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The U.S. and the Afghan Tragedy

By Stephen Zunes
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In making what administration officials themselves have acknowledged will be profoundly difficult choices about Afghanistan in the coming years, it will be important to understand how that country -- and, by extension, the United States -- has found itself in this difficult situation of a weak and corrupt central government, a resurgent Taliban, and increasing violence and chaos in the countryside.

Many Americans are profoundly ignorant of history, even regarding distant countries where the United States finds itself at war. One need not know much about Afghanistan's rich and ancient history, however, to learn some important lessons regarding the tragic failures of U.S. policy toward that country during the past three decades.

The Soviet Union invaded in December 1979, after the Afghan people rose up against two successive communist regimes that seized power in violent coup d'etats in 1978 and 1979. The devastating aerial bombing and counterinsurgency operations led to more than six million Afghans fleeing into exile, most of them settling into refugee camps in neighboring Pakistan. The United States, with the assistance of Pakistan's Islamist military dictatorship, found their allies in some of the more hard-line resistance movements, at the expense of some very rational enlightened Afghans from different fields and aspect of life.

The United States sent more than \$8 billion to Pakistani military dictator Zia al-Huq, who dramatically increased the size of the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) to help support Afghan mujahedeen in their battle against the Soviets and their puppet government. Their goal,

according to the late Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, was "to radicalize the influence of religious factions within Afghanistan." The ISI helped channel this American money, and billions more from oil-rich American allies, from the Gulf region to extremists within the Afghan resistance movement.

Extremist Education

The Reagan administration sensed the most hard-line elements of the resistance were less likely to reach negotiated settlements, but the goal was to cripple the Soviet Union, not free the Afghan people. Recognizing the historically strong role of Islam in Afghan society, they tried to exploit it to advance U.S. policy goals. Religious studies along militaristic lines were given more importance than conventional education in the school system for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The number of religious schools (madrassas) educating Afghans rose from 2,500 in 1980 at the start of Afghan resistance to over 39,000. The United States encouraged the Saudis to recruit Wahhabist ideologues to come join the resistance and teach in refugee institutes.

While willing to contribute billions to the war effort, the United States was far less generous in providing refugees with funding for education and other basic needs, which was essentially outsourced to the Saudis and the ISI. Outside of some Western non-governmental organizations like the International Rescue Committee, secular education was all but unavailable for the millions of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. None of these projects could match the impact the generous funding for religious education and scholarships to Islamic schools in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. As a result, the only education that became available was religious indoctrination, primarily of the hard-line Wahhabi tradition. The generous funding of religious institutions during wartime made it the main attraction of free education, clothing, and boarding for poor refugee children. Out of these madrassas came the talibs (students), who later became the Taliban.

This was no accident. It seemed that such policies were intentionally initiated that way to drag young Afghans towards extremism and war, and to be well prepared not only to fight a war of liberation, but to fight the foes and rivals of foreigners at the expense of Afghan destruction and blood. And the indoctrination and resulting radicalization of Afghan youth that later formed the core of the Taliban wasn't simply from outsourcing but was directly supported by the U.S. government as well, such as through textbooks issued by the U.S. Agency for International Development for refugee children between 1986 and 1992, which were designed to encourage such militancy.

Often mathematics and other basic subjects were sacrificed altogether in favor of full-time religious and indoctrination. Sardar Ghulam Nabi, an elementary school teacher in a Peshawar refugee camp, stated that he was discouraged by the school administration to teach Afghan history to Afghan refugee children, since most of the concentration and emphasis was placed on religious studies rather than other subjects.

This focus on a rigid religious indoctrination at the expense of other education is particularly ironic since, while the Afghans have tended to be devout and rather conservative Muslims, they hadn't previously been inclined to embrace the kind of fanatic Wahhabi-influenced

fundamentalism that dominated Islamic studies in the camps.

It seemed during the Afghan wars that no one cared and valued Afghan lives. Afghans became the subject of struggle between different rival and competing ideologies. The foreign backers of Afghanistan didn't care about the impact and consequences of their policies for the future of Afghanistan. Milt Bearden, the former CIA station chief in Islamabad, Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet war, commented that "the United States was fighting the Soviets to the last Afghan." According to Sonali Kolhatkar, in her book *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence*, some in the United States saw the Soviet invasion as a "gift." Zbigniew Brzezinski, former President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, even claimed that the United States helped provoke the Soviet invasion by arming the mujahideen beforehand, noting how "we did not push the Russians to intervene but we knowingly increased the probability that they would." Once they did, he wrote to Carter, "We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War."

Professor Hassan Kakar, a renowned Afghan historian formerly of Kabul University now exiled in California after spending time in an Afghan prison during the communist era, notes in his book how the competition between the Afghan left and right had been previously confined to a verbal debate, comparable to those taking place in intellectual and other politicized circles in other developing countries during the late Cold War period. With the invasion of Soviet troops and the U.S. backing of the mujaheddin, however, it took the shape of direct armed conflict. The conflict evolved into open confrontation backed by the two Cold War rivals and other regional powers. Afghanistan was split and divided into different ideological groups, resulting in bloodshed, killing, destruction, suffering, and hatred among Afghans.

