

## Islamism, the Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

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The Cold War profoundly affected the fate of many states; Iran and Afghanistan were two which particularly felt its effects. Their domestic and foreign-policy settings were influenced by the onset of the Cold War in ways that produced contrasting outcomes for the two countries, helping eventually to open space for the rise of radical Islamism in their politics, with impacts well beyond their boundaries. The Iranian revolution of 1978/79 resulted in the overthrow of the US-backed regime of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi and its replacement with the anti-US Islamic government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In contrast, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 followed the seizure of power in Kabul by a cluster of pro-Soviet Communists twenty months earlier. However, both events were considerably grounded in the US–Soviet Cold War rivalry. Similarly, political Islam, or Islamism, which had a major effect on the Muslim world and its relations with the United States and its allies in the wake of the Iranian revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, arose in interaction with the dynamics of the Cold War, although it was also embedded in older schools of thinking amongst Muslim scholars. Arguably, if it had not been for the US policy of containment of the Soviet Union and the Soviet responses to it, Iran might not have moved so clearly into the American orbit and Afghanistan might not have fallen under Soviet influence. By the same token, the grounds might not have emerged in the late 1970s for the radical forces of political Islam to become increasingly assertive in their quest to redefine Muslim politics, with an anti-US posture.

### Background

When George F. Kennan on 22 February 1946 dispatched his ‘long telegram’ from Moscow to Washington (which formed the basis of the US strategy of containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War), few people could have

expected Iran and Afghanistan to be affected by the US–Soviet rivalry to such an extent that it would transform them into critical sources of tension and conflict in world politics over the next four decades. At the time, Iran and Afghanistan were two independent neighbouring Muslim states, enjoying varying degrees of strategic importance and experiencing different stages of national development. Although both were ruled by traditional monarchies, Iran could count on its oil riches and outlets to international waters to claim not only wider interaction with the outside world and greater strategic assets, but also a higher level of development than the resource-poor and landlocked Afghanistan. Iran was a relatively homogeneous state, dominated by Persian stock and the Shi'ite sect of Islam, whose clergy had historically forged a shaky alliance with the temporal power, forming the basis of the modern Iranian state. Afghanistan, on the other hand, was a heterogeneous country, where a weak state functioned in dynamic relationships with strong micro-societies largely under the influence of the Sunni sect of Islam. However, the two countries had a great deal in common as well, especially in terms of language, culture, and historical experiences; in addition, each had long borders and extensive cross-border ethnic ties with the Soviet Union. They had both been subjected to pressures arising from Anglo-Russian rivalry in the past, with effects on their domestic and foreign policies. All this meant that their regimes had to be constantly conscious of performing a balancing act between religious and secular change on the domestic front, and between Western powers and the Soviet Union in the foreign-policy arena.

As a result, by the onset of the Cold War, the leaders of both countries promoted nationalist ideologies that emphasised the sanctity of religion and traditions, although without denying the need for secular national politics and development. Both states also assumed foreign-policy postures that upheld their neutrality in world politics as the best way of avoiding complications with the Soviet Union. On this basis, while seeking good relations with the United States as a distant power and source of aid, Tehran and Kabul could not afford to become too entangled in the Cold War.

However, in 1953, three separate but simultaneous events changed their circumstances. In one of its most successful operations of the Cold War, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped overthrow an elected, reformist government in Iran. In Kabul, a moderate and passive government was replaced by a more impatient and centralist set of modernisers. And in Moscow Iosif Stalin died, leaving power in the hands of new leaders who stressed peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference in the internal affairs of others as part of a new diplomatic offensive to shape

the dynamics of Soviet–American rivalry. These developments laid the groundwork for Iran to drift into the American orbit and for Afghanistan to become vulnerable to Soviet influence, opening the space for radical political Islam to rise in the region and beyond.

## Iran

The Iranian crisis materialised against the backdrop of Iran's experiencing nationalist political turbulence and the United States and the Soviet Union eyeing the country as an important strategic prize. Moscow regarded Iran as vital for the Soviet Union's security in the south, and Washington saw it as significant to the US policy of containment and geopolitical dominance in the oil-rich Middle East.

At the heart of the Iranian turbulence was a bitter power struggle between the pro-Western Iranian monarch Mohammad Reza Shah, who had succeeded his father in 1941 in the wake of the joint Anglo-Soviet wartime occupation of Iran, and the veteran Iranian nationalist reformist politician, Mohammad Mossadeq. The latter wanted a revolutionary process of change to transform Iran into a constitutional monarchy; to maximise Iran's control over and income from its oil resources, which had been monopolised by the British since early in the century; and to implement long-overdue social and economic reforms. The shah was opposed to Mossadeq's approach, especially when it affected his traditional powers. However, when the Majlis (National Assembly) elected Mossadeq as prime minister on 30 April 1951, constitutionally the shah had no choice but to consent. Mossadeq's first act in office was the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company on 1 May. The British rejection of the nationalisation – the first of its kind in the Middle East – and imposition of an economic blockade on Iran precipitated a crisis in Anglo-Iranian relations.

Mossadeq refused to back down on the grounds that he was politically and morally right, and that he had the support of the Iranian people and the international community. London, somewhat belatedly, underpinned its policy by claiming that the pro-Soviet Iranian Communist party, Tudeh, was benefiting from Mossadeq's government. Although initially Washington had sided with Iran in the dispute partly because it feared the British attitude was driving the country into Soviet arms, it now accepted the British anti-Communist argument for fear of the West losing access to Iran's oil. In late August 1953, the CIA, assisted by British intelligence, engineered a *coup d'état*. The shah, who had been forced by Mossadeq to leave the country for Switzerland a week earlier, was initially reluctant to support the CIA's machinations, but he

ultimately relented. The CIA brought him back and re-installed him on his throne not to reign but to rule Iran at the behest of the United States.

