

War, Peace and the Warlords: The Case of Ismail Khan of Herat in Afghanistan

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Distribution of power in a political entity is a compromise. It reflects the strengths and weaknesses in the line of command vertically and the reach of power horizontally. It could be embodied in a written constitution, a set of conventions, informal understandings or facts on the ground. A weak center results in the rise of competitive centers of power in the periphery. Eventually, the center may prevail, an uneasy equilibrium may continue, or the entity may split into two or more units.

In uncertain times and strife-torn places, the periphery challenges the center's right to exclusive ownership and use of coercive power. Private militias spring up to protect the local leaders, rule over local populations and guard the local realms. The phenomenon of warlord is in place at that point.¹ The paper proposes to scrutinize the role and relevance of warlords in times of war and peace with special reference to Ismail Khan of Herat.

Qawms and Their Leaders in Afghanistan: An Overview

Afghanistan has always been a country composed of autonomous "village states". The Afghans identify themselves by "Qawm" - a sub-national identity based on kinship, residence and occupation. This instinctive social cohesiveness includes tribes, clans, ethnic

subgroups, religious sects, locality-based groups and groups united by interests. Outside the family, Qawm is the most important focus of individual loyalty.²

For a quarter of a century, Afghanistan has been in turmoil. It has witnessed three systemic changes in that period; monarchy to Marxist to Islamic fundamentalist to the present one claiming to be a constitutional democracy. The Qawm, nonetheless, has endured during these uncertain times. It provided an anchor to the social groups and transformed itself into resistance soldiers during the Soviet occupation. Later, it continued to be a social entity, but engaged in competition and confrontation with other Qawms. It also entered into shifting alliances with other Qawms, split into smaller units, and joined with others to form a larger unit.

The Qawm is ruled by a leader within and represented by him outside. And led into battles by him in times of war. There is a mosaic of ethnicity in Afghanistan. The Pashtuns constitute 38 percent of the population, the Tajiks 25, Hazaras 19 and the Uzbeks 5. Within these broad categories are the subgroups. President Hamid Karzai belongs to Ahmadzai, a west Pashtun tribe. The east Pashtun tribe of Ghilzai suffers from a lack of leadership after the assassination of Abdul Haq Ghilzai at the hands of the Taliban and his brother Haji Abdul Qadeer Ghilzai by a bomb blast. The Tajiks, similarly, are divided into Badkshanis and Panjshiris, who are against each other; and the Western Tajiks who are against them both. The Hazaras in the central mountains of Hazarajat are shiis. The Uzbeks are in the north along the border with Uzbekistan.

The saving grace for the country lies in the fact that the diverse ethnicity is not distributed into neat geographic spaces. Thus, no single Tajik entity or union with Tajikistan can bring all Tajiks together. Similarly, although historically the Pashtun's homeland is south of the

Hindu Kush, they have significant presence in the north as well. Indeed, before the anti-Soviet Basmachi rebellion of the 1920s in Central Asia, which brought in a large influx of Uzbek refugees into northern Afghanistan, the Pashtuns outnumbered the Uzbeks in the north.³ And till the Soviet occupation, the Pashtuns were settled in the north as a deliberate state policy. Thus, disintegration along ethnic lines would be quite difficult.

On the other hand, the threat to the integrity of the country lies in the fact that the ethnic diversity within is accentuated by the interested and influential neighbors across its landlocked borders. There is Pakistan to its south, Iran to its west, China along a narrow, inaccessible mountain strip across the Pamirs to its east, and three Central Asian states to its north. Russia and India, though not immediate neighbors, are avid watchers of the situation in the country. And the United States, though preoccupied in Iraq, has no intentions of leaving Afghanistan alone in the near future.

The country has not always been at the receiving end of the external interference, however. The Kabul-promoted cause of uniting the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan died a natural death with the Soviet occupation; and the Taliban-promoted cause of making parts of Uzbekistan, specially Bukhara, a part of Afghanistan never took off. On the other hand, the Afghan Tajiks effectively meddled into the Tajikistan civil war and hosted Said Abdulla Nuri-led Government-in-Exile of the Badakhshan Autonomous Republic in Taloqan in 1992. The local commanders have taken an escape route to the neighboring countries at difficult times and returned at times of their choosing. Thus, Ismail Khan repeatedly escaped to Iran; and Abdul Rashid Dostum – the leader of the Afghan Uzbeks - to Turkey and Uzbekistan.