A whole generation of Afghan children grew up knowing nothing of life but bombings that destroyed their homes, killed their loved ones, and drove them to seek refuge over the borders. As a result, they became easy prey to those willing to raise them to hate and to fight. These children, caught in the midst of competing extremist ideologies from all sides, learned to kill each other and destroy their country for the interests of others.

Most Afghans with clear vision and strategic insight were deliberately marginalized by outside supporters of the Afghan radicalization process. Members of the Afghan intelligentsia who maintained their Afghan character in face of foreign ideologies and were therefore difficult to manipulate were threatened, eliminated, and in some cases forced into exile. One was Professor Sayed Bahauddin Majrooh, a renowned Afghan writer, poet, and visionary. Another was Azizur-Rahman Ulfat, the author of *Political Games*, a book that criticized the politics of the U.S.-backed Afghan resistance movements based in Pakistan. Both were among the many who were assassinated as part of the effort to silence voices of reason and logic.

The Hezb-e-Islami faction, a relatively small group among the resistance to the Soviets and their Afghan allies, received at least 80% of U.S. aid. According to Professor Barnett Rubin's testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, the militia -- led by the notorious Gulbuddin Hekmatyar -- conducted a "reign of terror against insufficiently Islamic intellectuals" in the refugee camps of Pakistan. Despite all this, Rubin further noted how "both the ISI and CIA considered him a useful tool for shaping the future of Central Asia."

Assassinations of Afghan intellectuals deprived Afghan refugees of enlightened visionaries who would have represented the balanced Afghan character of religious faith, cultural traditions, and modern education. What these early victims of extremist violence had in common was opposition to the radicalization and hijacking of the Afghan struggle for purposes other than Afghan self-determination. The Afghan resistance to the Soviets was a nationalist uprising that included intellectuals, students, farmers, bureaucrats, and shopkeepers as well as people from all the country's diverse ethnic groups. Their purpose was the liberation of their country, not the subjugation and radicalization of their society by bloodthirsty fanatics. Some Afghan field commanders with clear conscience and strategic insight also took a different approach than radical Afghan leaders supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia who -- with U.S. acquiescence -- sought to replace hard-line communist puppets with hard-line Islamist puppets.

Abdul Haq

Among these was the legendary Afghan resistance leader Abdul Haq. He realized that the Afghans' legitimate struggle for their independence and self-determination was being intentionally dragged towards fanatical indoctrination for the interests of others. In a letter to The New York Times he wrote, "We started our struggle with the full support and determination of our people and will continue regardless of the wishes or commands of others. We don't want to be an American or Soviet puppet...I would like you to be with us as a friend, not as somebody pulling the strings. The struggle of our nation is for the establishment of a system that assures human rights, social justice and peace. This system does not threaten any nation."

Haq openly criticized the United States and its allies' support for extremists among the resistance through the Pakistani government, warning U.S. officials of the dire consequences of such support for the radicalization of Afghan society through the support for extremists. In a 1994 interview with the Times, he warned that terrorists from all over the world were finding shelter in his increasingly chaotic country and that Afghanistan "is turning into poison and not only for us but for all others in the world. Maybe one day the Americans will have to send hundreds of thousands of troops to deal with it." Noting that Afghanistan had been a graveyard for both the British and Russians, he expressed concerns that soon American soldiers could be flying home in body bags due to Washington's support for extremists during the Afghan-Soviet War during the 1980s and then abandoning the country following the Communist government's overthrow in 1992.

Preference for Extremists

In a 2006 interview on the PBS documentary "The Return of the Taliban," U.S. Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance Peter Tomsen observed how the leadership of the Pakistani army "wanted to favor Gulbuddin Hekmatyar with seventy percent of the American weapons coming into the country, but the ISI and army leadership's game plan was to put Hekmatyar top down in Kabul, even though he was viewed by the great majority of Afghans -- it probably exceeded 90 percent -- of being a Pakistani puppet, as unacceptable as the Soviet puppets that were sitting in Kabul during the communist period. However, that was what the [Pakistani] generals wanted to create: a strategic Islamic [ally] with a pro-Pakistani Afghan in charge in Kabul."

Hekmatyar was extremely useful to Pakistan not only because he was rabidly anticommunist, but also because -- unlike most other mujahideen leaders less favored by Washington -- he wasn't an Afghan nationalist, and was willing to support the agenda of hard-line Pakistani military and intelligence leaders. Pakistan's support for radical Muslim domination has been in part for keeping the long-running territorial dispute with Afghanistan over Pashtun areas suppressed. Islamist radicals like Hekmatyar, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and later the Taliban mullahs tended to de-emphasize state borders in favor of uniting with the Muslim Umma (community of believers) wherever it may be -- in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, the Middle East, or Central Asia.

