487). Goodson’s argument, focusing on Hobbesian violence, fails to explain the fraught relationships between post-1989 national leaders in Kabul and local warlords, and how this differed from notions of alliance (state financial and military support for local powers in exchange for loyalty and resources) under successful Durrani king regimes.

The opposite criticism can be leveled against the cultural/ideological conflict argument. While a compelling explanation of the national-level conflict in Afghanistan, it underplays the relative importance of local motives. Modernization may have been the key agent of change pushing a divide between progressive and traditional groups, but it was not modernization per se that led to conflict. Rather, Afghanistan has seen conflict in the form of local manifestations of modernization: rural Afghans were not willing to fight over bureaucratic reforms requiring greater taxes, but they were willing to fight over the mass corruption (from every level of government as money passed hands to Kabul) carried out locally and immediately affecting their lives. To cite another example, to claim that traditional communities would rally against the
government’s tolerance of women in Kabul not wearing the headscarf is misguided. Evidence actually suggests conservative communities simply kept their traditions of female dress and did not vehemently oppose such changes in the capital. But when social modernizing reforms reached a local level, say, with national marriage laws (such as banning polygamy) overriding local law, a willingness to fight has been more likely (Barfield 2011: 183).

So, too, does the regional intervention argument fail to fully explain fighting at the local level. Afghanistan has undoubtedly been a nation engaged in proxy wars by international powers, but to claim that this alone provides a motive for conflict underestimates the personal-local agency of ordinary Afghan people. As Kalyvas argues, a national conflict (including one financed and perpetuated by international interests) has significant small-scale variables contributing to it. Rather than fighting for or against a Pakistan-backed Taliban, ordinary Afghans primarily viewed themselves as fighting for their local tribes or warlords or to get local resources (Rubin, 2002).

Finally, and though there is great value in the inordinate centralization hypothesis, if this argument is to stand alone as an explanation, how can it explain recent war and mid-20th century peace based on its premise that all rulers after the Iron Amir (including the Musahiban monarchs of 1929-1978) constructed ill-conceived government structures? If most Afghans have been violently opposed to strong central government for the last century, why would it take until 1979 for fighting to start?

In this way, all of these hypotheses have flaws that undermine their ability to provide a satisfactory explanation for Afghanistan’s transition from relative stability and peace before the 1970s to continual, large-scale violence since then.
A New Argument: Legitimacy and the Consequences of the Soviet Invasion

While most scholars have focused on the various deep divisions in Afghan society—ethnic, tribal, religious, ideological, topographical, regional (and in turn political)—I propose a new framework with two main causal factors leading to perpetual warfare beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979. First, the Soviet war from 1979-1989 has rendered political institutions incapable of power sharing in a way that was never true of Afghan politics before. Second, in contrast to mid-20th century regimes, all governments since 1979 have been viewed as illegitimate by a significant portion of the Afghan people.

Before defending these two claims, it is important to examine a more stable time in modern Afghan history, namely the regimes of Musahiban monarchs from 1929 to 1978. In particular, I will attempt to answer the question, how did power sharing between ethnic groups and political factions work under these regimes?

1929 to 1978: A (Relatively) Successful Power Sharing Paradigm

Afghanistan was ruled by a family unit of the Muhammedzai subtribe of Barakzai Pashtuns during this period: Mohammed Nadir Shah ruled from 1929-1933, replaced at death by his son Mohammed Zahir Shah, who ruled until ousted in 1973 in a coup by his first cousin (and former Afghan Prime Minister from 1953-63) Mohammed Daoud Khan, who was, in turn, assassinated by the PDPA in 1978, ending five decades of Musahiban rule. This period is the longest interval of peace and stability in modern Afghan history. In essence, the Musahiban monarchs managed to successfully extend the traditional power base of the central government beyond Kabul, ruling as legitimate leaders across regional and ethnic lines. As Goodson writes,

Through the creation of a bureaucracy and national army, economic modernization and urbanization, construction of a transportation network... the rise of the ‘ulama, co-optation of the
khans, and various other developments, Afghanistan witnessed the rise of state over traditional society. [Goodson 2001: 21]

Three strategies were particularly important: minor degrees of ethnic power sharing in combination with Pashtun consolidation of the innermost central institutions; a limited vision of government; and a conservative, slow approach to reform, development and modernization.