The CIA's intervention was widely resented inside Iran and in the region. The shah imposed a military dictatorship and made extensive use of a secret police force (SAVAK), set up for him by the CIA and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Many Iranians despised this development, but could not openly express their opposition. Elsewhere in the region, radical Arab nationalists (headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt) perceived the CIA's imposition as a threat to their quest for regional unity against the forces of 'colonialism', 'imperialism', and 'Zionism'. At the same time, the Soviets condemned the development as a Western imperialist offensive against independent post-colonial regimes.<sup>1</sup>

The United States provided massive financial, economic, and military assistance, and signed various bilateral agreements with Iran to shore up the shah's government. From 1954 on, Washington put in place an international consortium to run the Iranian oil industry. The new corporation was controlled in equal parts by British Petroleum and five American oil companies, while remaining under the nominal tutelage of the Iranian National Oil Company, which Mossadeq had established. Further, Iran joined the US-backed regional alliance of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 and its successor, the Central Treaty Organisation, two years later – part of a US strategy to put an international ring of containment around the Soviet Union. Iran lost its traditional neutrality in world politics. Its position in the US camp as a frontline bulwark against Soviet Communism was confirmed.

The shah pursued two contradictory goals: one was to make himself pivotal to the operation of Iranian politics; another was to find a pro-capitalist form of national development and foreign-policy behaviour that would complement his special relationship with the United States. However, to be successful, the former required centralisation, and the latter decentralisation, of politics. The shah formally ended martial law in 1959 and subsequently, under pressure from the administration of John F. Kennedy, set out to secure a wider base of popular legitimacy. In 1961, he embraced a land reform initiated by Prime Minister Ali Amini, a close friend of the Kennedys who had been imposed by Washington. However, by 1962, the shah prompted Amini to resign and he himself not only took over the administration of the land reform, but also

1 S. M. Aliev (ed.), *Sovremennyi Iran* [Contemporary Iran] (Moscow: Rossiskaia akademiia nauk, 1993), 82–83; see also the chapter by Douglas Little in volume II.

initiated a number of other social and economic reforms, which he called the White Revolution or 'the revolution of the shah and the people'.

Yet, whatever steps he took from that point, he could not expunge the indignity of having been put on the throne by the CIA, nor bridge the contradiction in his goals, nor transform his relationship with the United States into one of interdependence in order to elevate his rule in the eyes of most Iranians and the countries of the region. He continued to reign using suppression, co-optation, patronage, and divide-and-rule politics. SAVAK was operated as such a pervasive force that the majority of the Iranian people thought that most of their compatriots were either members or informants of the organisation. This perception reached the point where 'people could not trust people'.<sup>2</sup>

There were four major sources of opposition brewing from the 1960s. The first consisted of the ideological and political opponents of the shah's rule. They included not only the remnants of Mossadeq's centre-left National Front, but also Marxist-Leninist groups such as Tudeh and Fadaïyan-e Khalq (People's Devotees) as well as the radical Mojahedin-e Khalq (People's Warriors), which preached a mixture of Marxist and Islamic messages.

The second comprised the opponents of the shah's regime from the professional stratum of Iranian society. They included public servants, lawyers, journalists, academics, and university students. In general, they had no consolidated political agenda beyond seeking a democratic reformation of the political system.

The third was the Bazaaris or petit bourgeois, composed mainly of owners of small businesses and merchants, many of whom had traditionally constituted a fairly coherent middle-class stratum in close interaction with the Shi'ite religious establishment. Although some of the Bazaaris benefited from the shah's policies, there were also many who resented their change in status from independent merchants to participants in the shah's modernisation drive. They did not approve of increased taxes and regulations, nor did they appreciate the growing cost of living and of operating a business.

The fourth was the Shi'ite religious establishment. The Pahlavi dynasty had embraced Shi'ite Islam as a state religion, but would not allow it to set the framework for how the Iranian state and society operated. The shah, even more than his father, found it imperative to promote secular politics, partly in order to prevent any religious centre of power from challenging his position. His constant attempts to erode the power base of the Shi'ite establishment

2 Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 13.

caused widespread disquiet among the clerics. Many of their leading figures, especially in the city of Qom – a traditional Shi'ite seat of learning and political power that had counter-balanced temporal authority since the early sixteenth century – did not approve of the shah's regime or his pro-Western secular modernisation drive.

From the early 1960s on, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as a leading Islamist and political critic of the shah's rule. After the death of his mentor, Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Borojerdi, in March 1962, Khomeini openly opposed the shah and his special relationship with the United States. To silence him, SAVAK first detained him in 1963 for a year and then forced him into exile, which took him to southern Iraq – the spiritual seat of Shi'ite power in the Muslim world. Khomeini received protection from Iraq's leftist-nationalist Baathist regime as leverage in Baghdad's political, ideological, and territorial disputes with Tehran. His opposition activities, with increased contacts with fellow dissident clerics in Iran, eventually led his followers to establish the Jame'eh Rowhaniyat-e Mobarez (Society of Assertive Clerics, SAC) in 1977, with the aim of overthrowing the shah's regime. Most of Iran's subsequent Islamist leaders belonged to this society.

While public grievances gathered pace in different levels of society, two related factors coalesced to trigger widespread active popular opposition to the shah's rule by the late 1970s. The first was the dramatic increase in Iran's oil revenue; this allowed the shah to entertain ambitious plans, including transforming Iran into what he called the world's fifth-largest economic and military power by the mid-1980s. The second concerned Washington's unqualified complicity in the shah's quest for grandeur. Under the Nixon Doctrine, which was formulated in the wake of the United States' debacle in Vietnam, the shah's regime was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the interests not only of Iran but also of the United States in the region. The shah was given *carte blanche* to purchase any conventional weapon system he desired.

