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# THE TALIBAN AND THE CIVIL WAR ENTANGLEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Civil wars and revolution are instruments that may be used by those who want to bring about a change in a country. However, such change comes with a heavy price when existing structures are transformed drastically from one form to another. The use of these tools comes at high cost as it entails great chaos and destruction. Usually a revolution is followed by a civil war, as the change is not acceptable to some and strong resistance follows. But a civil war can occur without a revolution. Because of its protracted nature, the Afghan civil war has passed through different phases. Afghanistan's case is unique because at first it was the socialist revolution of 1978 that started the civil war. But the revolution did not bring about the change envisaged. The revolutionaries were not able to enlist the support of the Afghan masses, because they were not convinced about their program and ideals. The civil war that erupted then still continues.

The Taliban emerged in Afghanistan's political scene with the avowed objective of ending the civil war and bringing peace to the country. In this article, while I will make passing references to the earlier efforts of the Taliban to conclude the civil war in Afghanistan, the focus here will be on the current phase of the civil war in which the Taliban are the dominant force. While waging war against the Northern Alliance, the Taliban now control 90% of Afghanistan. They are putting all their efforts into achieving a complete victory. Ironically, the Taliban remain entangled in the civil war, despite their aim to disentangle it. During their five years of de facto rule, the Taliban are also trying to gain international legitimacy. However, such recognition has not been granted to them. This article will conclude by showing

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how regional powers have a stake in maintaining the status quo in Afghanistan.

## The Roots of the Civil War in Afghanistan

Civil wars are costly because they damage the entire infrastructure of countries. The Afghan case is no exception, which has seen many players both national and international trying to enforce their own agendas and seek their national interests through the conflict. The country itself has mostly been poor and of little economic importance internationally. However, Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads between Iran, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea, and India has given its mountain passes a significance for centuries. This significance has been noted by the famous poet Mohammed Iqbal, who described Afghanistan as the "heart of Asia," while Lord Curzon, one of the most famous British viceroys of India, called it the "cockpit of Asia."<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary times, Afghanistan's strategic significance has been enhanced because it lies close to several energy-rich countries in Central Asia. The country straddles a major route for the transport of energy resources to viable markets and thrusts Afghanistan into the game of international oil and gas politics. The country's geographic position has contributed the single most important element to the shaping of its history, ethnic diversity, economy, and political situation in the region and the world. Unfortunately, political geography also has contributed to the continuation of its civil war.

The current civil war is now two decades old. The Afghan war has been bloody and destructive. Out of the country's population of nearly 17 million, about one million Afghans have been killed in the war so far. In addition, around five million Afghans have become refugees, and around two to three million people are displaced across different regions of the country. By rough estimates, there are about eight million anti-personnel and two million anti-tank mines in Afghanistan. The infrastructure and institutions of the state have largely been destroyed. According to the United Nations (U.N.), socioeconomic conditions of the population are among the worst in the world. Health care is rudimentary and many are without access to basic healthcare provision. Maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world. Given the amount of destruction, Afghanistan will require massive reconstruction and rebuilding once the war is ended.

The Afghans have paid a heavy price for the ongoing civil war: destruction, death, disabled bodies, refugees and displacement, and above all disunity. The country's citizens are a disillusioned people who do not know their direction and future. Efforts to end the civil war in Afghanistan have

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1. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 7.

not been successful. The Taliban, one of the war's by-products, have been making efforts to restore peace but have not yet been able to steer the country toward complete peace and order. In this article, I will show how the complexity of the Afghan situation has produced added difficulties for the various actors engaged in the quest to end the conflict.

## Theoretical Perspectives on the Termination of Civil Wars

Once civil wars begin, they become almost impossible to end short of a decisive military victory. Nonetheless, almost half of all such wars since 1940 did involve serious negotiations designed to find early solutions to the conflicts. Unfortunately, less than half again of these negotiations (about one-fifth) actually resulted in successful peace settlements. The majority of these negotiations failed. Despite what appeared to be strong incentives to stop fighting and what often appeared to be strong yearnings for peace, groups rarely agreed to settle for compromise settlements that would allow them either to share political power or peacefully part company. In the end, the combatants eventually returned to war.

Settlements to civil wars can have the unanticipated effect of making groups less secure than they would be if they continued the war. This outcome occurs because a settlement leaves groups physically intermingled with their former enemies. Moreover, a settlement to a civil war could institutionalize an unsettling balance of power among the participants. In each of these scenarios, it is the fear of the negative consequences of settlement that convinces groups to choose the more secure but violent path of war. According to Paul Piller,

[i]f the stakes are chiefly indivisible, so that neither side can get most of what it wants without depriving the others of most of what it wants, negotiations are less apt to be successful. Stakes are usually less divisible in civil wars than in other types; the issue is whether one side or the other shall control the country. . . . The struggle for power becomes a struggle for survival as the options narrow to the single one of a fight to the finish.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the problem of civil war resolution has been viewed mainly as one of war termination. Civil wars are seldom analyzed within the scope of the more difficult but accurate problem of rebuilding a state from the chaos of rampant anarchy. Resolving a civil war is never simply a matter of agreeing to a cease-fire. That would only be the case if functioning, legitimate state structures already existed and a new leader merely needed to be appointed.

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2. Barbara F. Walter, *Exiting from War: Cooperating under Even the Most Difficult Conditions* (New York: Institute of War and Peace Studies, 1996), p. 5.

The settlement of civil war will always entail the accommodation of new groups into government and a new political system to support multiparty rule. Domestic cooperation under anarchy is difficult and often breaks down.

Barbara Walter has synthesized some of the theories on the causes for the continuation of civil wars. According to her, civil wars can be divided into four broad categories: (1) historical hatreds, namely, groups fight because they hate each other and have no desire to cooperate; (2) conflicts of interest in which groups fighting for control of a single state inevitably encounter conflicts of interest that are difficult to reconcile; (3) greedy elites, that is, stubborn, threatened, or self-interested leaders often with little to lose by continuing to fight; and (4) security dilemmas in which fear and uncertainty during the war can ultimately sabotage cooperation efforts and perpetuate violence.

A study of the causes for the continuation of the Afghan civil war encompasses all of these reasons. At certain times during the war, groups have placed strong obstacles to other groups. Therefore, the actors in Afghanistan's civil war do not entertain the route of negotiations and choose instead to continue pursuing war. In the Afghan civil war, different players have participated in it and changed their roles over time, but none have been willing to negotiate in a flexible manner to conclude a settlement.

The Saur Revolution of 1978 cannot be ignored in any analysis of the Afghan civil war nor can the current conflict be delinked from it. According to Barnett Rubin, the 1978 revolution introduced Marxist-oriented radical reforms in Afghanistan that led to disruptive changes in the social, economic, and political structures of a predominantly feudo-tribal society. The reforms were intended to bring about much-needed economic change by abolishing the oligarchic power arrangements that, in the judgment of Afghan revolutionaries, had prevented progress and development in the past.

