

2. The Struggle for Independence, Modernization, and Development

Afghanistan became a unified entity in the mid-1700s, a poor and underdeveloped country in a very rough neighborhood. Its size, shape, and degree of centralized power depended on leaders who, like President Karzai, were often from the Durrani confederation of southern Pashtuns, and whose biggest and toughest rivals were often the Ghilzai, or eastern Pashtuns, who were famous for their rebelliousness and martial spirit.¹ Beginning in the 1830s, Afghanistan fought two wars over the issue of Russia's feeble attempts at gaining influence and using Afghanistan against British India, which contained the territory of what is now modern Pakistan. The Third Anglo-Afghan War was fought after World War I for independence from British interference with Afghan affairs. This competition was referred to as the "Great Game," and some writers extend the term to cover any great power competition that involves Afghanistan.

The First Anglo-Afghan War, 1839–1842, was about blocking the Russian influence from the Indian border and extending British influence into Central Asia. The war began with a massive British invasion, the toppling of ruler Dost Mohammad, and an occupation of Kabul and other cities. After the British political agent was assassinated, the remnants of the first British expeditionary force (16,000 soldiers, dependents, and camp followers) tried to retreat back into India.² They were nearly all killed or dispersed, save for a lone regimental surgeon who returned home to tell the tale. The subsequent British punitive expedition killed thousands of Afghans and destroyed three cities, including Kabul. The British then withdrew. Dost Mohammad again became the ruler—called

shah or emir (or amir) in different eras—and spent the remainder of his reign consolidating power, usually with a British subsidy.

In the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1878–1880, disputes over potential Russian influence on Kabul again produced a British ultimatum, a rapid and successful invasion, a troubled occupation, a murdered British envoy, and subsequent maneuver warfare. Abdur Rahman became emir after a Pyrrhic victory for Great Britain. He pursued, in Barnett Rubin’s phrase, “a coercion-intensive path to state formation” and ruled from the center with an iron fist (and significant British subsidies) until his death in 1901.³ Rahman brought the country together and ruled well but harshly. He was forced to accept the hated Durand Line drawn by the British envoy, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, to divide Afghanistan from India. It also divided the Pashtuns, leaving a third of them in Afghanistan and two-thirds in western India, which later became modern Pakistan. The results of the first two wars with Britain were longstanding Afghan-British tensions, an increase in Afghanistan’s xenophobia, and an unresolved issue over the homeland of the Pashtuns, which was split between two countries.

In the first two Anglo-Afghan wars, the Afghans earned a well-justified reputation as fierce fighters with a taste for sometimes no-holds-barred battlefield behaviors and atrocities. Kipling allowed how no sane British soldier would ever let himself be captured even if wounded. His famous poem on basic soldiering gave new soldiers a grisly prescription:

*If your officer’s dead and the sergeants look white,
Remember it’s ruin to run from a fight:
So take open order, lie down, and sit tight,*

And wait for supports like a soldier.

Wait, wait, wait like a soldier. . . .

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,

And the women come out to cut up what remains,

Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains

An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.

Go, go, go like a soldier,

Go, go, go like a soldier,

Go, go, go like a soldier,

So-oldier of the Queen!⁴

Interestingly, the Afghan leaders fought against British encroachment, but then after besting or severely vexing the British to establish that independence, often ended up taking subsidies from them. The British in return received control over Afghan foreign policy. The subsidies were generally used to strengthen the Afghan army and further the internal power of the central government in Kabul. This rather stable situation continued until 1919, when a third Anglo-Afghan war, discussed below, won total independence. In a great political paradox, Afghan rulers were strongest within their nation when they were supported by foreign subsidies. Low or no subsidies meant taxing the locals and, at times, harsh conscription. These measures were never popular. The people were eager to salute the national rulers but not eager to have them interfere with local autonomy.

The Third Anglo-Afghan War followed World War I and established full independence. It began with the mysterious death of the old emir, Habibullah, who did not want another war with Britain because it had paid him a healthy subsidy. He had ruled peacefully for nearly two decades and

kept Afghanistan neutral during the First World War. According to some historians, the new emir, Amanullah—a third son who seized power from those with stronger dynastic claims—was involved in his father’s death.⁵ He wanted a showdown with Great Britain. The Third Anglo-Afghan War involved very few battles, but the British did manage to use biplanes to bomb Jalalabad and Kabul. The war-weary British, however, soon gave in to Afghan demands for full independence. The war ended British subsidies—a key revenue source for Afghan leaders—and Great Britain’s encroachment on Afghan sovereignty.