The Soviet occupation led to a large-scale exodus and resistance. The experience of exile among millions of Afghan refugees helped forge a sense of belonging to a common homeland, but it fell short of generating a united resistance. They fought the Soviets for a decade and defeated them. It was not a unified struggle of liberation. The Qawms engaged the enemy in thousands of local battles – the terrain, the tactics, the strategies, the weapons, the leaders, the external supporters were different. The only constant was the enemy – the Soviet Union.

The fragmentation of political and military structures of resistance prevented the freedom fighters or mujahideen from turning local victories into a national one. For many, the personal obligation (farz-e ain) of jihad ended with the Soviet withdrawal. As in more normal times, but with more weapons, they engaged in struggle for local power. Some pursued economic opportunities, especially in opium production and the drug trade, while others elaborated independent political strategies. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran sought to shape them into a conventional military force that could pose a genuine political alternative to the Soviet-ruled Kabul.⁴

The post-Soviet era, therefore, brought liberation; but not peace. Dozens of local leaders established their own proto-statelets. Lawlessness, corruption, violence and poverty characterized the early nineties. As the Taliban arrived on the scene in 1993, the country was plunged into a civil war. The warring warlords retreated in face of the Taliban advances. Prominent among them united under a tenuous “Northern Alliance” and held on to a constantly shrinking piece of territory in the north of the country.

And then came the Nine-Eleven, followed by the US war on terrorism. The demand that Taliban hand over Osama bin Ladin, the alleged culprit of the Nine-Eleven terrorism, was

denied. The attack on Afghanistan was inevitable in the circumstances. Operation Enduring Freedom, as it was grandiosely named, began on 7 October 2001.

In all, the US commitment to overthrow the Taliban was about 110 CIA officers and 316 Special Forces personnel, plus massive air power.⁵ Cooperation of warlords was central to the US Operation Enduring Freedom. They were paid off to fight the Taliban and to refrain from fighting each other. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) made full use of cash to get Atta Muhammad, an ethnic Tajik; Hajji Muhammad Muhaqiq, an ethnic Hazara and Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek; to coordinate their strategies. The going rate for a run-of-the-mill warlord to defect was \$200,000.⁶ In some areas, local commanders were promised a top-of-the-range \$40,000 pick-up truck – a local status symbol - if they could prove they had killed Taliban or al-Qaeda elements.⁷

In the aftermath of the Operation Enduring Freedom, the CIA established a 150-strong Special Activities Division (SAD) consisting largely of the veterans from the 1980s anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan and working in civilian clothes. Even as the US government is committed to organizing and training an army for the country, the SAD has continued to pay the local warlords and use local troops –particularly in the south and the east of the country - to locate the al-Qaeda.

Ismail Khan of Herat

Herat was the cradle of Afghanistan's history and civilization. An oasis town, it was first settled some five thousand years ago. Its two hundred square miles of irrigated farmland in a valley rimmed by mountains was considered to have the richest soil in Central Asia.⁸ Agriculture and trade ensured an affluent economy and generated art and architecture; culture and literature.

Since ancient times, the city and its hinterland had been a part of the Iranian province of Khorasan. The Safavids ruled it largely through Durrani governors. The area has, therefore, been traditionally economically integrated into Iran. Many families from the region have their members working in Iran. During the liberation war against the Soviets, taxes on workers' remittances provided an important source of finance for the mujahideen.⁹ During the post-Soviet period, the Iranian government bought wheat from the farmers in Herat at triple the price paid to the Iranian farmers to discourage them from growing opium¹⁰ - as also to retain a tenuous toe-hold in its immediate neighborhood. Iran's interests in Herat are geopolitical. Its ethno-sectarian commitments lie elsewhere; mainly with three distinct groups in Afghanistan. The Hazara shiis, who live in the central mountain fastnesses of Hazarajat and who claim descent from Genghis Khan; the Qizilbash, who are holdovers from the officialdom and army of Nadir Shah; and ethnic Iranians in the marshes and plains of western province of Nimruz.¹¹