While the substance of various reforms was highly desirable and could even be considered fundamental to any process of development in a feudal and tribal society, the political form in which the reforms were articulated contrasted with the popular cultural and social norms of the Afghan masses. Specifically, the landowning and religious establishment feared losses of economic and social privileges if the reforms were implemented. This led to resistance from the masses and the growth of countrywide opposition. Despite the fact that the opposition was divided and loosely organized along ethnic and regional lines, it effectively exploited the contradictions between the ideology of the regime and popular Afghan cultural norms. The characterization of the reforms as un-Islamic and the Soviet support for the regime worked effectively in favor of the resistance. The active involvement of the Soviet military forces in suppressing the Afghan resistance in order to stabilize the Marxist regime further strengthened the opposition forces.

This period saw the Soviets and the socialist regime locked in a struggle against the Islamist opposition. The ideological and social cleavages put them on opposite sides. External powers got involved backing their own favorites in the war, exacerbating the cold war rivalry. The conclusion of the Geneva Accords in 1988 produced a shift in the war, as the agreement eliminated one major cause of the war, the Soviet factor. The Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan by 1989; consequently, the Marxist regime lost support and finally stepped down to hand over power to the *mujahideen* (freedom fighters).

In 1992, the Northern Alliance was established in opposition to the communist government led by President Najibullah. The group consisted of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, former head of Najibullah's militia forces; Ahmed Shah Masood, head of the Jamiat-i-Islami Party; and Hizb-i-Wahadat, a pro-Shi'a party. The resistance groups that fought the Soviet troops and defeated the Soviet-backed government in Kabul then turned on each other. On becoming a ruling elite—a goal of any combatant in a civil war—a greedy power struggle starts among the different factions as each wants a greater share and say in the government. During the early stages of the civil war, there were also seven factions operating from Pakistan: the Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic party) led by Gulbaddin Hekmatyar; the Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic society) led by Burhanuddin Rabbani; the Ittihad-i-Islami (Islamic unity) led by Rasul Sayyaf; the Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic party) led by Maulvi Yunus Khalis; the Mahaz Milli Islami (NIFA, the National Islamic front of Afghanistan) led by Syed Ahmed Gailani; the Jabha-i—Nijat-i-Milli (National salvation front) led by Sibghatullah Mujjadidi; and Harakat-e-Inqilabi-i-Islami (Movement of the Islamic revolution) led by Maulvi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi. As they could not bridge their political differences, the civil war took the form of an intra-*mujahideen* struggle. Peace remained elusive despite U.N. efforts.

Amid this turbulence and confusion, another force, the Taliban, a united traditionalist Islamic contender, emerged in 1994. By 1996, they took control of Kabul and pushed the *mujahideen* back into their opposition barracks. At the time, a war-weary population welcomed the Taliban forces. However, the ousted Rabbani regime did not give up its claim to be the legitimate government and has therefore opposed the Taliban. As a result, complete military victory eluded them and since then the Taliban have engaged in a fight against the Northern Alliance.

### The Taliban's Changing Role in the Civil War

The Taliban was one of many groups that participated in the struggle against Soviet forces. When the Taliban launched their own movement across Af-

ghanistan, they began to catch the attention of the international media. Once they overran the country militarily so swiftly and yet so peacefully, they simply could not go unnoticed. A lot of theories started emerging about their origin, characteristics, and objectives. Nevertheless, they were and still are a complex phenomenon. The Taliban's leadership has been calculatedly mysterious about the origins of the movement. After the Soviet withdrawal, Taliban leaders had gone back to their seminaries in order to complete their studies.

However, they were not happy with what went on in the country during rule by the *mujahideen*. They felt that their sacrifices were going to waste as power wrangling and corruption continued. This motivated them to start the movement. Its major missions were to bring peace and order and implement *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) in what they believed to be its true sense. According to Mullah Omar, one of the key Taliban leaders, the Taliban "took up arms to achieve the aims of the Afghan jihad and save our people from further suffering at the hands of the so-called *mujahideen*. We had complete faith in God Almighty. We never forgot that. He can bless us with victory or plunge us into defeat."<sup>3</sup>

The rapid emergence of the Islamic Movement of Taliban of Afghanistan led to many positive expectations. As an initially peaceful, neutral, and non-greedy force, they appeared on the scene when the Afghans had lost all faith in the country's leadership. Their early critics did not predict that the Taliban would make any difference in the outcome of the war or be able to manage success. With little fighting, the Taliban took control over the southern part of the country within a few months. There they disarmed militia commanders and reestablished law and order by applying a rather strict interpretation of Islamic law. With a piecemeal approach, the Taliban soon occupied larger territories and became a formidable force.

Their agenda was clear and convincing for the war-weary public as the aims of the movement unfolded. According to Kamal Matinuddin, the immediate goals of the new movement were to disarm all rival militia, fight against those who did not accept their request, enforce Islamic law in the areas they liberated, and retain all areas the Taliban captured.<sup>4</sup> As a truly grassroots Islamist movement, the Taliban could rely on the support of the masses. By this time, the loyalty of the *mujahideen* to their respective factions was not strong. They could be purchased or persuaded to switch sides whenever they found it in their interest to do so. In town after town, armed men deserted their leaders and joined the Taliban. Desertions brought weapons as the Rus-

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3. Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 23.

4. Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 26.

sians had left behind a heavily armed country. As the Taliban marched along, they picked up guns, mortars, tanks, and even aircraft.

What was unusual about the Taliban's strategy is that they were relatively successful in avoiding direct fighting with other potential rival groups. They adopted a simple strategy that was markedly different and peaceful. When approaching an unconquered territory, the Taliban would first send a delegation of *ulama* (clerics) to talk to any local militia commanders. The *ulama* then invited them to implement Islamic law and establish peace by handing over their arms and ammunition. These clerics argued that the weapons belonged to the Bait-ul-Mal (National treasury) under the rule of a single government. If the local militia commander agreed to the request by the delegation, then there was no fighting. In case that the delegation of *ulama* failed to secure a peaceful surrender, the Taliban then would send a second delegation including elderly pious people of the area along with a Taliban representative. If the second delegation failed to secure a surrender to their demands, then the Taliban would take up arms against the hold-out militia.

Since disarming the local militia was the foremost priority of the Taliban, the latter's stockpile of weapons kept increasing every time they overran a province. Most of the time, the weapons were handed over peacefully because local militia commanders considered the Taliban to be a neutral, even a benign, force. Moreover, local commanders were eager to avoid further bloodshed. Though simple, the Taliban's peaceful strategy—but with the veiled threat of force—has been difficult to understand. It could be argued that during the initial stages of the Afghan civil war, the Taliban achieved most of their victories without waging a fight.