After victory in the third war, later celebrated as the beginning of Afghan self-rule, Amanullah decided to modernize his kingdom. He was the first Afghan ruler to take aid and military assistance from the Soviet Union. He announced reforms and predictably had to put down a few revolts in the east over taxation, conscription, and social changes, such as the education of women. A few years later, after retreating on his most objectionable reforms, Amanullah toured Europe for a few months. In 1928, he returned with a notion of becoming an Afghan version of Kemal Attaturk, the leader who made Turkey a modern secular state. Amanullah again pursued what were drastic reforms by Afghan standards, despite the fact that his previous attempts at reform had sparked a revolt in the east. This time he went further by removing the veil from women, pushing coeducation, and forcing Afghans to wear Western-style clothing in the capital. He alienated the conservative clergy, including those who had previously supported his modernization program.

A revolt, the Civil War of 1929,⁶ broke out, the weakened king abdicated, and for 9 months a chaotic Afghanistan was ruled by Habibullah Kalakani (also referred to as Bacha Saqao, the “son of the water carrier”), seen

by many as a Tajik brigand. Order returned with a reluctant Nadir Shah on the throne. He restored conservative rule only to be assassinated in 1933 by a young man seeking revenge for the death of a family member. Nadir Shah's dynasty, called Musahiban after the family name, ruled from 1929 to 1978.

After Nadir Shah's death, his teenage son, Zahir Shah, succeeded to the throne, although his paternal uncles ruled as regents until 1953. From 1953 to 1973, Zahir Shah ruled with various prime ministers, the first of which was his cousin, Prince Mohammed Daoud. During Zahir Shah's reign, Afghanistan managed to remain neutral in World War II, began to develop economically with the help of foreign aid, created a modern military with the help of the USSR, and stayed at an uneasy peace with its neighbors. Trouble with the new state of Pakistan, home to more than twice as many Pashtuns as Afghanistan, was a near constant. The Durand Line was always an issue, and from time to time the status of "Pashtunistan" was formally placed on the table by Afghan nationalists who demanded a plebiscite. Afghanistan even cast the only vote against Pakistan being admitted to the United Nations in 1947.

For its part, the United States did provide aid but in general was much less interested in Afghanistan than the Soviet Union was. Quotes often appeared in Embassy reports to Washington, such as:

For the United States, Afghanistan has at present limited direct interest: it is not an important trading partner . . . not an access route for U.S. trade with others . . . not a source of oil or scarce strategic metals . . . there are no treaty ties or defense commitments; and Afghanistan does not provide us with significant defense, intelligence, or scientific facilities. United States policy has long recognized these facts.⁷

Afghanistan was much more important for the Soviet Union. It was a neutral, developing state on the periphery of the USSR, beholden to Moscow for economic and military aid which was generously applied, especially in the early 1970s.

Daoud, the king's cousin, served as prime minister from 1953 until the start of the constitutional monarchy in 1964, which ended his term. The king chafed under the tutelage of his cousin and had it written into the constitution that no relative of the king could be a government minister. The constitutional monarchy—a half-hearted attempt at democracy with a parliament but no political parties—lasted about a decade until 1973, when the spurned Daoud, with the help of leftist army officers, launched a bloodless coup while Zahir Shah was abroad. Five years later, Daoud, who some inaccurately called “the Red Prince,” was himself toppled in a coup by the leftists on whom he had turned his back. Another cycle of rapid and fruitless modernization efforts followed, accompanied by an unusually high amount of repression. The new and more radical heirs of Amanullah were avowed communists, completely bereft of common sense and out of touch with their own people. Their power base was found among disaffected eastern Pashtun intellectuals and Soviet-trained army officers.

A number of threads tie together the events of Afghan history in the time between Abdur Rahman's passing (1901) and the advent of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (1978). They continue to exist today, woven into a contemporary context dominated by war, terrorism, globalization, radical Islam, and the information age. First, Afghanistan was in drastic need of modernization, but radical modernizers like Amanullah and the communists easily ran afoul of entrenched interests and a very conservative populace in the countryside

that jealously guarded its autonomy. Afghan leaders in Kabul have usually had enormous formal power, but their direct rule has usually extended only to the Kabul area and the environs of the five major cities. A successful Afghan emir or president must learn to share power and deal effectively with local leaders.