Throughout the war, neither the Soviet nor the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan armed forces were able to completely control the city. Finally, the Soviets dealt with the Herat guerrillas by bombing seventy-five percent of Herat into rubble.¹²

Ismail Khan was born in a middle class family in Shindand in 1946. He belongs to the Durrani tribe. A "small, cheerful looking Persian speaking Tajik"¹³, he rose to become a captain of a local garrison in Herat. In March 1979, he disobeyed the orders of the government in Kabul to fire at an anti-government demonstration. Together with the insurgents, his garrison turned on the cadres of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), their officers and the Soviet military advisors and their families, killing three hundred and fifty Soviet citizens. The garrison took over Herat. Within days,

however, the government forces took back the city after a fierce battle. Ismail Khan fled to Iran.

During the Soviet occupation, he joined Jamiat-e Islami - a predominantly Tajik, moderate Islamist party led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. It was a loosely organized group, which permitted a lot of autonomy and initiative to the local commanders. Ismail Khan, in the circumstances, developed his own battle strategies. Since the area was much flatter and more densely populated than the rest of the country; it was less suited to the guerrilla warfare. Instead, he took his military model from his experience as a staff officer in the regular army and created a vertically organized structure. Alongside this, he constituted nine committees to run the civil administration: Military, Financial, Medical, Administrative, Judicial, Agricultural, Information, Education and Investigation.¹⁴

The high-point of his career as the resistance leader was a conference of the provincial commanders in the summer of 1987. The Soviets had decided to withdraw from the country and forced the PDPA leadership to propose national reconciliation. At the same time, eight Shii groups based in Iran had announced the formation of an alliance – a move to signal their readiness and their right to participate in the political dialogue about the future arrangement in the country. By then, Khan's Hamza division had grown to five regiments, each with six to nine battalions of about 200 men made up of combat units of 25 men.¹⁵

Ostensibly called to establish guidelines for military cooperation throughout the area under his control, the conference accepted and approved his position on various issues. It decided to regularize his proclamation announcing himself to be the "Emir of Southwest Afghanistan" and rejected both Kabul's national reconciliation proposal and any attempt by the exiled leaders to impose a solution on the commanders.¹⁶

The post-liberation period in Herat was peaceful though Ismail Khan came under intense pressure from Pakistan and Iran. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) saw the Soviet withdrawal as an opportunity of gaining strategic depth against India by securing a friendly ruler in Afghanistan and demanded that Ismail Khan attack Kabul. He refused and lost \$500,000 annual subsidy he was receiving from the ISI.¹⁷ Iran demanded more power for the Shiis in the Herat shura and began pushing Afghan refugees across the border.¹⁸ By 1992, he was firmly in saddle; having taken control of the Soviet-built Shindand airbase as well.

Pakistan's involvement in Afghan affairs continued. It sought to use the Afghan territory as a passage to Central Asia. Its shortest route would have been from Peshawar to Kabul and then across the Hindukush mountains to Mazar-e Sharif and Tirmez to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. That route was unavailable due to fighting around Kabul. An alternative southern route was then planned from Quetta to Kandahar to Herat reaching Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan. In September 1993, the Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto sent a high-level delegation led by the Minister of Interior Naseerullah Babar to Ismail Khan to secure his assistance for the project in return for economic and political gains he could obtain through the southern route. Khan indicated his willingness to co-operate provided the security of the road to Herat could be assured.¹⁹ On 28 October 1993, Bhutto visited Ashkhabad, where she met Ismail Khan and Abdul Rashid Dostum and urged them to open the southern route, where the trucks would pay just a couple of tolls on the way and their security would be guaranteed.²⁰

The Taliban advances overtook the events shortly thereafter. Ismail Khan, with the help of the Northern Alliance forces, engaged the Taliban from March 1995 onwards. After scoring

a series of successes, he faced a route by Taliban's sudden shift to mobile warfare. An inadequate infrastructure, outstretched logistics and low morale among his troops led to his retreat and eventual withdrawal. In late 1995, the Taliban captured Herat as well as the Shindand airbase along with its forty-one aircraft and helicopters.²¹ The loss of Herat marked the beginning of the end of President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government. Ismail Khan fled to Iran; but returned with rearmed fighters within a few months. In 1997, he was captured and imprisoned by the Taliban in one of the clashes.²² After spending three years in captivity, he escaped and fled a third time to Iran.