Iran's oil revenues were increasing sharply, and the shah had grand plans for social and economic reform and for military modernisation. These schemes soon proved to be poorly conceived and badly implemented, as well as irrelevant to Iran's real needs. More than 70 per cent of Iranians could not read and write, an equal number suffered from curable diseases and poor sanitary conditions, and unemployment hovered around 30 per cent, especially among Iranian youth, yet the shah continued to spend too much on economic modernisation and military build-up and too little on social development. This produced serious social and economic dislocation and imbalances

that caused much confusion and uncertainty among Iranians. A majority were no longer assured of the direction that their identity, lives, and society were taking. Those who did not benefit from the shah's policies (and they constituted a majority of the Iranians from both urban and rural backgrounds) could not identify with what the shah was trying to achieve.

Meanwhile, the shah's policies caused alarm in the region. Although the Soviets appeared to have come to terms with Iran's transformation into a firm US ally and were happy to settle for good working relations with Tehran in return for an Iran that was not openly hostile to them, they could not but view the shah's military build-up with trepidation. Moscow was horrified by the idea of the shah as the regional policeman. Nor could it remain indifferent to his projection of power against what he called foreign-backed subversive forces, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, which was also backed by several Soviet friends in the region – the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, Syria, and Iraq – and his offer of support to Pakistan to crush the Popular Front for the Liberation of Pakistani and Iranian Baluchistan, backed by another Soviet friend, Afghanistan. Beyond this, Moscow had reason to be mindful of Tehran's intelligence and economic co-operation with Israel. Such collaboration might have an impact on the regional balance of power as well as on Soviet support for the Palestinian/ Arab cause, on which Moscow had rested its Cold War competition with the United States in the wider Middle East since the mid-1950s.

By the same token, both radical and conservative Arab states found the shah's vision of an all-powerful Iran disturbing. The radicals had long been critical of the shah's regime. But their ranks were now swelled by conservatives, led by Saudi Arabia, given the historical, sectarian, and cultural differences between the Arabs and Iranians. The Saudis countered the development not only by engaging in a process of economic and military modernisation of their own, but also by using their position as the largest producer within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to keep oil prices steady, thus preventing the shah from receiving increased oil revenue. By 1975, this caused a serious shortfall in Tehran's income, forcing the shah to raise a \$500 million loan from Europe in order to meet the costs of his planned projects. Meanwhile, he had to call on Iranians to dampen the expectations that he had initially elevated. This could only draw the ire of many Iranians, who now questioned the shah's approach to their country's transformation.

In the context of this uncertainty, the change of American administrations, in 1977, from Republican to Democratic under President Jimmy Carter also had a profound effect on the shah's regime. Carter made human rights a foreign-policy

priority. Although his prime target was the Soviet Union, this move also pressured the shah to engage in a degree of limited liberalisation. Despite declaring off-limits any criticism of the monarchy, the constitution, and the armed forces, once he had engaged in even limited liberalisation, he was unable to stop its forward momentum.

The aggregate effect was widespread Iranian alienation from the shah's rule. Carter re-affirmed US support for the shah in November 1977 when he praised him as a 'strong leader', with a declaration that 'we look upon Iran as a very stabilising force in the world at large'.<sup>3</sup> But it came too late. Iranian students studying in the United States had already begun a wave of protests which were picked up by Tehran University students and which snowballed into a nationwide uprising and popular revolution within months. The participants came to include a wide range of social strata. Since the shah had suppressed all forms of organised political opposition, the protesters had no shared platform: all they initially wanted was a democratic reformation of the shah's regime and the withdrawal of US support for that regime.

However, one opposition group that had remained fairly cohesive was the Shi'ite establishment: for fear of committing sacrilegious acts, SAVAK could not infiltrate the establishment's network of mosques and seminaries in order to uproot it. As a prominent Shi'ite leader (though not as senior in the Shi'ite religious hierarchy as, for example, Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari), Khomeini found a wide audience when he portrayed the situation in religious terms. He dichotomised the world between the realm of *mostakbarin* (the oppressors) and *mosta'zafin* (the downtrodden) and called for empowerment of the latter. He electrified young clerics by calling on them to assume the task of governing instead of merely supervising the state. In comparison to the criticisms disseminated by the shah's political opponents, Khomeini's Islamist message was simple and easily discernable by a majority of Iranians, who had been imbued with the religion of Islam over the centuries.

Khomeini's preaching – spread by illegal pamphlets and tapes – helped his *Rowhaniyat* supporters seize the leadership in opposition by the second half of 1978. Khomeini provided guidance from Iraq, and then, when Saddam Hussein expelled him (under pressure from the shah), from Paris. Once the shah and SAVAK were exposed as vulnerable in their inability to suppress the cleric and his followers, the dam burst. Neither the shah's military heavy-handedness nor his concessions to the opposition could produce an outcome

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1977.





5. Demonstrators in Iran carry posters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, February 1979. By the late spring of 1979, Khomeini's supporters were in full control of the country.

that was satisfactory to him. By November 1978, Khomeini would settle for nothing less than the shah's removal from power, which also became the goal of the opposition as a whole. The shah was finally forced to hand over power to a prominent figure of the suppressed National Front, Shapour Bakhtiar, and leave Tehran on 16 January 1979 for a 'temporary stay' abroad. Khomeini received a tumultuous welcome by millions of Iranians two weeks later when he returned to Tehran. The shah's temporary departure became a permanent exile, ending with his death eighteen months later in Cairo at a point when even the United States was no longer prepared to be closely identified with him.