Using this unique strategy, the Taliban continued to make headway to the capital without much resistance from the former rulers. They took control of three of Afghanistan's largest cities: Herat in 1995, Kabul in 1996, and Mazar Sharif in 1997. They did it with few casualties among their troops and even fewer among civilians. Initially, they were the only force capable of restoring law and order. By 1997, the Taliban controlled around 90% of the country by disarming and, in certain cases, incorporating the former militia commanders and assorted *mujahideen*.

Restoration of peace and order are prerequisites to end civil war. As Barnett Rubin has documented, the Taliban denounced the failure of the *mujahideen* leaders to establish security. They accused the former militia commanders of becoming thieves and even rapists. They tore down all checkpoints set up to extort money and refused all bribes at their own. They cleared the bandits off the roads and, instead of slaughtering their opponents,

merely disarmed them. Their message seemed simple and appealing to most Afghans: peace, order, and Islamic law.<sup>5</sup>

Establishing peace in a country like Afghanistan is by no means an easy task, particularly in light of how long the civil war has been underway. Even some critics of the Taliban talk about the restoration of peace in Taliban-controlled areas. "Before the Taliban, this country belonged to warlords, and the simple act of going to visit my village was an impossibility," said a U.N. official who is an Afghan. "My daughters sit in the house and cry to me: We want education. This is heartbreaking, but peace is the first priority for people here. The Taliban must be given credit for accomplishing this."<sup>6</sup>

In his in-depth analysis, Franz Schurmann concluded that it is the power of the Taliban's ideas and the stability they have brought to war-torn Afghanistan that makes them so frightening. Their proven effectiveness in maintaining law and order as well as their adherence to the commandments of Islam and cultural norms, which see traditional Afghan women as being obedient rather than challenging to men, seem to have won over the predominantly illiterate peasants and working class.

After so many years of debilitating warfare concentrated in and around the cities, the urbane, educated elite who would challenge these norms have vanished. More importantly, for centuries the great mass of Afghans has thrived under the most primitive political and economic conditions, while the past two decades have brought only war, poverty, and insecurity. For most Afghans, therefore, their present situation under the Taliban appears to be, if not ideal, the best among possible alternatives. The removal of small arms and heavy weapons from public view is an accomplishment of immense proportions as weapons were everywhere and used indiscriminately.

The situation in the territory controlled by the Northern Alliance is quite different. The opposition controls a tiny but significant 10% of the country in the north. There, people are so fearful of crime that they often doubt the advantages of the relatively liberal order under which they live. It appears that in Afghanistan, freedom and safety are opposites. The Alliance had been instrumental in bringing down Najibullah's government in April 1992, but it disintegrated shortly after its victory because of power struggles within the group. However, when the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, the three participant groups resurrected the Northern Alliance, in opposition once again. Accurate figures regarding the total mobilizing force of the alliance are not available, but by a rough estimate they would number around 80,000 troops. In contrast, the Taliban's active forces number about 100,000.

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5. Barnett Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 140.

6. Barry Bearak, "Afghans Ruled by Taliban: Poor, Isolated, but Secure," *New York Times* (NYT), October 10, 1998.



The nominal head of the Northern Alliance is Burhanuddin Rabbani, although in reality he shares power with his primary military backer, Ahmed Shah Masood. Both of them belong to the Jamiat-i-Islami, which is a predominantly Tajik Islamist party. Rabbani's regime controls most of the country's embassies abroad and retains Afghanistan's seat in the U.N. Ahmed Shah Masood built Afghanistan's most sophisticated military-political organization, the *Shura-yi-Nazar-i-Shamali* (Supervisory Council of the North, SCN). The SCN coordinated Jamiat commanders and also created region-wide forces that developed into Masood's Urdu-i-Islami (Islamic Army). Rabbani and Masood get their main support from the northeastern, largely Tajik portion of the country. Due to his military performance and control of the strategic Panjsher Valley, Masood is popularly known as the "lion of Panjsher."

General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his ethnic Uzbek Junbish-i-Milli (National movement) Party also form part of the Northern Alliance. The latter's base of support lies primarily among the Sunni Muslim Uzbeks. A large number of fighters forming part of this organization (the numbers vary between 15,000 and 16,000) had a reputation of being the best-equipped forces. The Hizb-i-Wahadat-i-Islami yi-Afghanistan (Islamic unity party of Afghanistan) is the principal Shi'a party in Afghanistan; its support is mainly among the ethnic Hazara group. This group was originally formed under Iranian sponsorship in order to unite eight Shi'a parties. Its leader is Karim Khalili, who is based in Hazarajat.<sup>7</sup>

Until they captured Kabul in 1996, the Taliban expressed no desire to rule the country. Ever since then, the Taliban have committed themselves to conquering the entire country. The problems with the Taliban began when they started acting as the ruling elite. Eventually, their growing international isolation plus their ineffective administration alienated large numbers of Afghans. As the civil war continues, they are becoming more rigid. This attitude has doomed expectations that the civil war will end. Indeed, while the Taliban's achievements as a peace force had good beginnings, as the years have passed they seem to have become entangled in the civil war that they intended to disentangle. During the early period of the civil war, the Taliban did achieve some remarkable accomplishments, above all reviving the lost trust of the Afghans. However, their strong opposition to the forces of the North has earned them a reputation for inflexibility.

The Taliban transformed themselves from a movement into a ruling government. Their main priorities were to bring peace while at the same time to stay in power to implement their vision of an Islamic state. But resistance to this vision remains strong and the Northern Alliance is still giving the

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7. Ibid.

Taliban a difficult time. Despite the relative isolation of the Northern Alliance's forces and their extended lines of communication, they have been able to continue owing to military assistance from outside governments. This aid has come in a variety of forms, ranging from the direct transfer of materiel to the dispatch of military advisors and support personnel, albeit in limited numbers. Next to none of these transfers have been publicly documented via submissions to the U.N.'s register on conventional arms. Ironically, much of the Northern Alliance's military support comes from nations participating in the so-called "Six-Plus-Two" contact group (Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Russia and the United States) whose members have publicly pledged not to provide military support to any Afghan combatants and prevent the use of member state territories for such purposes.

The Northern Alliance's main suppliers are Iran and Russia, with secondary roles played by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (at least until 1998), Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow denies that it is arming the Afghan rebels. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Masood has said that he receives much of his equipment from the Russian mafia, not the Russian government. However, Russia has reportedly provided Dostum with 500 T-55 and T-62 tanks that are used against areas that oppose his rule. Russia has also supplied him with a large number of Frog 7 and Luna M missiles.<sup>8</sup>

The assistance from some Central Asian republics has been an important source of support to the Northern Alliance. Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov has clandestinely supported his fellow Uzbeks. His country has supplied the Northern Alliance with tanks, aircraft, and technical personnel. This support has been provided with the expectation that Uzbek-dominated provinces in northern Afghanistan would provide a buffer against the spread of fundamentalism. The secular regime of Turkmenistan's president Sapamurad Niyazov has publicly joined other Central Asian republics in articulating the dangers of the Afghan civil war spreading into the neighboring states. However, the government of Turkmenistan is not too keen in getting embroiled and providing overt backing to those fighting the Taliban.