By early 2001, he set out to fight again. According to his own account, the Iranians refused to let him cross the border, forcing him to take a twenty-two-day journey via Tajikistan and the Panjshir valley to central Afghanistan and then on foot, instead of the four hour trip across the border.²³

By October 2001, when the US-led war against Afghanistan started, Ismail Khan was already holding near Herat.²⁴ On the night of 12-13 November, the Taliban abandoned Kabul. The next day, Ismail Khan led his 4,000 troops in a pincer movement and retook Herat. Typically, at a news conference, he did not acknowledge US help, merely saying, "American bombing was useful in some places."²⁵

Warlords in Post-War Afghanistan

The US-led Coalition met in Bonn in December to signify the end of the war and work out a post-war political arrangement for the country. Hamid Karzai was put in charge of an interim government. He is seen to be an American protégé. His brief association with the Taliban²⁶ and his long stay outside the country has not enhanced his personal stature. The powerful warlords constitute a further dent in his authority.

The Bonn conference was followed by the Tokyo Donors' meeting in early 2002, where the international community pledged \$4.5 billion in aid to Afghanistan over the next two and a half years.

The first time that the Afghans were invited to participate in shaping their own future was when the Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) was held in Kabul in July 2002. It was projected as an exercise in democracy. The selection/election process brought in all tribes, sects and faiths. Women were present as well. More than one thousand and five hundred delegates deliberated for nine days. Beneath the appearances, though, it was a game the warlords had agreed to play. According to a delegate, "In the Loya Jirga, eighty-five percent of the elected were with the warlords or were warlords."²⁷ The important amongst them – Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ismail Khan, Abdul Rasool Sayyaf, the Tajik general Moalam Ata, Maolana from Parwan, Mulla Ezzat, Haji Qadir, etc.²⁸

The Loya Jirga recognized the Karzai administration as a transitional government for the next eighteen months. It approved fourteen ministers, who seemed to represent all major ethnic groups in the country. The powerful warlords also managed to secure some important berths on the council of ministers.

Thus, Muhammad Fahim, a Tajik warlord from Panjshir, became the Defense Minister; Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek warlord from the northern provinces, his deputy; Yunus Qanooni, another Tajik from the Panjshir, was appointed the Education Minister. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun warlord and the former Prime Minister, on the other hand, did not participate in the Loya Jirga and openly tried to subvert it.

Within months, the cracks within the political structure started showing. In January, there were clashes between the soldiers loyal to Fahim and those loyal to Dostum in Mazare

Sharif. In April, Fahim himself was attacked in Jalalabad, for which Hekmatyar was held responsible and a hundred and fifty of his supporters were arrested. In the East, Hazrat Ali, Haji Abdul Qadir, and Haji Muhammad Zaman continued jockeying for power in the Jalalabad area. Gul Agha Shirzai of Kandahar and the former President Burhanuddin Rabbani were not reconciled to the Karzai presidency and remained potential threats.

Haji Abdul Qadeer Ghilzai, one of the three vice-presidents and minister of civil aviation, was killed in July. Immediately thereafter, Karzai dismissed his own guards from the Defense Ministry and replaced them with forty-six US Special Forces, suggesting that there were serious threats to his own security and also that he did not trust his Defense Minister.

Initially, the US refused to expand the multilateral International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) beyond Kabul, which could have reduced the power of the warlords. Even after the UN resolution of October 2003 expanding its presence into the Afghan hinterland, the ISAF is conspicuously missing in the provinces. In the circumstances, there has been an increased insecurity in the countryside. The ordinary Afghans have been left to fend for themselves from the Taliban who are still at large as also from the warlords. The most vulnerable are some two million refugees, who returned to find that the warlords' militias had already occupied their houses.