First, the Musahiban monarchs balanced the necessity of including members of a variety of ethnic groups with the placement of Muhammadzai allies in key positions. According to Rubin, nearly two thirds of these elites\(^2\) were non-Pashtuns, including a significant portion of Tajiks (mostly Kabulis) who were dominant in the legal, financial and social ministries. Though these numbers were not proportionate to the Afghan population as a whole (Hazaras were especially excluded from government positions), they nonetheless included a minimum viable representation of minorities given the relative absence of ethnic revolutionary violence. At the same time, the Musahiban court still managed to build in a shield of elites especially loyal to the monarchs due to family and ethnic ties—the concentration of both members of the Muhammadzai clan and ministers from Kabul were around 10 times what a purely proportional system based on population would appropriate (Rubin 2002: 90). They also implemented a parallel model in the national military: though ethnically mixed, the top officers were usually from groups close to the monarch (Rubin, 2002).

Second, the Musahiban monarchs crafted a limited vision of central government. Except in the traditional areas of taxation and a military, the Musahiban monarchs attempted to stay out of the lives of ordinary Afghans, a move in line with the wishes of the local- and tribal-centric Afghan people (Barfield 2011: 173). For Barfield, the most successful leaders in Afghan history crafted a “Wizard of Oz” strategy: while they declared their governments “all-powerful,” they

\(^2\) Defined as “those who served as heads of state, cabinet ministers, governors and members of the supreme court during the rule of the Musahiban family” (Rubin 2002: 90).
almost never risked a dispute over their power by attempting to push contentious policies. In that light, the Musahiban monarchs were the ultimate “Wizard of Oz” practitioners; their achievements—and departure from the 20th century norm of Afghan governance—are overlooked by Shahrani and the inordinate centralization argument. Their primary impact on rural Afghans was to reduce taxes on agriculture, shifting government revenues to trade tariffs, state-owned businesses and foreign aid, which helped to calm tensions between urban elites and rural populations; this was an unconventional but highly effective state building measure (Barfield 2011: 198).

Third, the Musahiban monarchs implemented gradual economic and social policy changes that appeased both conservative and progressive factions. During these five decades, Afghanistan built nascent export cotton and lambskin industries, a more sophisticated agricultural industry (including opium production) and a small industrial sector (Barfield 2011: 203). But economic reforms were gradual and limited, which meant a continued agricultural subsistence-based way of life for most rural Afghans (Barfield 2011: 204). In an effort to appeal to traditional elites, few meaningful social reforms were implemented during these years until democratic constitutional reform in the mid-1960s, which introduced elections, universal suffrage, a parliament, and greater women’s rights. It was these rapid reforms—a break from previous policies—that helped contribute to the mobilization of conservative opposition and undermining of family rule a decade later.

Of course, even this period, often referred to as a Golden Age in Afghan politics, had significant troubles. There is a strong case to be made that the Musahiban monarchs, though their policies were a positive step towards stability, should have shared even more power with ethnic minorities and rival factions and invested more in economic and social development. But the
power sharing strategies of the Musahiban monarchs nonetheless provide a useful model for contemporary Afghan policymakers.

I. (Destructive) Power Sharing Implications of the Soviet War

Though ethnic tensions existed before 1979 and occasionally led to conflict in modern Afghan history, it would be incorrect to say that Afghanistan witnessed *ethnic conflict* in the strict sense of the word—ordinary citizens were far more likely to fight for tribal identity than say, Pashtun identity. This paradigm radically changed during the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Former member of the Afghan parliament Mir Ahmad Joyenda puts it simply:

> [Ethnic violence] was not always the case. Ethnic tensions really only began in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation when foreign governments began supporting various ethnic-based factions opposed to the Soviet presence. Iran hosted Dari insurgents, Pakistan hosted Pashtun insurgents. [Khan, 2012]

Two explanations for this—one borrowed from the traditional international invention school of thought (namely Rashid), which explains motivations at the *elite* level, and a more novel explanation of ethnicity serving as an organizing device, which explains motivations at the level of *ordinary citizens*—combine to create a comprehensive understanding of the ethnicization of Afghan conflict.