Anti-Taliban forces are being trained in a dozen or so camps located along Iran's eastern border. Since May 1997, 6,000 Afghan military personnel have been dispatched from these camps to various war fronts in northern Afghanistan. Most of Iran's aid has been going to the Hizb-i-Wahadat Party. Iran has also purchased two Su-22 and one Su-24 fighter-bombers for Ahmed Shah Masood and sent Iranian pilots to help plan air operations for the Northern Alliance.

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8. James Risen, "Russians Are Back in Afghanistan, Aiding Rebels," *NYT*, July 27, 1998.

Clearly, the challenges to the Taliban have grown over the years, particularly in the political and economic field. They continue fighting on the one hand, while on the other they are increasingly worried about their growing political isolation. However, isolation has not moderated them. They staunchly believe in their ideology, which makes it difficult for others to understand them as something other than an extremist force. Economically, they are in a vulnerable position because they are operating in a war-devastated country and the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan have been targeted for heavy international sanctions.

### The Formation of the Taliban Government and Its Effect on the Civil War

By 1997, the Taliban had accomplished major military successes in the civil war. After the capture of Kabul, they also began to prove themselves in the political arena. They felt the need of forming an alternate government to counter the legitimacy of Rabbani's regime. Aware that peace and political stability in the country would ultimately make them a credible force, the Taliban instituted a framework of *shuras* (consultative bodies) to achieve those aims. The most visible Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund, then asked the *shuras* to give some political shape to the movement.

The Taliban also gave the country a new official name, changing it from the Islamic State of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in October 1997. The group justified the new name as reflecting the ground realities. However, the opposition has termed the change to be an undemocratic move. A prominent Afghan intellectual, Rasul Amin, in a BBC Pushto Service interview spoke of the new name as something that, to him, felt as though it was a transplant from the Arab world. However, Mullah Wakil Ahmed, a senior Taliban leader and spokesman of the movement, said it was not the first time that Afghanistan's name has been changed. In the past, words such as "republic" or "democratic" were added to Afghanistan's name. The emirate system, however, is not acceptable to the opposition, as Taliban possess no popular or legal mandate to govern or impose such. But for the Taliban, changing the country's appellation represents breaking with the past and reforming the political system.

The Taliban's initially loose bureaucratic structures have been transformed, too. Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund was elected Amir-ul-Momineen (Commander of the believers) by an assembly of about 1,200 invited *ulama* in the city of Kandahar in spring 1996. Since then, Mullah Omar has been at the top of the ruling structure in Afghanistan. Though he remains in the background, his word is final and almost has the force of law in the movement. Mullah Omar lives simply, known for having few needs and with no particular taste in food or dress. He is alarmingly careless about his per-

TABLE 1 *Ethnic Composition and Cabinet Portfolios of the 10-Member Shura Based in Kandahar*

<i>Names</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>
Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund	Ghilzai Pushtun	<i>Amir-ul-Monineen</i>
Mullah Mohammad Rabbani	Pushtun	Chairman of the Caretaker Council Deputy Commander of the Taliban movement
Mullah Mohammad Fadel	Pushtun	Minister of Defense
Mullah Mohammad Ghaus	Pushtun	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Mullah Mohammad Hassan	Pushtun	Minister of Security
Maulvi Ghaisuddin Agha	Uzbek	Minister of Education
Maulvi Abdul Raqib	Uzbek	Minister for Refugees
Qari Deen Mohammad	Tajik	Minister for Planning
Mullah Abdul Razzaq	Tajik	Member Supervisory Council
Maulvi Abdul Saleem	Uzbek	Deputy Minister of Education

sonal security, is not a gifted orator, and his study of religion is limited as he was not able to complete his religious education because of the war. Despite this background, he inspires confidence among his supporters because of his piety and the strength of his beliefs.

Mullah Omar is assisted by a loose network of *shuras*. A central *shura* comprising 10 members was established in Kandahar (see Table 1). All directives and policies were initiated from here and it virtually became the capital of the Taliban-controlled areas (indeed, Kandahar is the current headquarters of the Taliban movement). Aside from the core group of 10, meetings of the original *shura* also saw participation from military commanders, tribal leaders, and *ulama*; this indeterminate structure is one of the key features of the Taliban's central *shura*. Mullah Omar also tried to maintain a balance between the Pushtuns and non-Pushtuns in the *shura*. The Taliban have been criticized for dividing Afghanistan along ethnic lines. However, despite the effort to integrate non-Pushtuns into the *shura*, the Taliban have not been able to shed their Pushtun moorings and have not been considered as impartial regarding other ethnicities.

The takeover of Kabul and the formation of a central *shura* reflected the Taliban's desire to have a more lasting stay on the political scene. The central *shura* is assisted by a cabinet, a *shura* in Kabul, and a military *shura*. These three bodies report to the central *shura* in Kandahar. Clearly, these administrative structures are different from the past governments. For instance, a talib (religious student) in a ministerial post is something unknown in Afghan history. Nevertheless, even the Taliban have found that control-

TABLE 2 *Military Command Structure of the Taliban*

<i>Position</i>	<i>Individual</i>
Commander in Chief	Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund
Military Chief of Staff	Mullah Mohmmad Hassan
Chief of the Army Staff	Mullah Rahmatullah Akhund
Army Division Chief	Mullah Muhammad Jumma Khan
Army Division Chief	Mullah Muhammad Yunus
Army Division Chief	Mullah Mohammad Gul
Army Division Chief	Mullah Mohammad Aziz Khan
Armored Force No. 4	Mullah Mohammad Zahir

ling a territory without a clear administrative system is not possible in contemporary times.

The formation of these *shuras* was aimed at creating an efficient government. After they captured Kabul, the Taliban formed a six-member Provisional Ruling Council, headed by Mullah Mohammad Rabbani. This was followed by the formation of the Kabul *Shura* of Acting Ministers in 1999. The Kabul *Shura* deals with day-to-day problems of the government, the city, and the Kabul military front. Important policy recommendations are conveyed to the Kandahar *Shura*, where decisions are actually made. To restore and maintain peace in the provinces, the Taliban appoints governors who are from provinces other than those where they are serving. This policy appears to have been welcomed by the people. As for the military *shura*, it is a loose organizational body that plans strategy and can implement some tactical decisions (see Table 2). The military *shura* appears to have no strategic decision-making powers. Military strategy, key personnel appointments, and the allocation of funds for offensives are decided upon by the Amir-ul-Momineen.