Ismail Khan and the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

Ismail Khan has been leading his men into battles for the last quarter of a century; against the Soviets, against the Taliban and against his fellow warlords. An assessment of his relevance in the present context can only be done against this backdrop. His greatest strength is the location. Herat, dating back to five thousand years, has been at the crossroads of world trade and travel. The ancient Silk Road from Rome to China passed

through this area. Bhutto sought to map a southern route from Pakistan to Central Asia through Herat. Today, its 150,000 inhabitants are poised to benefit from the ambitious Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline (TAGP), which will eventually pass through the city. The TAGP envisages construction of parallel downstream gas and oil pipelines from Central Asia to Pakistan, a fibre-optics communication network and a highway system.²⁹

Herat's proximity to Iran is an additional factor in its favor. The Iranians across the border have exerted a benevolent influence. Iran is one of the few countries, according to field researchers, that is making good on its financial commitment of \$560 million made at the Tokyo Donors' Conference. Much of that monetary assistance is spent in Herat. The Iranian diplomats in the Consulate and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC or Pasdaran) are visible and active there. Iran is busy building a road connecting the city to the Iranian city of Mashhad. Every single day, between 100 and 400 trucks pass to and from Iran. The goods range from food all the way to the reconditioned cars from Dubai. They reach local markets within the country and further on to Pakistan. According to one estimate, as many as 500 cars from Dubai reach Pakistan via Herat every day. The UN relief agency uses the highway for its supply trucks; although it has – at least once – temporarily halted the operation citing prohibitive fees charged at the checkpoints.

The transit has contributed toward making Herat one of the richest regions and a major port of entry. Presiding over this thriving trade route is Ismail Khan. Justly proud of post-war reconstruction going on in his region, he says, "Before it was a jihad of blood. Today, it is a jihad of sweat".³⁰ He is reported to be earning as much as \$60million to \$80million annually from the customs duty he collects from the trade. His refusal to hand over the tax revenue has been a constant source of anger to the national government in Kabul. He

visited Iran in early March 2003 and came back with Iranian assurances of co-operation in construction of roads, railways, education, public health, border security and repatriation of refugees.

Like Iran, the US has been indulgent towards him as well. It owes a debt to Ismail Khan. Together with Dostum in the north, Shirzai in the south and Hazrat Ali in the east, he was a valuable US ally in the war and developed close ties with the US military officers. And the US needs all of them even today. Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, the American Commander in charge of the Coalition forces admitted as such. “For the near term, these regional leaders – while they appear unsavory to some, and some accuse them of having sordid pasts – they are providing a degree of security and stability out and away from Kabul”, he said.³¹ Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense was effusive in his praise of Ismail Khan, when he called him “...an appealing man...thoughtful, measured and self-confident.”³²

That the US still needs the services of the warlords to nab the Taliban/al-Qaeda is not lost on Ismail Khan. In the circumstances, he continues to remind the world that only five per cent of the al-Qaeda are captured to-date. They still pose a threat and need to be confronted; he repeats often enough. His ability to keep the rival Americans and Iranians at bay and defy Kabul at the same time cannot all be put down to his financial independence. Not even to his well-equipped and well-paid army, which is 30,000 strong – larger than Kabul’s ragtag troops of a similar number.³³

There are other factors, which have buttressed his position. He is financially secure and does not need to resort to extortion from his people to raise money. Unlike Dostum, he has not changed his political allegiance. Unlike Fahim, Qanooni or Rabbani, he has no national

ambitions. Unlike most other warlords, he has cultivated a favourable image for himself – by making himself accessible to the media; by holding a weekly audience where he dispenses money, advice, divorce and decisions on family disputes to hundreds of supplicants; by occasionally inviting local intellectuals to seek their advice; by setting up schools and hospitals; and so on. And unlike all of them, he has not denied violation of human rights in his fiefdom. He argues, instead, that the Pashtun-dominated Taliban had committed atrocities against the Tajik, and vengeance was only to be expected.