The successful campaign of Tajik commander Burhanuddin Rabbani, partially allied with Uzbek commander Rashid Dostum, to seize Kabul in 1989, following the Soviet withdrawal, was an ominous sign of ethnic warfare to come: “It was a devastating psychological blow, because for the first time in 300 years, the Pashtuns had lost control of the capital” (Rashid 2010: 21). But ethnic conflict would reach far greater heights over the next decade. Arms and money from the U.S. during the Soviet war in Afghanistan was mostly handled through the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI); Pakistan, mistrustful of Durrani Pashtun leaders in the south, gave
minimal support to these mujahedeen groups and their associated ulama (religious scholars) (Rashid 2010: 18). Instead, they armed groups who tended to be strict Islamists. While the ulama were “much more accommodating towards the ethnic minorities,” Islamists “pursued a radical political ideology” in that they were “exclusivists, which made the minorities suspicious of them.” As Rashid explains, it was American and Pakistani backing that allowed this radical ideology to become the dominant force in a struggle between mujahedeen groups following the Soviet withdrawal:

Prior to the war the Islamicists barely had a base in Afghan society, but with money and arms from the CIA pipeline and support from Pakistan, they built one and wielded tremendous clout. The traditionalists and the Islamicists fought each other mercilessly so that by 1994, the traditional leadership in Kandahar had been eliminated, leaving the field free for the new wave of even more extreme Islamicists—the Taliban.” [Rashid 2010: 19]

In this way, the deliberate arming and support by the U.S. and Pakistan of exclusionist, Pashtun supremacist, ethnicizing factions over more moderate parties led to true *ethnic warfare* for the first time in modern Afghan history. Only in the absence of traditional elites—either through death or an inability to compete with factions supported with vast quantities of Pakistani and American weaponry and money—was it possible for the Taliban to rise to power, given its relative unpopularity due to its violent excesses, especially the ethnic cleansing of many northern minority groups (Goodson 2001: 21). Though the Taliban’s brand of Islamism has a “strong anti-Western cultural and political bias” and though they have “consistently presented their fight against fellow Afghans as a jihad in order to unify and embolden their followers,” the defining characteristics of the last decade of conflict have still remained largely ethnic, rather than religious or cultural (Goodson 2001: 18; Roy 1998: 202). Given the inexorable ethnicization of conflict set into motion by international actors during the 1980s, elites have been unable to shift the political situation back to the viable possibility of ethnic power sharing.
It is also important to account for the motivations and actions of ordinary Afghans in this civil conflict. Rather than the logic of the standard international intervention hypothesis, in which military groups with divisive ethnic agendas won out with the help of foreign backing, ordinary citizens were likely far more motivated to support or join ethnically-motivated organizations not out of commitment to ideology but out of local-personal privacy concerns. Historically protected by local warlords, ordinary Afghans were forced to support higher political orders when these warlords formed varying alliances with pro- or anti-Taliban forces during the 1990s (and again with the Taliban resurgence in the 2000s). In a perpetually evolving situation with potentially fatal consequences, Afghans used ethnicity and ethnic politics as the safest grouping mechanism to ensure their security, further dividing the country along ethnic lines. Though Philip Roessler was writing about Sudan, his analysis of the rationale for how ethnicity can come to define a conflict is an accurate portrayal of the Afghan situation:

Ultimately ethnicity or regionalism did not motivate political behavior—the conflict was rooted in competition over power. But, consistent with… the notion that identity can serve as an ‘uncertainty-reduction device,’ regionalism and ethnicity became lenses that [people] employed to understand a fast-moving and uncertain situation. [Roessler 2012: 19]