Many State Department officials were wary of U.S. support for Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John Kelly was quoted as saying that Hekmatyar "is a person who has vehemently attacked the United States on a number of issues.... I think he is a person with whom we do not need to have or should not have much trust." However, even when the State Department -- over CIA objections -- succeeded in cutting back on U.S. support for Hezb-e-Islami, U.S. ally Saudi Arabia would then increase its aid and, with CIA assistance, recruited thousands of Arab volunteers to join the fight, including a young Saudi businessman named Osama bin Laden.

The renowned journalist Ahmed Rashid stated in his book *the Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* that "CIA chief William Casey committed CIA support to a long-standing ISI initiative to recruit radical Muslims from around the world to come to Pakistan and fight with the Afghan Mujahideen. The ISI had encouraged this since 1982 and by now all the other players had their reasons for supporting the idea. President Zia aimed to cement Islamic unity, turn Pakistan into the leader of the Muslim world and foster an Islamic opposition in Central Asia. Washington wanted to demonstrate that the entire Muslim world was fighting the Soviets Union alongside the Afghans and their American benefactors. And the Saudis saw an opportunity both to promote Wahabbism and get rid of its disgruntled radicals...which would eventually turn their hatred against the Soviets on their own regimes and the Americans."

After having their country largely destroyed and its social fabric torn apart as pawns in a Cold War rivalry, the Soviets were finally forced out in 1989 and the communist regime was overthrown two years later.

While Hizb-e-Islami and other U.S. and Pakistani-backed groups weren't truly representative of the Afghan people, they had become the best-armed as a result of their foreign support. Wanting power for themselves, they soon turned the capital city of Kabul into rubble as the remaining infrastructure surviving from the Soviet-Afghan war was destroyed by a senseless civil war.

Afghanistan became a failed state. In the three years following the fall of the Communist regime, at least 25,000 civilians were killed in Kabul by indiscriminate shelling by Hezb-e-Islami and other factions. There was no proper functioning government. Educational institutions, from elementary schools to university buildings, weren't spared in the violence. Most of the teachers and students again joined refugees in the neighboring countries. The chaos and suffering created conditions such that when the Pakistani-backed Taliban emerged promising stability and order, they were welcomed in many parts of the country.

Once in power, the Taliban -- made up of students from the same refugee religious institutions promoted and encouraged by the United States and its allies -- shrouded Afghan society in the darkness of totalitarianism and illiteracy. They didn't value modern scientific education. They barred girls from school. With the help of Arab recruits originally brought in with support of the United States to fight the Soviets, they destroyed Afghan cultural heritage and attempted to transform Afghanistan into a puritanical theocracy. Fanatics and criminals from all over the world found safe-haven in Afghanistan, thanks to the blunders made by U.S. policymakers who created, promoted, and encouraged fanaticism against the Soviet Union.

In October 2001, in an interview with Newsweek, Abdul Haq said, " Why are the Arabs here? The U.S. brought the Arabs to Pakistan and Afghanistan [during the Soviet war]. Washington gave them money, gave them training, and created 10 or 15 different fighting groups. The U.S. and Pakistan worked together. The minute the pro-Communist regime collapsed, the Americans walked away and didn't even clean up their shit. They brought this problem to Afghanistan."

One week after this interview, Abdul Haq -- an opponent of the 2001 U.S. intervention and one of the few Afghans capable of uniting his country under a nationalist banner -- was captured by the Taliban and later executed. U.S. forces in the area ignored pleas for assistance to rescue him and his comrades while they were being pursued and in the period soon after their capture.

Afghans are still paying the price for the Taliban's continued destruction in Afghanistan from their bases in Pakistan. Taliban remnants are killing and threatening school staff members and burning down educational facilities. Their heinous crimes mean that the young minds needed to drag the country out from current miserable situation are being deprived of their desperately needed education. And, despite strong evidence of ongoing support for the Taliban by elements of the ISI and the Pakistani military, the Bush administration continued to send billions of dollars worth of arms and other support for the Musharraf dictatorship in Pakistan.

Implications for Today

The consequences of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan through the 1980s and 1990s played a major role in the Taliban's rise and al-Qaeda's subsequent sanctuary. The September 11 attacks brought the United States directly into battle in Afghanistan for the first time, and U.S. troops are to this day fighting the forces of former Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami allies.

The United States has made many errors during the more than eight years of fighting, but one of most dangerous was repeating the tragic mistake of placing short-term alliances ahead of the Afghanistan's long-term stability. During the 1980s, the United States was so focused on defeating the Soviets and the Afghan communists that an alliance was made with Islamist extremists, who ended up contributing to the country's destruction. In this decade, the United States has been so focused on defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda it's made alliances with an assortment of drug lords, opium magnates, militia leaders, and other violent and corrupting elements which have contributed to the country's devastation still further.

There's no easy answer to Afghanistan's ongoing tragic situation. Nor is the question of the most

appropriate role the United States can now play after contributing so much to this tragedy.

What's important, however, is recognizing that Afghanistan's fate belongs to the people of Afghanistan. Indeed, any further efforts by the United States to play one faction off against the other for temporary political gain won't only add to that country's suffering but -- as we became tragically aware on a September morning eight years ago -- could some day bring the violence home to American shores.