Khomeini had always envisioned Iran as a Shi'ite Islamic state. He could now implement this ideal by first transforming the Iranian revolution into an Islamic one and then, after holding a referendum on 31 March 1979, by declaring Iran an Islamic republic, with an Islamic government, also known as *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent), with Khomeini assuming the all-powerful position of the Guardian.<sup>4</sup> He scrapped the shah's pro-Western

4 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeyni, *Islamic Government* (Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service, 1979).

secular approach and replaced it with an Islamic paradigm in order to build a new Islamic Iran.

Just as it had remained oblivious to the possible consequences of its support for the shah, Washington now appeared overwhelmed by Iranian developments. Khomeini implicated the United States in the shah's 'reign of terror', and found it morally justifiable and politically expedient to denounce the country as the 'Great Satan', depriving Washington of a major strategic foothold in the region. He endorsed the action of a group of his militant student followers to over-run the US Embassy in Tehran and take fifty-two of its staff hostage, holding them from 4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981. The main purpose of the ensuing hostage crisis was to humiliate the United States and to keep the public mobilised behind his leadership. The hostage crisis revealed the limits of US power, and Moscow was pleased to see the United States ensnared while the USSR was seeking to deflect international opposition to its December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

Khomeini declared the new republic's foreign policy as neither pro-Western nor pro-Eastern, but pro-Islamic, and therefore totally independent. He inaugurated a *jihadi* (combative) phase in the revolution aimed at forceful Islamisation of politics and society according to his political Islamist version of the religion. This phase dominated the first few years of the revolution at the cost of thousands of lives. Yet, since he also wanted to build a powerful and modern Shi'ite Islamic state, he followed his *jihadi* phase with an *ijtihadi* (reformist/reconstruction) phase, during which he constructed a polity that had a pluralist Islamic system of governance and a foreign-policy posture capable of situating an Islamic republic in the prevailing world order, while keeping the United States as an 'evil power' at bay.<sup>5</sup> He did not have much time for Soviet Communism either, condemning the USSR as 'the other Great Satan'.<sup>6</sup> He later invited the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to convert to Islam.

## Afghanistan

From 1953, as Iran drifted into the US camp, Afghanistan incrementally took the opposite path in the politics of the Cold War. Up to this point, King Zahir, who had acceded to the throne in 1933, had formally served as head of state,

<sup>5</sup> Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 69–88.

<sup>6</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 298.

but Afghanistan was really governed by his two uncles, Mohammed Hashem Khan and Shah Mahmoud Khan, who served as Zahir's prime ministers from 1933 to 1946 and 1946 to 1953 respectively. However, as post-Second World War pressures for modernisation built up and Afghanistan became enmeshed in a border dispute with the newly created Islamic state of Pakistan, the king agreed with his cousin, Mohammed Daoud, that the time had come for the younger generation of the royal family to lead Afghanistan. They struck a deal under which the king would be empowered to exercise his constitutional powers and Daoud would become prime minister, pursuing an accelerated process of state-building and modernisation.

Yet Zahir and Daoud came from two rival branches of the royal family. Once Daoud assumed power, he reneged on his promise to the king and immediately established himself as the *de facto* ruler, with several objectives. He wanted to centralise power in order to pursue accelerated modernisation driven by the state. He also wanted to renegotiate the Afghan–Pakistan border, or what had historically become known as the Durand Line (determined in 1893 by the British without Afghanistan's participation). Further, he supported a concept of nationalism centred on the ethnic Pashtuns. However, he needed massive foreign economic and military assistance for achieving his goals.

Daoud had no interest in Marxism-Leninism *per se* and he seemed aware both of the incompatibility of Soviet Communism with Islam and of the inappropriateness of a leftist/socialist revolution in Afghanistan. Equally, he appeared informed of the need to maintain balanced foreign relations. While upholding Afghanistan's traditional foreign policy of neutrality, Daoud approached Washington in 1953–54 for economic and military aid and mediation in the Afghan–Pakistan border dispute. Washington turned him down, especially on his request for military aid, on the grounds that Afghanistan was not as strategically important as two of its neighbours, Iran and Pakistan, and that 'no amount of military aid' could make Afghanistan 'secure against a determined Soviet attack'.<sup>7</sup> Daoud and his brother, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Naim, found the US rejection deeply offensive and regarded it as a clear sign of Washington's support for Pakistan in the conflict. Neither did they feel comfortable with the US penetration of Iran, given a simmering border dispute that Afghanistan had

7 Shaheen F. Dil, 'The Cabal in Kabul: Great-Power Interaction in Afghanistan', *American Political Science Review*, 71 (1977), 468.

with that country and the fact that Afghanistan had supported Mossadeq's oil nationalisation.

Daoud consequently turned to the USSR for purely pragmatic reasons. The post-Stalin Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev welcomed Daoud's request and embarked upon a generous programme of military and economic assistance to Afghanistan, which between 1955 and 1978 amounted to about \$2.5 billion. By 1956, Moscow also supported Afghanistan in its quarrel with Pakistan. The Soviet motives were clear: to counter the US policy of containment, to prevent Afghanistan from becoming an anti-Soviet American base like Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, to set a good example for promoting the new Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence, and to hope to turn Afghanistan into a focus for expanding Soviet reach in the region. Moscow's new policies laid the foundation for growing military and economic influence. Within a decade, the Afghan armed forces became almost entirely Soviet-trained and -equipped, with Soviets also acting as advisers in civilian administration and economic development. Hundreds of young Afghans were sent to the USSR to receive both military and civilian training, with some becoming impressed by Soviet 'progress' and recruited by the Soviet security and intelligence agency, the KGB, for pro-Soviet activities upon their return to Afghanistan. At the same time, hundreds of Soviet advisers were stationed at different military and civilian levels in Afghanistan. When Afghan-Pakistan relations deteriorated, from 1959, and when Washington once again turned down an Afghan request in 1961 for mediation, Moscow stepped up its support for Afghanistan. After Pakistan denied Afghanistan access to its ports in 1961, the Kremlin opened an alternate transit route.