Another way of articulating a similar point is that the number of true Pashtun supremacists has not radically increased over the last 15 years, despite that being a common belief among ethnic minorities. Adnan Khan’s description of the beliefs and customs of Afghan citizens—Dari speakers in Kabul play soccer (seen as a Western cultural invasion for hardline Pashtuns) while their Pashtun neighbors play cricket (yet another parallel to Pakistan, in the eyes of Dari speakers)—is a valuable insight into the local concerns of the country’s people. He quotes Habiba Khalili, a mother of two: “My children were harassed every day because they are Hazara. I’m not racist but for us, it’s impossible to live with Pashtuns” (Khan, 2012). Khalili’s statement is but a deeply personal reflection of a national sentiment—“it’s impossible to live
with Pashtuns” is a parallel expression of the impossibility of ethnic power sharing at the
national level. Afghanistan’s ethnic conflict, as well as from the lens of ethnically divisive
policies of political elites, can be seen as the summation of the experiences of millions of Habiba
Khalilis, building personal feuds with neighbors of rival ethnicities into a master cleavage. It is
important to give weight to both of these forces—international/national and local—in
characterizing the Afghan conflict, just as it is vital to note the turning point towards true *ethnic
violence* in Afghanistan as the arming of ethnically divisive groups during the Soviet war in
Afghanistan.

**II. Recent Governments Lack Legitimacy, Perpetuating Conflict**

Every Afghan government since 1979 has failed to engender the committed support of
most of its citizens. There are a variety of explanations for this, including the absence of
traditionally legitimate (monarchical) rulers, the antagonizing of conservatives through rapid
modernizing reforms, poor attempts at power sharing in essential institutions like parliament, the
violation of the ideological wishes of the Afghan people, and centralized consolidation at the
expense of regional and local power.

A simple factor contributing to disorder in Afghanistan—and a factor common to many
nations transitioning from monarchical to democratic rule—is the replacement of monarchs,
viewed as legitimate representatives of the Afghan people by broad cross-sections of the
population, with leaders who do not have such a claim. As Barfield explains,

> After the fall of the monarchy in 1973, each succeeding regime had a weaker claim to political
> legitimacy than had its predecessor in the eyes of ordinary Afghans. Such regimes compensated
> for this defect by increasingly resorting to force to maintain their authority. [Barfield 2011: 165]

Given the democratizing movements set in motion during the 1960s, this was an inevitable—and
unavoidable—problem that a modern Afghan state would have. But other problems associated
with the last three decades of conflict are strategic errors. The unprecedented rate of radical
political reforms over the last thirty years, all in an attempt to construct a modern nation state, has angered millions of ordinary conservative Afghans and their elites. As previously argued in this paper, the most successful Afghan regimes brought about gradual, moderate reforms that did not anger its traditional population. In contrast, each period of rapid reform in modern Afghan history has been associated with the outbreak of violence\(^3\). Every government since 1979—a radical Communist regime, bloody mujahedeen command, the Taliban and a U.S.-backed Karzai Presidency and its extensive democratic reforms— has caused huge upheaval to Afghan politics. This, for a people that has maintained much of their traditional way of life for the last few centuries, was seen as threatening to conservative elites (in an extreme case, the Taliban can be seen as part of the outpouring of reactionary, conservative Islamic sentiment) and thus has helped to perpetuate violence.

Afghanistan’s leaders, with U.S. support, have undermined power sharing agreements through failed policies. The most egregious error in joint Afghan-U.S. strategy was the refusal by Hamid Karzai to allow parliament to organize into political parties. Shortly after its creation, the inevitable happened in that parliament split into factions based on nonpolitical identities like family, religion, region and ethnicity (Barfield, 2011). Today, the Afghan parliament is split into Pashtun and non-Pashtun power blocs, a tragic failure for democratic hopes.