Second, because of the perceived need to modernize, Afghanistan's intellectuals were awash with new ideas, some moderately Western, some leftist (encouraged by close relations with the Soviet Union), and some Islamist, although that group was small until the jihad against the Soviet Union increased its strength. Islam became the ideology of the jihad against the USSR, increasing in influence as the war progressed, and then again when the Taliban came to power. During this same period, Pakistan, home to four million Afghan refugees, was undergoing its own Islamization, first under General and President Zia ul Haq, and later his successors. Pakistani Islamization no doubt also influenced the fervor of Afghan refugees. Pakistani intelligence favored the fundamentalist Pashtun groups among the seven major Afghan resistance groups in the war against the Soviet Union.

Third, Afghanistan has often been politically unstable. Most of its 20th-century rulers were ousted or else killed in office or shortly after they left. To review: Abdur Rahman, the Iron Emir, died in office in 1901 and was succeeded by his son and designated heir, Habibullah. As Barnett Rubin wrote, “[His] peaceful succession was an event with no precedent and so far, no sequel.”⁸ Habibullah ruled for nearly two decades before he was assassinated on a hunting trip in 1919 under mysterious circumstances. Amanullah, his son, was ousted in 1929 for his efforts to rapidly modernize the country. Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik, ruled for less than 9 months and was later executed. Next, Nadir Shah, a distant

cousin of Amanullah, was offered the throne by an assembly of leaders. He returned to conservative Afghan principles on women's rights and sharia law but was assassinated 4 years later in 1933. Zahir Shah ruled from 1933 to 1973 until he was toppled in a coup by his cousin, Prince Daoud (prime minister from 1953 to 1963 and president from 1973 to 1978). In turn, Daoud and his family were later killed by Afghan communists in the 1978 coup. Three of the next four communist rulers (Taraki, Amin, and Najibullah) would be killed in or shortly after they left office. Only Babrak Karmal would survive after being ousted in 1986 and then exiled. Burhanuddin Rabbani succeeded Najibullah, but he was ousted by the Taliban. President Karzai's 12 predecessors have led tough lives: all of them have been forced from office, with seven being killed in the process. Still, the periods 1901–1919 and 1933–1973 were times of relative stability, proof positive that good governance in Afghanistan is problematical but not impossible. Instability has been common but is in no sense preordained.

Fourth, most of the rulers of Afghanistan faced “center versus periphery” issues that tended to generate internal conflicts. The intrusion of central power deep into the countryside resulted in many revolts against Amanullah, Daoud, and the four leaders of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA): Taraki, Amin, Karmal, and Najibullah. Overlaid on many of these center-periphery debates were rivalries for the throne as well as tension between southern Pashtuns and their eastern cousins. Again, interference with the people's land, treasure, or women would be perceived as issues in many of the well-intentioned reforms. Alongside the modernization problem, Afghan rulers have usually been short on revenue. Foreign aid was often needed for regime security and basic population control. Many rulers have had to balance the tension

between aid or subsidies on the one hand, and a strong desire for independence on the other.

Fifth, Afghans are superb fighters. Long experience fighting conventional armies and other tribes has made them expert warriors. Professor Larry Goodson has written that the Afghans were:

*fiercely uncompromising warriors who excelled at political duplicity and guerrilla warfare. They mastered mobile hit and run and ambush tactics and understood the importance of seasonal warfare and tribal alliances against a common enemy. They were comfortable fighting on the rugged terrain . . . and aware how difficult it was for an invading army far from its home territory to effectively prosecute a protracted guerrilla war.*⁹

Finally, external pressures from great powers had significant effects. Whether contending with Iran and Pakistan, fighting the Soviet Union or Great Britain, or navigating the shoals of foreign aid from various suppliers, conflict and security tensions have been a hallmark of Afghan history. These international pressures and invaders have generated a widespread xenophobia that exists alongside the Afghans' well-deserved reputation for hospitality. A leader who rails against foreign influence is playing to a broad constituency. Afghanistan's internal and international conflicts have also been the enemy of development and tranquility, and the people continue to pay a high price.