From the late 1950s, Washington augmented its economic assistance to Kabul to counter rising Soviet influence, something Daoud was keen to exploit. But American aid, which amounted to about \$520 million over the entire period of Soviet assistance, could not compensate for the fact that, in a country such as Afghanistan, the only effective agent of change was the armed forces, which received most of their support from the Soviets. US aid proved to be too little and too late, and declined with the deepening American involvement in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, as Afghan-Pakistan relations resulted in border skirmishes and closure of the Afghan transit route at a high economic cost for Afghanistan, Daoud found himself with little choice but to resign in March 1963. Taking advantage of this, the king inaugurated an 'experiment with democracy' as a way of strengthening his own hold on power and preventing Daoud from returning to government. Yet the so-called democratic phase soon turned out

to be a sham. It produced three non-partisan and unruly parliaments, with little influence on the executive branch. The phase nonetheless opened the way for a number of opposition clusters to become informally operational inside and outside the parliamentary arenas. Three of these proved to be highly consequential.

The first, the Communist cluster, included most prominently two rival pro-Soviet factions: Parcham (Banner) and Khalq (Masses), which originated in the mid-1960s. Parcham was made up mostly of Kabul-based urbanised Dari-speaking Afghans, many of whom had been educated in the Soviet Union. It was led by Babrak Karmal, who subsequently became the third Soviet-installed Communist president of Afghanistan. The Parchamis wanted to see the Afghan monarchy reformed in a bourgeois revolution; they believed the conditions in Afghanistan were not ready for the overthrow of the system and the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Although Karmal had developed an underground relationship with Moscow from the late 1950s, he had also attracted the patronage of Daoud, who used him as part of a strategy to build good relations with the USSR and to pressure his rival branch in the royal family. Khalq, in contrast, was composed mostly of Pashto-speaking Soviet-trained Afghans, many of whom had a rural background. It was led by a self-styled revolutionary, Noor Mohammad Taraki, and a US-educated Marxist-Leninist, Hafizullah Amin, who served as Taraki's powerful deputy. Subsequently, Taraki and Amin became the first and the second Soviet-backed Communist presidents of Afghanistan. The Khalqis styled themselves very much after the Bolsheviks, calling for a proletarian revolution and the overthrow of the system.

In 1966, the two factions forged an alliance within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). But this alliance soon proved to be short-lived: Khalq rejected Parcham for being part of the Afghan establishment, mainly because of Karmal's relations with Daoud. Neither faction ever attracted more than a few hundred core members. Due to this small size and to the fact that the Afghan monarchy continued to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union, the successive governments of the democratic phase never perceived either of the factions as a threat.

Islamists formed the second cluster. By the early 1960s, a number of Afghans who had been educated at Cairo's traditional centre of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar University – which had become a hotbed of the radical Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood – returned to Kabul. They found the growing Communist influence and the monarchy's tolerance of it alarming. While most of their support was concentrated at the Faculty of

Theology at Kabul University, they wanted an Islamist transformation of Afghanistan. By the mid-1960s, they formed the Jamiat-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), whose founding members included leaders of the future Islamic resistance to the 1980s Soviet occupation of Afghanistan such as Burhannuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik who became the head of Jamiat, and Abdurrasul Sayyaf, an ethnic Pashtun, who led the Ittihad-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Unity of Afghanistan). An Afghan Islamic Youth Movement was formed about the same time in alliance with the Jamiat-i Islami. Its founding members included Ahmad Shah Massoud, who subsequently emerged as a celebrated Islamic resistance commander against the Soviets. Another original member of the movement was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who later split from Jamiat-i Islami and formed his own mujahedin (Islamic resistance) group, the Hezb-i Islami, under the patronage of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI).

The third cluster was the Daoudist network, which was decentralised, with Daoud acting as its discreet head. It was politically opportunist, operated and directed by a number of Daoud's agents within and outside the parliament. The network's function was to act in alliance with whoever was in the legislature and executive to cause political instability and undermine the position of the king – who, since turning his back on Daoud, had become the object of Daoud's intense fury – and thus facilitate the former prime minister's return to power.

Of these clusters, the Daoudists finally succeeded in seizing power and putting Afghanistan on a turbulent course of political development. In July 1973, in a secret alliance with the Parcham, which had some members and supporters within the armed forces, and while the king was on a visit to Rome, Daoud successfully enacted a bloodless coup, toppling his cousin's monarchy and declaring Afghanistan a republic. In his first policy statement, he condemned the preceding "democratic phase" as fraudulent and pledged to bring genuine democracy to Afghanistan. He affirmed a policy of non-alignment and praised Afghanistan's friendly relations with its 'great northern neighbour', the Soviet Union. At the same time, he singled out Pakistan as the only country with which Afghanistan had a major political dispute and stressed his country's support for the right to self-determination of the people of 'Pashtunistan'.<sup>8</sup> The constitution was suspended and all political activities

8 Text of Mohammad Daoud's declaration of the republic speech, in Abdul Aziz Danishyar (ed.), *The Afghanistan Republic Annual – 1974* (Kabul: Kabul Times Publishing Agency, 1974), 1–4.

were banned. Meanwhile, hundreds of Parchami supporters joined the bureaucracy, with 160 of their most energetic comrades-in-arms being dispatched to the provinces, where they could promote 'enlightenment and progress'.