In early July 2002, there were fierce clashes between the forces of Ismail Khan and those of Farah province's Pashtun commander Amanullah Khan. The fighting centered on Shindand, an area where the Tajik dominated northwest and Pashtun dominated southeast converge. It was an inevitable conflict. First, it was a war between the two warlords at the most basic level. Second, it was a national showdown between the two major ethnic components of the population: Tajik and Pashtun. Third, it was widely believed to be a proxy war between Iran and Pakistan. Fourthly, it had beyond-the-region implications; Shindand is at the center of the proposed natural gas pipeline. The oil consortiums would find it difficult to obtain finances in the circumstances of strife and uncertainty. And lastly, it was a US move to wrest control of the Shindand base.

Towards a Unified Afghanistan?

In October 2002, the government-appointed "Commission for Defense of the Motherland" made Karzai Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. It also established a Collegium of high-ranking military figures. The implication of these measures was to pull down the Defense Minister Fahim from the apex of the defense structure and make him just one of

the members of that Collegium. An ethnic representation in the armed forces was also promised.

Simultaneously, an ambitious program to demobilize, disarm and reintegrate (DDR, as it was popularized) the militia fighters was announced. Under the DDR, the warlords were required to supply their militias for training by the US Special Forces troops as part of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and disband their private forces once the national armed forces were deployed throughout the country. The Defense Ministry estimates put the number of private militias at 60,000. By late 2004, only 10,000 of them had turned in their weapons³⁴ and the ANA strength stood at just 16,000 out of the 75,000 soldiers it needs.³⁵

There are indications of tremendous obstacles ahead.

The foremost among them is the American reluctance, as they need to maintain security and fight the al-Qaeda across the country. Only the warlords in far-flung areas and difficult terrain can help them accomplish that. According to some accounts, during Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Kabul in May 2003, Karzai presented the US Secretary of Defense with a plan to take on certain key warlords. Rumsfeld declined to offer US support.³⁶ The US proposal to augment the internal security structure is the formation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) as "security elements", to which the US Special Forces would be attached. The PRTs would train the army, police, highway patrol, border forces and guards. Since the PRTs would be run directly under the US forces, according to the US official position, no new Security Council resolution is required for their operation. And once Karzai is formally elected as the president, he will be entitled to ask for an expanded role for the PRTs. A fresh mandate from the Security Council will not be necessary then either. Like the ISAF, the PRTs have not moved to isolated and potentially hostile areas.³⁷

The United Nations is equally lukewarm to the proposal. "By demobilizing these militias, you don't want to create a vacuum," according to Manoel de Almeida e Silva, spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan. But in the meantime, the process of DDR should not be so slow that it allows militias to hang on forever, he adds.

There are many other practical problems that are holding up the DDR. For instance, how to reintegrate a generation of men who have known no other job than war. Joining the national defense forces is neither an attractive nor an economically viable option. With a monthly salary of \$50, there are rampant desertions.³⁸

But the most crippling blow to the DDR is the defiance of the warlords, who are their employers and leaders. With the ISAF forces confined to Kabul, there is nothing to force the warlords to disarm their militias and nothing to punish them if they refuse. And nothing to persuade them either – in view of the internecine struggles between and among them.³⁹

By March 2004, 3,000 soldiers of the ANA had deserted⁴⁰; in the opposite direction, a trickle of desertions from the private militias, ironically, may have unintentionally contributed to the ANA.

Karzai also has to be extremely cautious on the issue. He could certainly train and arm the demobilized militia and transform them into a national army. Could he erase the Qawm from their consciences and rewrite Afghanistan in its place? Could he end up arming, training, paying and trusting a heterogeneous force that might melt away at the opening shot of a battle? The example of the multi-ethnic army in Yugoslavia that simply disintegrated under the strain needs to be noted in this context. Worse still, such an army could fight battles within its own ranks.

On 15 December, a presidential decree announced that no military or civilian official was allowed to offer dual services in both military and civilian affairs. The governors of the provinces and the commanders of the military or police forces should, therefore, operate within the limits of their authority. Ismail Khan was told to stop using the honorific “Emir of Southwest Afghanistan” in conducting official business.⁴¹

In the next few months, Kabul felt strong enough to further tighten the noose around the local potentates. In May 2003, Karzai invited the provincial governors to Kabul. In an act of brinkmanship, he threatened to resign and call a new Loya Jirga, if they did not agree to send the provincial revenues to Kabul. An agreement was reached and a document was signed. In June, the Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani was sent to Herat, where Ismail Khan handed over \$20 million in provincial revenue for the state treasury. The cash was loaded on a plane and flown back to Kabul. The Finance Ministry stated that \$55 million was collected the previous year, most of it in customs revenue, although only a fraction of it was sent to the central government.⁴² Ashraf Ghani’s visit yielded money as also sent a message to the other provincial supremos.