Although their government has few resources and many parts barely function at all, the Taliban have adopted a discourse of Afghan nationalism in addition to their Islamic traditionalism. Despite their amorphous political leadership, the Taliban claim to be trying to recreate a centralized Afghan state. In areas under their control, they have appointed provincial governors and administrators of districts, cities, and towns from the center.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Taliban leadership is that top government officials often switch from the battlefield to the ministry and back again, each time following the orders from Mullah Omar. In one sense, this produces remarkable flexibility among the Taliban hierarchy as they all act as both administrators and military commanders. This flexibility in the

9. Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban," *Current History*, vol. 98, no. 625 (February 1999), p. 81.

military command has allowed the leadership to maintain better ties with the rank-and-file fighters than might otherwise be the case. However, the Taliban administration in Kabul has faced problems. For instance, while any minister is away at the front no decisions can be taken in that ministry. Moreover, government ministers are working without pay, something unheard of in modern times. They do not use government resources for private use, curtailing expenses and refraining from indulgence in squandering and extravagance. Regular salaries are paid only to professional civil servants and trained soldiers drawn from the former communist army.

As for the Northern Alliance, until August 1998 the areas it controlled had four main administrative and political centers: Mazar Sharif, which some groups aspired to turn into a temporary capital for a government in exile of the Islamic State of Afghanistan; Talauqan, the headquarters of Masood's SCN; Shibergan, the location of Dostum's headquarters; and Bamiyan, the headquarters of the Hizb-i-Wahadat. The Taliban have made inroads into these areas, too, because the entire political administrative fabric of northern Afghanistan has broken down. Only one of Afghanistan's provinces is now entirely under the Northern Alliance's control: Badakhshan, an inaccessible mountainous region in the extreme northeast of the country. There are also neighboring valleys to the west, and a few enclaves in the Afghan interior, over which the Taliban have not yet been able to consolidate control. Some elements of the former state administration have survived, but political power resides individually in the various armed groups rather than in a unitary civilian structure. The groups maintain their own military and command structures; they do not have a unified strategy for the joint mobilization of resources in their struggle against the Taliban.

The areas controlled by the Taliban have been subjected to drastic changes to personal behavior. The Taliban have put a ban on wine and television, which is perceived to be immoral. There is also complete restriction on music, photography, and the painting of living things. The shaving off of one's beard or trimming it less than a fistful is prohibited, as is having a Western hairstyle. Gambling, betting, pigeon flying, dog-racing, and sodomy are also strictly forbidden.

The Taliban have gained international notoriety because they have banned women from working. Women are obligated to observe strict *purdah* (lit. veiling, also refers to covering of bodies). Girls have been stopped from going to schools. The Taliban have told all women working outside their homes to stay at home. Although women who had been working will continue to receive their salaries, the Taliban claim that there is no need for them to work any longer. They claim that these restrictions have been put in place to protect the honor and dignity of women. At the same time, Taliban officials have said that they are not against women working or receiving an edu-

cation. The Taliban claim that they need time and resources to create the proper environment and right texts and curriculum for women's education. The Taliban's behavior is modeled after the Islamic revolution in Iran. Educational establishments remained closed for many years in the aftermath of that revolution. They remained closed until the Iranian revolutionaries formally established an educational syllabus conforming to their own principles.

The Taliban have stated that they wish to establish a pure, Islamic state. In their view, this means that women have no place in the public arena. They are required to stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. The Taliban cling to the symbol of a protected woman. Women have to observe a strict dress code, wearing a *burqa* (a garment covering the body from head to toe) and trousers fully covering their ankles. While women had worn *burqa* in the pre-Taliban era, it had not been an enforced dress code.

The Taliban's edicts have had a severe impact on many other women who do not have a close male relative to accompany them in public. Hardest hit have been the country's estimated 30,000 widows, many of whom are the sole providers for their families. Some widows have been allowed to work in areas under the Taliban control, but even for them it is not easy to get permission. According to Taliban representatives, the current restrictions are said to be necessary because females are not safe outside their homes. Many women have strongly reacted to the Taliban policies despite the restrictive climate in Taliban-controlled areas. These women do not like what the Taliban have been professing. They want to work and continue with their education, but these rights are being denied to them. The justifications given by Taliban are not acceptable to the working and more enlightened urban Afghan women. It is therefore not surprising that women have become the most vocal critics of the Taliban.

The edicts against women also have predictably had a devastating impact on primary level education. Before the civil war, over four-fifths of primary school teachers were women. The majority of them are now jobless. The closure of schools has in turn affected children. Many orphaned children who once could make homes at schools are now forced to live on the streets. An international aid group in 1998 estimated 28,000 street children in Kabul alone.

Mullah Nuruddin Turabi, the Taliban minister of justice, defended the Taliban's domestic actions. He said, "It is not just a question of men wearing beards and women wearing *burqas*. . . . In Afghanistan every vice has to be stopped and every virtue promulgated."<sup>10</sup> The Taliban have established a new security service, the Ministry of Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice, for eradicating corruption and other vices from Afghan society. Ac-

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10. Michael Fathers, "Frozen in Time," *Time*, May 2000.

ording to Taliban tenets, their rules are a *jihad* (holy war) against sin, corruption, and cruelty. Therefore, those who do not abide by the Taliban edicts on personal behavior are strictly punished according to a strict application of Islamic law. Hence stoning to death, amputations (in case of robbery), and other forms of punishments are carried out in front of large crowds.

Nonetheless, a crisis of governance remains in Afghanistan. To supporters of the Taliban regime, its government is one that is accountable and representative of all ethnic groups. To many, the Taliban have restored Afghan culture. Afghan-style self-rule has been implemented in the provinces and the Taliban's supporters note that the country's civil administration and justice system are now based on Islamic and Afghan traditions. The opposition rejects this opinion and condemns the Taliban government of being unrepresentative and unaccountable.

While all the above-mentioned structures are functioning, the government faces tremendous challenges. The most obvious one is the government's unacceptability to and lack of recognition from the international system, let alone by the opposition. The political dealings that the government has had with others offer evidence of its credibility in the civil war. While the Taliban have major control of the country's land area, they have not yet had much success on the political front. Forming a government is not enough to end the civil war: the Taliban must gain acceptability both at home and abroad.

### The Taliban's International Legal Status

Recognition of a government in a civil war also helps in ending the conflict because both parties involved desire the political, economic, and military support that can come with it. Non-recognition of the Taliban government is an indicator of its standing in the international community. The recognition has not been forthcoming because of dissatisfaction with Taliban policies. Upon taking Kabul, the Taliban had immediately demanded from other states formal recognition as the only legitimate government of Afghanistan. They also demanded to be granted a seat in the U.N. General Assembly. However, they received neither. So far only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have recognized the Taliban government. In contrast, Burhanuddin Rabbani's Northern Alliance regime, despite its weak military position, has legitimacy and political backing from the world community, including the majority of the Islamic states. Most countries preserved the status quo and continued to allow the diplomatic missions of the Rabbani regime.