Despite claims to the contrary, Daoud was basically an autocratic nationalist moderniser, somewhat similar to the shah. He had already labelled the Islamists 'reactionaries' and launched a violent campaign against them with the help of the Parchamis. After consolidating power, from 1975 he also moved to reduce his dependence on the Parchamis and the Soviet Union. To achieve his goal, he sought to normalise relations with Pakistan by playing down his initial stand on Pashtunistan; he also worked towards closer ties with the shah's regime in the hope that it could provide Afghanistan with substantial financial aid. Likewise, he attempted to expand relations with Saudi Arabia and Libya as additional sources of finance. He further sought to cultivate bonds with Egypt under Anwar Sadat, who had emerged as one of the strongest critics of the Soviet Union as he pursued peace with Israel and friendship with the United States. Daoud reasoned that such measures would also endear him to Washington, whose ambassador to Afghanistan, Theodore Eliot, confirmed Daoud's move in 1975 to tilt away 'from pro-Soviet leftists and their patron power'.<sup>9</sup> In June 1976, Daoud dispatched Mohammad Naim as his special emissary to the United States to seek support for his domestic and foreign-policy changes.

However, while the shah promised \$2 billion in aid, he delivered only \$10 million of it before he was toppled, and the oil-rich Arab states made only modest contributions. Furthermore, Washington did not seem to realise the seriousness of the risk that Daoud was taking in his relations with Moscow by seeking to change Afghanistan's foreign-policy orientation; once again it rebuffed Daoud's approach. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was the main architect of the Nixon Doctrine, had so much confidence in the shah's regime and its ability to fulfil its role as a loyal US ally in the region that he advised Naim to turn to the shah as the main regional bulwark against Communism. Kissinger could not discern that the shah's regime was built on sand and that it did not have the capability of looking after US interests in Afghanistan.

Bewildered by the American response, Daoud nonetheless pressed on with his changes, much to Soviet annoyance. In April 1977, Soviet leader Leonid

9 Cited in Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 37.

Brezhnev invited Daoud to Moscow for talks. He asked Daoud to dismiss all non-Soviet specialists and advisers in Afghanistan, therefore arresting Afghanistan's shift away from the USSR. Brezhnev's intimidating approach backfired, for Daoud gave him 'a formidable dressing down . . . in front of his peers and most of his close associates'.<sup>10</sup>

That also appeared to seal Daoud's fate. Moscow urged the Parchamis and Khalqis to reunite within the PDPA in order to counter Daoud. When the PDPA staged demonstrations a year later, Daoud arrested most of its leaders. The PDPA's supporters in the armed forces launched a successful and bloody coup on 27 April 1978, eliminating Daoud and most members of his family. They declared Afghanistan a democratic republic with fraternal ties with the Soviet Union. While the Soviet leadership may have had prior knowledge of the coup, it is now established that it had no direct hand in it.<sup>11</sup>

In the new PDPA government, Taraki took over the post of president, Karmal the position of vice president and second deputy prime minister, and Amin the position of first deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. Moscow promptly recognised the new regime and declared full support for it. It urgently concluded a series of bilateral agreements and dispatched economic and military assistance. The number of Soviet military and non-military advisers was dramatically increased, reaching some 4,000 by the end of 1978; they guided the PDPA's administrative, political, economic, and security operations at all levels.

As might have been expected, the PDPA was not equipped to govern Afghanistan. It lacked a popular base of support, historical precedent, political legitimacy, and administrative experience; it was ideologically alien to Afghan society and suffered from intense factional rivalry. It became totally dependent on the Soviet Union for its survival. As PDPA leaders requested increased Soviet aid and Moscow obliged, the United States and Afghanistan's other neighbours, especially Iran and Pakistan, remained highly suspicious of the turn of events. However, for various reasons, most could do little. The Carter administration wanted to see the continuation of its policy of détente towards the USSR. The shah's regime was facing popular unrest and was incapable of fulfilling its proposed role under the Nixon Doctrine. The Pakistani military regime of General Zia ul-Haq, which was pursuing a policy of re-Islamisation and was a pariah in world politics, was the only actor keen to help those

10 Abdul Samad Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider's Account* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1988), 180.

11 Vasily Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre, 2002), 25–26.



Afghan Islamists who wanted to take up arms against the PDPA. The ISI cultivated Hekmatyar, now leader of the radical Islamist group Hezb-i Islami, for this purpose.

The PDPA quickly tore itself apart. Within two months of coming to power, the Khalqis outmanoeuvred the Parchamis, at first dispatching Karmal and some of his top lieutenants abroad as ambassadors and then dismissing them on charges of embezzling embassy funds. This, together with the Khalqis' ill-conceived Stalinist policies, outraged a majority of the Afghan people, prompting them to launch Islamist uprisings in different parts of the country. The PDPA requested increased Soviet assistance, including combat troops. While willing to continue its economic, military, and advisory assistance, the Kremlin was prudently reluctant to commit combat troops lest it antagonise the Afghan people further and entangle the Soviet Union in an unwinnable war.

However, the situation rapidly changed for Moscow when the ambitious Amin arrested (and later killed) Taraki and took over power in September 1979. Moscow could no longer trust Amin, who became aware that he was in a vulnerable position. As a consequence, to protect himself from the Soviets, he sought a ceasefire with Hekmatyar along with a normalization of relations with Washington. The Kremlin was faced with two stark choices. One was to invade and save the PDPA, thus protecting the massive Soviet investment in Afghanistan since the mid-1950s. Another was to let the PDPA regime collapse, at the risk of Afghanistan falling under Islamist rule, which, together with similar regimes in Pakistan and Iran, posed a perceived Islamist threat to the Soviet Central Asian Muslim republics. Brezhnev and a few of his colleagues in the Politburo decided on the invasion option.