From 1979 to 2001, the Afghan people were victims not only of a conflict that reached its unprecedented destructive extent through an international supply of enormous quantities of weapons and money, but also of regimes that—again at the whim of international actors—fundamentally ignored the wishes of the Afghan people. Both the communist regime and the radical Islamic regime that followed it shared a guaranteed formula for violent resistance: the

\(^3\) The Khost Rebellion of 1924 after sweeping social reforms under Amanullah Khan and the Saur Revolution of 1978 after constitutional reform in the mid-1960s are two shining examples.
imposition of ideology on an unwilling people and a shortfall in the economic and military resources needed to enforce such a regime at a national scale. Given a majority of people that opposed their ideology, it was, yet again, the inordinate costs of governance that hampered the ability to create a regime powerful enough to withstand mass popular opposition. The alternative, setting up some kind of power sharing agreement, was made impossible by an intractable ideological agenda.

And though the Karzai Administration has not deliberately disrespected the rights and wishes of the Afghan people, it has repeatedly made the mistake of exchanging local autonomy for central meddling, which has proved deeply unpopular. Afghanistan’s constitution, in large part due to international pressure (the U.S. and other international bodies would rather negotiate with a strong central government than dozens of smaller regional politicians), already allows for a dominant executive branch. But Karzai has exceeded what most would consider to be his constitutional authority in what his critics refer to as nepotism and corruption; Karzai himself has made all government appointments of significance in the country, “down to the subprovincial level” (Barfield, 2011). In Barfield’s view,

For regions that had grown accustomed to autonomy over the years, the arrival of Karzai's appointees, who abused their positions or favored one faction over another, created hostility to the central government. When they reemerged in southern Afghanistan in 2005, the Taliban drew on this resentment and on the belief that Karzai did not represent a national government so much as a family network keen to reward political allies and punish rivals. [Barfield, 2011]

In even simpler terms, the Afghan people desire a government with more limited central powers and more of a commitment to the historical relationship they have had with their local and regional leaders. Rubin describes a basic framework for such a relationship: “The universally expressed preference [of Afghans] is for being governed by a central authority that obeys some
laws and where the district administrator can be changed by the central government if he doesn't do the right thing” (Rubin, 2002).

A New Guiding Question

Too often Afghanistan scholars—and policymakers—have focused on the wrong question: who to rule? Since his name was put forward as a potential president, people have been fixated on the close familial ties of current President Hamid Karzai to Zahir Shah, as if somehow the legitimacy and stability of the regime of Afghanistan’s last king could inform the Karzai administration’s ability to govern and bring peace to the nation (Majalla, 2009). The next question is usually, who is behind the regime—which force is controlling the strings of power? To what extent is Pakistan or the U.S. or formerly the Soviet Union the institution that keeps this leader in power? The logical continuation of the international intervention argument is that, just as international actors created warfare in Afghanistan, if the proper balance of foreign powers is melded into an acceptable compromise (the U.S., Pakistan, etc.) then peace is achievable. But this seems to entirely circumnavigate the self-determination of the Afghan people. The question is not who should govern but how should Afghanistan govern—how should its leaders fashion a government based on an organic, legitimate relationship with the Afghan people? Setting aside regional or international agendas, what would an Afghan government look like if it were entirely left up to the wishes of Afghans?

Though a full defense of such a claim is beyond the scope of this paper, the most sensible answer to this question is the creation of a federated national government. Ethnic groups in Afghanistan do not define themselves as nationalities—there is overwhelming respect and support for the idea of Afghanistan as a multi-ethnic state (Smith, 2001). But a consistent, overriding request among ethnic minorities for the last few decades is for more regional
autonomy, in which local and regional elites have more power to govern over their constituencies (Barfield, 2011). This understanding of Afghan politics undermines the main counter-argument to a federal system, that it would lead to the destruction of a multiethnic state—in fact, given the inevitability of civil war again following U.S. withdrawal, it may be the only way to avoid that fate. Fundamentally, a federal system makes sense given a historical respect and desire for local power and rule. Furthermore, a primary advantage to a federal system is that it offers superior ability to account for one of the pieces of civil war that the research of Kalyvas (among others) is used to describe in this paper: insurgency based on local motives rather than a national-level “master cleavage.” A federal government would be better equipped to deal with the warlordism and locally motivated violence that defines much of Afghan conflict. On a policy level, a vital step is stripping Karzai and the central government of the power to appoint regional/local positions; the Afghan people must be allowed to vote on their own regional governors, and these governors must in turn be able to appoint cabinets and collect regional taxes.