Recognition in international law involves acceptance by a state of a given entity that this recognized entity possesses an international legal personality and the rights and privileges that flow from it, or that it is the exclusive



representative of a body with international legal personality. The decision to grant or not to grant recognition is a political one within the sovereign discretion of individual states. Recognition in principle can be accorded to states or governments. As far as the state of Afghanistan itself is concerned, it has been recognized by a large number of countries, including all permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, for many years. However, where political power has fragmented to the extent that it has in Afghanistan in recent years, there may well be more than one group claiming to be the government. In fact, as has been outlined already, there are two governments within one country. One is militarily strong and controls a large population and territory but has no legal standing, while the other is recognized but has less control of Afghan territory.

Pakistan was the first country to grant international recognition to the Taliban's government. Their past links provided the basis for doing so. As noted earlier, virtually all of the Taliban leadership had been refugees in Pakistan. For several years, Taliban leaders studied in the *madrasas* (religious schools) affiliated with the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI) headed by Maulvi Fazul ur Rehman. Although it has not been conclusively proven that the Taliban are Pakistan's creation, much criticism along these lines and others has been leveled against it. Pakistan is said to have played a key role in turning Taliban into a functioning military force by providing training, logistical support, and equipment.

In 1997, Pakistan rooted its decision to recognize the Taliban government based on the fact that the latter was in effective control of most of Afghanistan's territory, including the capital. By the time recognition was given, the Taliban government occupied 90% of Afghanistan and oversaw a population that was representative of all of the country's ethnic groups. Since then Pakistan has been striving to propagate a positive image of the student militia and working to induce other neighboring countries to recognize them. Furthermore, Pakistan has been making persistent attempts to get the U.N. to adopt the vacant seat formula, which the Organization of Islamic Conferences had done during 1996.

Pakistan's ties with the Taliban have become increasingly complex owing to the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. Pakistan—a country of 140 million, mostly poor people—has been almost single-handedly housing and feeding the 1.2 million Afghan refugees living there since 1995, the year the U.N. stopped providing food and housing aid. Some of the Afghan refugees currently in Pakistan have been there since the 1980s, having fled the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the time, an estimated 3.2 million refugees lived in Pakistan, making it the largest caseload of refugees in the world.

Some of the refugees did return to Afghanistan. In 1994, approximately 77,000 went back with the assistance of the U.N. High Commission for Refu-

gees (UNHCR). An additional 76,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan on their own.<sup>11</sup> However, the years since then have seen a new wave of refugees flowing into Pakistan from northern Afghanistan. Many of the fresh refugees are fleeing the fighting there plus a devastating drought. This new wave has not been officially registered with any international organization. As a consequence, the statistics regarding refugees in Pakistan are unreliable. An influx of 30,000 Afghan refugees came to Pakistan in 2000 and it is estimated that more than 50,000 have crossed the border since then. In that year, Pakistan decided to close its border to stop further refugees because it could not absorb any more. However, its border was later reopened because of the deplorable condition of the refugees and pressure from international humanitarian relief agencies.

Aside from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are on the list of countries recognizing the Taliban's government. Saudi Arabia's came only a few days after Pakistan's. Until mid-1998, Islamabad and Riyadh were on the same political wavelength. Saudi Arabia supplied heavily subsidized fuel to the Taliban through Pakistan and also provided general funding. After 1998, problems between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan developed over the fate of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire who had been funding the Afghan *jihad*. The Taliban had promised Saudi Arabia that Osama bin Laden would not use his refuge in Afghanistan to support any acts of violence abroad. After Osama bin Laden was linked to the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, his continued refuge in Afghanistan became a major source of tension between Taliban and the U.S. on one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other.

Apart from these three countries, the Taliban have not managed to establish political ties with other states. This becomes a major constraint for a government of a country going through civil war. If the paramount objective is to end the civil war, the government has to direct its energies in this direction. It cannot expect the U.S. or other countries to come to its rescue.

The United States has been a major country involved in Afghanistan. Along with the Soviets, the U.S. had fed the civil war since the days of the cold war. When Taliban captured Kabul, the U.S. State Department announced it would establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban by sending an official to Kabul. This announcement was quickly retracted. The State Department spokesman Glyn Davies said the U.S. found nothing objectionable in the steps taken by the Taliban to impose Islamic law and described the Taliban as anti-modern rather than anti-Western. Some members of Con-

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11. Nasreen Ghufuran, "Refugees: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan" (paper presented at the conference, "The Challenge of Cooperation: South Asia and Beyond," Kathmandu, Nepal, December 1998).

gress supported the Taliban because their government appeared to serve the U.S. policy of isolating Iran. A Taliban regime would create a firmly Sunni buffer on Iran's border and potentially provide security for trade routes and pipelines that would break Iran's monopoly on Central Asia's southern trade routes.

But from its initial policy of acquiescence vis-à-vis the Taliban, the U.S. moved to the other extreme of rejecting them completely. The U.S. rejection was largely because of the pressure exerted by the feminist movement. The prominent feminist Zieba-Shorish Shamley persuaded many U.S. feminist groups to spearhead a signature campaign to mobilize support for Afghan women. Her efforts helped persuade former President Clinton to take a tougher stance against the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> Washington's denouncement of the Taliban also came in the backdrop of the presidential election in the U.S., as supporting a regime that held no respect for human rights would have negatively affected Clinton's position.<sup>13</sup>

In 1998, when the Taliban made great military gains against the forces of the North, they expected to gain recognition and a seat in the U.N.; they had major Afghan cities under their control and their rivals in retreat. Taliban representatives claimed that if recognition were granted to their government, they would allow a huge pipeline project to proceed that would carry oil and gas from Central Asia to lucrative markets in Pakistan and India. This pipeline would cut through the western part of Afghanistan. "Even before the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif and Taloqan, we were fully qualified for recognition," said deputy information minister Abdur Rahman Hotaki, referring to two key opposition bases captured by the militia. "The opposition gave people an excuse to deny us recognition and prevent us having the pipeline run through our country, but that excuse has now gone," he said. "All excuses blocking our recognition are gone. Therefore it is predicted they will revise their policy in view of the current realities," he said, adding that all "terms and conditions for a legitimate state" have been met.<sup>14</sup>

But the Taliban encountered problems with international organizations. In 1999, the U.N. proposed imposing sanctions against the Taliban when it issued Security Council Resolution 1267. Adopted unanimously by the Security Council on October 15, the resolution demanded that the Taliban turn over Osama bin Laden without further delay to authorities in a country where he will be brought to justice. Until the Taliban comply, the resolution requires U.N. member states to deny permission for Taliban-owned, -leased, or -operated aircraft to land in or take off from their territory. It also calls for the

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12. Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 180–82.

13. P. Stobodan, "The Afghan Conflict and Regional Security," *Strategic Analysis* (August 1999), p. 724.

14. *Frontier Post* (Peshawar), January 14, 2001.

freezing of funds and other financial resources, including funds derived from property owned or controlled, directly or indirectly, by the Taliban. The latter had 30 days in which to comply with this resolution before sanctions were imposed. The Taliban did not comply and the sanctions came into force.