A sustained campaign against Fahim, Ismail Khan and Gul Agha of Kandahar followed. The common variable in the three cases was perceived to be their local support base and their cordial links with Iran. In July, Atta Muhammad of Mazare Sharif was appointed the Governor of Balkh province; Hazrat Ali of Jalalabad was named the Police Chief of Nangarhar; and Khan Muhammad of Kandhar was appointed the Police Chief in his own province.⁴³

On 12 August, Karzai issued a decree stripping Ismail Khan of his military command and appointing General Baz Muhammad Ahmadi as the new corps commander for Herat. “If

the central government decides to replace me, I'll go to the public mosque and call the people, or announce it by the TV. I'll tell the people, 'I want to go and elect your new governor.' But I'm sure the people won't let me go", he announced. He threw the gauntlet, which Karzai chose to ignore. He was retained as the Governor of Herat for the time being.⁴⁴

A second decree removed Gul Agha Shirzai as the Governor of Kandahar and appointed him the Minister of Urban Affairs. A massive shake-up within the top echelons of the Defense Ministry was then announced. In a swift move, twenty-two senior leaders, all members of the former Tajik Northern Alliance, were removed in favor of a broader mix of professional military men, representing the ethnic composition of the population.⁴⁵

In September, as Karzai was visiting the US and Europe,⁴⁶ there were reports that Fahim had met some warlords and decided to defect from the coalition government. The disclosure did not put him on the defensive. He confirmed having met them to discuss matters of "national interest", asserted "I was and am the first Vice President. I was and am the Minister of Defense" and stopped short of endorsing Karzai's candidacy in the forthcoming presidential elections.⁴⁷ Fahim is believed to have a 50,000-strong private army; most of it in the Panjshir Valley, and some in Kabul. Almost chiding Karzai, he asked him "to take my soldiers and pay them and make them part of the Afghan National Army. Why train new ones when we have a lot of soldiers, generals and commanders?" Striking an even more defiant note, he added, "As the Minister of Defense of Afghanistan, I can assure you that I don't have any private militias. Any weapon that I have belong to the Ministry of Defense and are just being stored in Panjshir for safekeeping."⁴⁸ The episode marks the high point in the confrontation between Karzai and the

warlords/ministers/governors. Later, Karzai nominated and dropped him as the vice-presidential candidate for the elections. A different version of the episode put it down to Fahim's refusal to immediately resign as the vice-president and the minister of defense to qualify to contest the elections.

In March 2004, Mirwaiz Sadiq, Ismail Khan's son and the minister of civil aviation, was killed in a clash in Herat. Khan blamed the pro-Government General Zahir Nayebzada and said the latter had been called to Kabul, where he should be punished. "If I see that he is not punished, then I will make a judgement." He resented the Government's decision to send 1,500 soldiers to impose order in Herat. "Because of the security here, we have no need for them. This is a political issue", he said. In May, on the eve of Karzai's visit to Herat, Khan dug in his heels on the DDR. In yet another interview, he said, "The disarming of mujahideen, who are helping to secure Afghanistan, will bring instability." The fledgling Afghan army was too weak to fill the power vacuum that would be created, he warned.⁴⁹

In August, a fresh fighting broke out between Khan's forces and those of Amanullah Khan – after a gap of more than two years. Karzai adopted a magisterial position: Ismail Khan is the legal governor of the province and the attack against him represents an attack on the Afghan state. He sent more than 1,000 members of US-trained national army and 300 German-trained police to Herat.⁵⁰ The fighting continued to spread to nearby places like Qila, Shindand and Chishti. As a cease-fire was imposed, the pro-Khan demonstrators marched through Herat. Some sixty tribal leaders left for Kabul in early September. "We are going to see President Karzai to tell him that Ismail Khan is our spiritual leader and our hero. We support the Transitional Government, but only through him," they declared.⁵¹