In late December 1979, Soviet forces occupied Kabul and all other major cities, as well as the strategic points and main lines of communications and border entries. Their advanced special units promptly eliminated Amin and some of his colleagues. Karmal, whom Moscow had kept on tap for such an eventuality, was returned to Kabul to head a new PDPA government, dominated this time by the Parchamis. Moscow justified its invasion by claiming that it had dispatched a 'limited contingent' of Soviet troops at the invitation of the PDPA leadership to save Afghanistan from being overrun by imperialist-backed counter-revolutionary forces. The Kremlin expected the Soviet forces to stabilise the PDPA and Afghanistan within six to twelve months and then to return home en masse, leaving behind only small numbers of troops, as they had done in Eastern Europe. However, the invasion invited growing opposition not only from the Afghan people but also from most of the international

community. The only regional state that openly sided with the Soviets was India, largely because of its rivalry with Pakistan.

The invasion marked an unparalleled development in Soviet international behaviour outside the Warsaw Pact since the Second World War. All those foreign leaders who had traditionally believed Soviet foreign policy to be inherently expansionist now judged their suspicions to be well founded. The invasion shocked the West, especially the United States, which felt that it had been deceived despite its sustained efforts to maintain a policy of *détente*. It also caused alarm in the Muslim world about the long-term intentions of the Soviet Union. It frightened China, especially in the light of the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia a year earlier. Beijing viewed the invasion as part of a Soviet strategy to encircle China.

The invasion snuffed out *détente*. President Carter denounced it as a serious threat to the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf and to world peace. However, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US national security adviser, who had been warning the president about a 'creeping Soviet invasion' for months, now also saw a unique opportunity for the United States to turn Afghanistan into a 'Soviet Vietnam'.<sup>12</sup> On this basis, Washington formulated its counter-intervention strategy in connection with the overall American policy of containment.

### The US counter-intervention strategy

The US strategy had four main elements. First, under the Carter Doctrine, it warned the Soviet Union against any expansion beyond Afghanistan, especially in the direction of the Persian Gulf, and promised to repel any such move by all means (including nuclear weapons). Secondly, it launched a diplomatic and propaganda campaign to prevent the Soviets from attaining international support for their invasion. Thirdly, since allying with Iran under Khomeini was not an option, it renewed the American alliance with Pakistan to strengthen that country's position as a front-line state and to enable it to act as a conduit for outside assistance to the Afghans who were fighting the invasion. Washington dropped its sanctions against Pakistan and embraced General Zia ul-Haq's dictatorship as an essential ally, despite the public US commitment to human rights and democracy. Fourthly, it backed the use of

12 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Les révélations d'un ancien conseiller de Carter: 'Oui, la CIA est entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes ...'", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 14 January 1998.

Islam by the Afghans and their Muslim supporters as an ideology of resistance to wage a *jihad* (holy war) against the Soviet occupation. The CIA was authorised to organise a network of material and human support for the Afghan Islamist resistance.

Although Zia ul-Haq scorned the Carter administration's initial offer of \$400 million in economic and military assistance, he did not have to wait long for a larger amount of American aid. After winning the 1980 US presidential election, Ronald Reagan, the Republican candidate, assumed the presidency. Holding strong anti-Soviet convictions, he believed the United States had to pursue the Cold War vigorously against the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration increased US aid to Pakistan to \$3.2 billion over six years. The CIA forged very close ties with the ISI, which Zia ul-Haq put in charge of Pakistan's Afghanistan and Kashmir policies. From the early 1980s, the ISI tried to orchestrate Afghan resistance.

Seven main Afghan mujahedin groups rapidly became operative, with their political leaders and headquarters based mainly in Pakistan's border city of Peshawar, from where the resistance was largely directed and assisted. Although the Afghan Shi'ite minority also formed several mujahedin units with bases in Iran, the Pakistan-based groups claimed to represent the 80 per cent of the population of Afghanistan that was Sunni. Although proving to be divided along personal, ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and political lines, they all embraced Islam as an ideology of resistance and professed unity of purpose and action on this basis, with some being more radical than others in their ideological disposition. While three small groups supported the restoration of the monarchy of Zahir Shah, who remained in Rome, and stood mostly aloof from the resistance, the others opposed the monarchy and fought for a free and independent Islamic Afghanistan. Two rival groups emerged in dominant positions: Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami, which was primarily Pashtun-based, and Rabbani's Jamiat-i Islami, which was composed largely of non-Pashtuns. Jamiat's key commander, Massoud, turned his native Panjshir valley (sixty miles north of Kabul) into an enduring fortress of resistance. Whereas Hekmatyar was a self-styled radical Islamist and an ISI instrument, Massoud proved to be an independent-minded moderate Islamist and nationalist. He possessed a vision and a strategy that enabled him to be far more successful than Hekmatyar in subsequent years.

The CIA acted as the overall supplier and co-ordinator of outside aid to the mujahedin, but the ISI distributed most such outside assistance. The lion's share went to Hekmatyar, even though he was highly critical of the United States and at times tried to break the unity of the resistance for his own

political purposes. The ISI and the CIA jointly managed a network of volunteers from the Muslim world in support of the Afghan resistance. The young Saudi son of a billionaire, Osama bin Laden, was one such volunteer. The ISI also worked hard to develop networks of Pakistani Islamist activists whom it trained, armed, and funded not only to infiltrate and control the Afghan resistance, but also to fight in Kashmir. For this purpose, with most funding coming from Saudi Arabia and the United States, the ISI nurtured a range of Islamic *madrasas* (schools) whose students were recruited from amongst the Pakistanis and the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. These students were mostly schooled in a form of *jihadi* Islamism so they would be ready to defend their religion when they were called upon.