Another round of sanctions was imposed on the Taliban in December 2000 with the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1333. The new sanctions called for an arms embargo on the Taliban, including foreign military assistance. It also imposed a ban on travel by the militia's senior leaders, a broader flight ban than the one imposed last year to force bin Laden's surrender, measures to close all Taliban offices overseas, and a ban on exports to Taliban areas of acetic anhydride, used to manufacture heroin. Finally, it also froze funds and other financial assets of Osama bin Laden and individuals and entities associated with him. Mullah Omar reacted to this round of sanctions by saying his government would not back out from its stand and principles even if the entire world turned against them.<sup>15</sup>

The continuation of these sanctions has pushed the issue of recognition to the backburner. However, the international community is also paying a price for not recognizing the legitimacy of the Taliban. One of the principal areas in which the Taliban could provide some assistance is in the containment of the production of poppy. Mullah Omar on several occasions emphasized his will to fight against opium production. However, it has been difficult to maintain such policy postures in the wake of external sanctions. As a result, in 1999, over 90,983 hectares of poppies yielded a harvest of over 4,581 tons of dry opium, an estimated 70% increase in production over the previous year's figure.

The international sanctions have also affected the incentives of local farmers to turn away from poppy production. Afghanistan's socioeconomic situation makes opium production one of the only available economic means for access to land, labor, and credit. Currently, the Afghan peasantry's heavy dependence upon opium production, associated with the politico-territorial realities of a tribal society typified by fragile political allegiances, is making it difficult for the Taliban to make any serious attempts at eradication.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, any Taliban attempt to implement a poppy eradication policy will be severely compromised by the government's international non-recognition. This places restrictions on the options open to the government. Even the U.N. Drug Control Program cannot legally reach any formal agreement with the Taliban government as long as the latter is not internationally recognized. The Taliban government faces a self-imposed catch-22 situation. Its

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15. Ibid.

16. Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Taliban's Drug Dilemma: Opium Production vs. International Recognition," *The Analyst* (Paris) (1999).

political policies and actions are deemed unacceptable by the international community, yet it cannot pursue any eradication policy with any hope of complete success without the international recognition and aid that are being denied it owing to those policies and actions.<sup>17</sup>

## Future Prospects for Change in the Taliban's Regime

Since 1996, the Taliban have been striving to bring the civil war to a successful conclusion. Their domestic policies have brought about alienation and created fissures within the Afghan society. Their inflexible stand on various policies has denied them the credibility they so desire. Their authoritarianism and intolerance have alienated non-Pushtun Afghans, who make up more than half the population. The flow of thousands of extremist Pakistani and Arab Taliban supporters into Afghanistan has fueled the resentment of the local populace.<sup>18</sup>

The Taliban are accused of harboring terrorists and extremists who not only support Taliban but also carry out their extremist policies in the targeted countries. According to a report that appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*, Afghanistan has become a sanctuary for "armed insurgents accused of terrorist attacks in China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan." Some 400 Arab Islamic militants from a dozen Middle Eastern and African countries are said to be part of the 055 Brigade, funded by Osama bin Laden and fighting alongside Taliban in the current offensive. The article further noted that "[t]he diverse groups have their own agendas, mainly focused on undermining the regimes at home, but some share bin Laden's zeal for a global Islamic revolution. The resulting web of dangerous friendships threatens to export instability throughout the mineral-rich and commercially under-exploited hinterland of Central Asia."<sup>19</sup>

It is obvious that the Taliban must improve their image both at home and abroad, as perceptions play an important role in the general acceptability or non-acceptability of governments in both arenas. Currently, the Taliban are perceived primarily as a negative element that is unlikely to play any positive role in resolving the Afghan conflict. If they fail in their goal, the Afghan nation will lose any trust that religious political forces could play any meaningful role in resolving the ongoing conflict. The Taliban's fate will be more

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17. At the time of writing, the Taliban were not cooperating in poppy eradication. Currently, it appears this may have changed. The Taliban claim to have completely eradicated poppy production in the areas dominated by their troops, and the claim is being verified under U.N. auspices.

18. Peter Tomsen, "Response: A Chance for Peace in Afghanistan—The Taliban's Days are Numbered," *Foreign Affairs* 79 (January–February 2000), p. 179.

19. Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: Heart of Darkness," *FEER*, August 5, 1999.

or less the same as that which befell the *mujahideen* if they do not take timely and corrective measures to improve Afghanistan's deteriorating situation.

The Taliban gained support from most of the populace in the beginning because they offered themselves a neutral force and declared their intention to remain so. However, they are no longer neutral and have become another party to the conflict. Their policies have not only infuriated the international public but also large sections of the Afghan community. The large influxes of Afghan refugees into Pakistan reflect the growing disagreement with their policies. This disenchantment is unlikely to change if the Taliban do not moderate their stance. The Taliban of course believe their policies to be important for bringing about the change they desire, but they do not realize how much these policies have alienated people. The international community has explicitly voiced its criticism of the Taliban regime and consider it to be a living nightmare for women, political dissidents, and anyone else who does not submit to the laws under the authority of the Ministry for the Fostering of Virtue and Suppression of Vice. The Taliban movement itself came about as a reaction to the self-seeking and self-destructive policies of the *mujahideen*, whose pretensions to Islam and leadership were discredited. It was in this ideological vacuum and a Hobbesian state of anarchy that made the Taliban's rule palatable to common Afghans.<sup>20</sup> But if the Taliban's government does not soften its present policies and complete peace is not restored, it will not be too late for the common people to turn against them.

The year 2001 has seen universal outrage at the offensive launched by the Taliban rulers against Afghanistan's Buddhist past. Condemnation has not remained confined to non-Muslim states; several Islamic countries including Pakistan have been appalled by the destruction of Buddhist statues in the province of Bamiyan. Pakistan sent an official delegation whose aim was to prevent the Taliban from destroying the statues. Pakistan's foreign minister Abdul Sattar said, "Certainly we believe it was a mistake, a blunder and as a result Afghanistan will suffer consequences for years to come." To this he added that "it is very difficult for me to make a statement as to why they did not hear."<sup>21</sup> Iran likewise strongly condemned the statues' destruction. A statement released by Iran's Cultural Heritage Organization wondered why "certain Taliban-led individuals, calling themselves 'cleric,' have ordered destruction of ancient sites of the mankind society, citing blasphemy and idoliz-

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20. Hafeez Malik, "Pakistan, Islam and the Taliban Phenomenon," *News International* (Pakistan), June 9, 2000.

21. Sattar's remarks are in, *ibid.*, March 11, 2001.

ing as reasons.”<sup>22</sup> To prevent their destruction, Iran even offered to buy the statues or move them into safekeeping.