The 2014 Situation: A Commitment Problem

It is difficult to understate how crucial 2014 is to the Afghan people, a year that will see both the end of President Karzai’s second and final term in office and the withdrawal of NATO troops. By all accounts, most Afghans anticipate a return to some level of violence at this juncture, if not outright civil war (Khan, 2012). Though it is entirely possible that the 2014 situation could follow a different path (especially if relevant leaders start moving to a federal system as described above), one likely result will be a “commitment problem” between various ethnic groups. In essence, despite what agreements might be in place now, without NATO
backing, minority groups may feel that there is a significant chance that Pashtun majority leaders in Kabul may implement less favorable policies toward ethnic minorities in the future. A specific fear is that minority anger over a perceived overreaching of executive and family power by Karzai into local matters may worsen after the transition (there are even serious worries that Karzai will act against constitution term limits and attempt to stay in power) (Barfield, 2011). Though it is not a classic commitment problem in the way that Fearon has outlined because a post-Karzai, post-NATO environment does not represent the creation of a new state per se, the potential anarchic or near-anarchic results are equally possible. A chief reason for this is the relative inexperience of the Afghan military and its potential inability to combat the Taliban, which is seen as a major threat by ethnic minorities. In the 2014 environment, elites from ethnic minority groups may choose to use violence as a means of preventive war, choosing to act immediately while the Afghan military, without NATO backing, is still weak and ill-prepared. This option may be seen as preferable to waiting to see how post-Karzai, post-NATO regimes treat ethnic minorities over the coming years (especially if the Taliban begin to seize more central power), while the military capabilities of the central government continue to grow. It is important to note in all of this that secessionist movements have been rare in Afghanistan for reasons previously explained. However, that does not preclude a viable secessionist movement from forming in the future, or for ethnic minorities/regions fighting for de facto regional autonomy within an Afghan state. NATO and the Afghan government must make undertake all possible efforts to avoid such a situation in the coming years.
The Future of Afghanistan: Conclusion and Proscriptions for NATO

This paper has offered two major claims. First, that, as a result of the Soviet war of 1979-1989 and its associated international meddling, power sharing in Afghanistan today is considerably more difficult than at any time in its modern history. Second, no regime since 1979 has formed an organic relationship with the Afghan people that reflects their rights and desires, which has led to considerable anti-government sentiment and violence. The situation in Afghanistan today is characterized by a resilient Taliban insurgency and a general fear that mass violence will return on a national scale in 2014 with the withdrawal of NATO forces. Such fear is warranted. Up through 2014, NATO and the Karzai government should move towards a federal model. This entails transferring greater power to regional and local forces and encouraging Karzai to reverse his refusal to allow political parties. A potentially stabilizing compromise between non-Pashtuns (who deplore the idea of the Taliban playing a role in national government) and Pashtuns is power sharing with the Taliban on a local (but not national) level by allowing district governor positions to be democratically elected. As Barfield notes, this strategy could have the added benefit of creating fractures within the Taliban (Barfield, 2011).

But all of these critical initiatives will take time. As such, it is necessary that NATO reexamine its timeline for withdrawal, as unpopular as that is. If the international community wants to fulfill its promise to leave Afghanistan as a stable nation, NATO forces will likely have to stay longer than 2014 in order to steer the transition to a post-Karzai government and to help oversee policies of greater regional autonomy. In order to further incentivize Afghan leaders to create a viable, long-term power sharing agreement and to help ease the burden on NATO, a “plan under which costs of international peacekeeping would be increasingly borne by the state
being reconstructed” would be a positive step (Fearon and Laitin, 37). At some point in the future, given an extended NATO mission past 2014, Afghanistan would start making payments to the U.S. and other member parties. If Afghanistan is to avoid a return to the last three decades of perpetual war and bloodshed, external forces may have to stay a while yet.
Works Cited