Ultimately, three factors helped the mujahedin and their international supporters to achieve victory, thereby contributing to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. First, the Soviets persistently failed to win the support of the Afghan people and the international community, while the United States and its allies remained determined to do whatever possible, short of risking a direct confrontation with the USSR, to turn Afghanistan into a theatre of conflict where Soviet Communism could eventually be buried. The biggest advantage that the Soviets initially had was their air superiority. Washington and London addressed this problem in the mid-1980s by providing the mujahedin with shoulder-fired Stinger and Blowpipe missiles, significantly degrading the Soviet capacity to provide air cover for ground operations. This increased the cost of the war for the Soviets, alerting them to the fact that they were involved in a lost cause.

Secondly, at no point did the Soviets manage to secure effective mechanisms of control on the ground in Afghanistan. All their efforts at creating a united governing PDPA proved futile. In 1986, they replaced the ideologically dogmatic and administratively incompetent Karmal with the politically pragmatic head of the KGB-run Afghan secret police (KHAD), Mohammed Najibullah. But this brought about few improvements. Najibullah's promotion of party solidarity and a policy of 'national reconciliation' did little either to stop the power struggle within the PDPA or to entice any major mujahedin group to join the government.

The third factor was the generational leadership change in the USSR. The rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985 proved critical in the process. Gorbachev rapidly learned that he had inherited not only a politically and economically stagnant USSR, with growing internal nationality problems and foreign-policy isolation, but also a draining Afghan conflict. On 25 February 1986, he described the Afghan crisis as a 'bleeding wound', and conveyed a



6. Afghan mujahedin standing on a downed Soviet helicopter, January 1980. The invasion of Afghanistan turned out to be costly for the Soviet Union.

readiness to work towards a political resolution.<sup>13</sup> He signalled an even stronger desire for a settlement to President Reagan at the Reykjavik summit in October 1986. At that time, however, Reagan wanted nothing short of Soviet defeat, although he found the Soviet leader to be likable, and a potential partner.

In 1987, Gorbachev intensified his peace-making efforts as a prelude to a Soviet troop withdrawal. He launched a three-pronged approach. One focused on opening dialogue with the mujahedin and their regional backers in Islamabad, Tehran, and Riyadh in order to facilitate some kind of power-sharing arrangement between the Islamists and the PDPA. Another was to let the UN peace mediation, which had commenced shortly after the Soviet invasion but had been frustrated by Soviet intransigence, become more effective. The third was to strengthen the PDPA regime's defences in order to pave the way for a Soviet withdrawal and to empower Afghan forces to replace them. The first prong did not work. But UN mediation resulted in the Afghan Geneva Peace Accords, signed on 14 April 1988, between the PDPA government and that of Pakistan and co-guaranteed by the Soviet Union and the United States. Although the accords did not provide for a ceasefire, let

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986), 86.

alone peace, they helped the Soviets to withdraw their forces within a year. Nonetheless, Moscow and Washington retained the right to continue to supply arms to their respective clients. Washington claimed victory and scaled down its involvement in Afghanistan, but Islamabad revelled in the opportunities to expand its influence in Afghanistan and the broader region as a dividend for its investment in the Afghan resistance.

After the Soviet withdrawal, the PDPA regime survived for three years, largely because of growing divisions and in-fighting among the mujahedin, who began to lose any semblance of unity after the Soviet pull-out. However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in December 1991, finally deprived the regime of its lifeline. By late April 1992, Najibullah's government collapsed. Massoud's forces took over Kabul and the mujahedin declared the establishment of an Islamic government. With this, the United States also turned its back on Afghanistan. Washington had achieved its prime goal of delivering a mortal blow to Soviet Communism and was no longer interested in the post-Communist transition and management of war-torn Afghanistan. It left the country to the mercy of its predatory neighbours, especially Pakistan, which was now close to its goal of securing a subservient government in Kabul.

At first, Islamabad backed Hekmatyar to prevent Massoud and the leader of his political group, Rabbani, from consolidating power. But when Hekmatyar proved ineffective, the ISI raised a fresh new Pashtun-dominated militia, the Taliban (religious students), to achieve its objectives. The Taliban were a Sunni extremist Islamist force, who claimed religious superiority over all other Islamist forces in Afghanistan. They appeared on the Afghan scene in 1994 and by September 1996 were able to take over Kabul. Massoud and his forces retreated to the Panjshir valley and northern Afghanistan, where they re-grouped and formed an alliance against the Taliban and Pakistan's 'creeping invasion' of Afghanistan. In the meantime, while Afghanistan's other neighbours opposed the Taliban regime and closed their borders with the country, the ISI allowed Osama bin Laden to return shortly after the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Bin Laden was joined in 1997 by the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, bringing new Arab money and volunteers. The Taliban, in alliance with bin Laden's Al Qaeda, pursued a reign of terror in Afghanistan and turned the country into a hub for international terrorism, poppy growing, and drug trafficking, all in the name of Islam.<sup>14</sup> It was from

<sup>14</sup> G. Farrell and J. Thorne, 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone? Evaluation of the Taliban Crackdown against Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 16, 2 (2005), 81–91.

Afghanistan that Al Qaeda masterminded the attacks of 11 September 2001 on New York and Washington. The United States countered and launched a military campaign in Afghanistan as part of a wider 'war on terror', toppling the Taliban and helping to establish the internationally backed government of President Hamid Karzai in December 2001. Yet the Taliban and Al Qaeda survived to continue the fight, and the structures supporting them in Pakistan remained intact.

The Cold War, as the world knew it, ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, radical Islamism, with an anti-US posture, flourished in the post-Cold War period. Having germinated from both sides of the Shi'ite (Iran) and Sunni (Afghanistan and Pakistan) divide, it challenged the United States and its allies in the region and beyond. The Al Qaeda attacks on the United States confirmed the enormity of the danger that radical forces of political Islam could pose to the country and its allies. As such, radical Islamism became a substitute for the Soviet threat, and once again Washington was able to claim a global enemy on which it could blame its foreign-policy mistakes.