However, the Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, rejected any offer to prevent the destruction of the statues. His negotiations with Pakistan did not bear a positive result and he rejected the Iranian offers, reiterating that the presence of the statues conflicted with Islamic teaching. In the wake of the Taliban’s subsequent actions, Iran led a U.N. initiative to take serious action against the regime. Commenting on the statues’ destruction, the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated, “Unfortunately, the Taliban’s destruction of the statues has cast doubts on the comprehensive views offered by Islamic ideology in the world. Clearly, Muslims across the world pin the blame on the rigid-minded Taliban and by no means embroil the Afghan Muslims in this counter-cultural move.”<sup>23</sup>

The Bamiyan incident stirred up dual controversies, about both the character of the Taliban regime and the relationship between culture, religion, and national heritage in an Islamic state. In his characteristic style, Mullah Omar shrugged off all objections to the planned destruction of the Buddhist statues, saying “my job is the implementation of Islamic order.” He invoked Islamic law, a *fatwa* issued by the Afghan *ulama* associated with this regime, and the decision of the Supreme Court of Afghanistan to support his decision.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the destruction of the statues has further tarnished the Taliban’s image. While it may be the case that the Taliban undertook their actions in reaction to the tough sanctions imposed on them by the world, the Taliban have to realize that they are not going to earn any international sympathy or recognition.

Afghanistan has always been important to external powers due to its strategic location. They have meddled in its affairs both in the past and at present. The protracted civil war makes it more vulnerable to external penetration. In such situations it has no other option but to seek help and support from outside. The external powers are more than willing to do so if it serves their national interest. The opposition is likely to adopt a similar strategy as they have less access to the resources of the country than the ruling authority. Had there been no external involvement, Afghanistan’s extended civil war would not have become the protracted and complicated affair that it is.

The Afghan civil war has important regional implications. Various external powers are pursuing divergent objectives in Afghanistan and the outcome

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22. Cultural Heritage Organization comment is in *Iran News* (Tehran), March 1, 2001. This news item is distributed via Middle East News Online, available at <<http://www.middleeastwire.com>>.

23. Comments of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, reported by the BBC World Service, March 5, 2001.

24. Rahimullah Yusufzai, “A Question of Tolerance,” *News International*, March 4, 2001.

of these players' pursuits may determine the continuation of the conflict. The most influential such player, Pakistan, is aiming to establish a friendly government in Afghanistan. Pakistan wants to attain strategic depth against India. A complete victory by the Taliban would give Pakistan greater access to Central Asian markets and a safe route for the planned oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea.

The end of the civil war in Afghanistan would also lead to the repatriation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Pakistan is growing impatient with the effects of having these refugees on its soil. Economically, Pakistanis are alarmed because some of the refugees have been able to monopolize various trades. The vast influx of refugees has kept labor wages low. Their large numbers have contributed to the overcrowding of cities and villages, thereby overstressing the infrastructure and contributing to an increase in rents. Haji Abdul Haleem, the president of Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry, expressed the exasperation felt by many Pakistanis: "The local traders are paying taxes while their businesses have come to a standstill due to [the] free hand given to Afghan traders in the trading activities as they do not pay any taxes."<sup>25</sup> Many of the refugees have also been blamed for increased crime, especially gunrunning, drug smuggling, prostitution, and theft. The Pakistani government has launched intermittent operations against those Afghan refugees involved in heinous crimes. Statistics compiled by the crime branch of the police in the North West Frontier Province revealed that the refugees committed 11 times more crimes than the local population during the year 1998. Nearly eight out of every 1,000 Afghan refugees have been formally accused of committing a crime.<sup>26</sup>

Pakistan's major competitor for influence in Afghanistan is Iran. Iran has sought to give the Northern Alliance support as a way to express its solidarity with Afghanistan's Shi'a population. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is providing financial support to the Taliban to limit Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia has an affinity to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. However, the Saudi government has specific concerns over the activities of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, currently residing in the Taliban-occupied areas of Afghanistan. The stated objectives of the U.S. are for the civil war to end with the establishment of a representative government. However, it is most interested in driving international terrorists out of Afghanistan and putting a stop to drug trafficking. To prevent a spread of the Taliban's brand of Islamic fundamentalism, the U.S. is tacitly cooperating with the Northern Alliance.

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25. Haleem, in *ibid.*, January 4, 1998.

26. Police statistics, in *ibid.*, March 5, 1999.



The Taliban face other obstacles among the neighboring Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. These republics consider the Taliban a direct threat to their security. For that reason they are cooperating with the Northern Alliance through a complex network of ethnic allegiances. However, the continuation of the Afghan conflict poses a major constraint to the development of communication linkages and energy pipelines to the south. Russia is similarly motivated by a desire to deter the spread of fundamentalist elements and it, too, is supporting the Northern Alliance groups in the conflict.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan's protracted domestic conflict has not ended because the main protagonists continue to pursue their objectives on the battlefield. That said, at this point it is unclear whether the end of the conflict would even help Afghanistan. Subjugation is not in the nature of Afghans; they cannot be forced to accept things whether they be religious or secular. Disillusionment is gaining ground even in areas under the Taliban's control. Given where the Taliban's leadership received their training, many Afghans consider them to be a foreign-trained force imposed upon them by Pakistan. The growing reservations about and resentment over Pakistan's involvement in the country are not going to favor the Taliban regime. However, the opposition Northern Alliance's reluctance to seek a negotiated settlement to the civil war only reflects their own inability to bring about unity and peace in the country. Moreover, the civil war has hardened ethnic differences in Afghanistan. Bridging these cleavages will take years to overcome.

Despite their ground successes, the Taliban do not have widespread international recognition. Although the Taliban purportedly wish to cultivate relations with other nations, their political rigidity is not contributing positively to this aim. Afghanistan has paid a high price for its past isolation and it certainly cannot afford it in the 21st century. The regime will have to change its approach and policies if it is to be accepted by the international community. What's more, international sanctions have further complicated an economic situation already made difficult by the destruction to the Afghan economy wrought by the years of civil war. The Taliban's totalitarian policies have alienated many of its own people. Under the conditions those policies impose, the refugees currently residing in Pakistan and Iran are unlikely to return to their homeland. At the same time, as long as the civil war continues, external powers will meddle in Afghanistan's internal affairs. A weak government cannot prevent foreign interference in Afghanistan and adopt independent policies.

If the Taliban desire a stable peace, a political solution has to be a top priority. They could make a great contribution to achieving such by holding

a referendum in areas under their control. This action would also encourage the Northern Alliance to do the same in areas under their control. A referendum could be carried out with the supervision of the U.N. While it is the responsibility of the Taliban to make major changes to their domestic policies, the rest of the world should also come forward to assist Afghanistan. By recognizing the mobile government of President Rabbani and ignoring the ground realities in Afghanistan, the world is not helping to reduce the tensions. One cannot encourage any change to the Taliban's policies by treating them like pariahs. Only by engaging the Taliban in the international community will they be able to moderate their worldview.