The final showdown was expected anytime thereafter. On 12 September, the Government announced that Khan was relieved of his position as the Governor and would be taking up the position of minister of mines and industry in Kabul. The same day, Sayed Muhammad Khaikhwa, his successor and substitute as the Governor of Herat, arrived and took over.⁵²

The Heratis burnt the offices of the aid workers and fought with security forces over the sacking of their leader. The UN began flying some of its 51 foreign staff to Kabul. Some 50 other foreign relief workers also left the riot-torn town. Ismail Khan finally appeared on the local television – reportedly after a call from Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador in Kabul. He said the hand-over was “part of the natural order”; asked people to be patient and maintain order; and criticized the national army for firing directly into the crowd and killing innocent people.⁵³

In a revealing comment, Khan denied that the proliferation of posters in Herat of Yunus Qanooni – the strongest of Karzai’s rivals in the presidential elections – indicated his preference. “Campaigning has not started. So I have not decided yet”, he said.⁵⁴ For months before that, there were persistent rumors that Khan had reached some kind of understanding with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Questions and Conclusions

Ismail Khan’s career deserves a close scrutiny for various reasons - it is a fascinating life-sketch in its own right; it sheds light on the complexity of Afghan situation; and it throws up various conceptual issues regarding centers of power within a conflict-ridden state that is taking tentative steps towards normalcy.

Khan made his mark as a resistance fighter against the Soviet occupation. He led his men in a number of battles for over a decade. He was a military strategist, who created a vertically

organized military structure that was more suitable for a much flatter and more densely populated Herat than the rest of the country that resorted to guerrilla warfare. He coordinated the war efforts with an expanding network of fellow commanders. Simultaneously, he put together a civilian administration in the liberated areas.

The anti-Soviet struggle of the eighties turned into an anti-Taliban struggle in the nineties. In the early two thousand, it was participation in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom. He consolidated his position in the post-war period and became a virtual ruler in his own realm. He ran state-like institutions exercising state-like authority and dispensing state-like services. It was a rentier system that sustained itself without the people's contribution and functioned without their participation.

As the government in Kabul pursued internal cohesion and acquired administrative capacities, it claimed an undivided legitimacy for itself. In December 2002, it directed Ismail Khan to stop using the honorific "Emir of Southwest Afghanistan" in conducting official business. In June 2003, the Finance Minister paid a well-publicized and triumphant visit to Herat and collected provincial revenue from Khan for the Central Treasury. In August, Khan was stripped of his military command. After more than a year thereafter, in September 2004, he was also relieved of his position as the Governor of Herat. As he declined to become the minister of mines and industry instead, he is a private citizen today.

Herat – the location of Khan's power base – is worth a closer scrutiny. In the conventional literature, the warlords are thought to be operating in the wild lawless peripheries of the states. Weapons, drugs and precious natural resources like the diamonds are currencies of trade and power in such areas. The Center, however beleaguered and weak, is still the repository of national identity and seat of authority. It is also comparatively more

developed, more orderly and better governed. Herat does not conform to this conventional image. It is not a dusty, isolated outpost of the state. The people have enjoyed better living standards, higher literacy and more responsive administration. For five thousand years, it has been on the ancient Silk Road. It is located close to Iran and it will be on the route of the Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline that will connect Central Asia to Pakistan. In the circumstances, Khan formulated and pursued his own de facto foreign policy with the countries across the border and with the US presence within. To that extent, he was an accomplished player at the local, national, regional and global levels. He benefited immensely from his geographic location generally; though he had to fend off pressures and demands from his neighbors at times. Would he have been able to retain the space he had created for himself between the US and Iran; and leverage it against Kabul? Could he still? Is it possible to write off Ismail Khan just as yet? What are the prospects of other warlords in the country? According to Ayoob, civil wars and social fragmentation in failed states have invariably led to the rise of warlords who benefit from the prolonged strife. Whether it is Congo, or Sierra Leone, or Somalia, or Liberia; it is the same story: poppy cultivation, drug traffic, gun-running, protection money and control of scarce resources in the context of acute shortages. The warlords then acquire an abiding interest in perpetuating insecurity.⁵⁵ For over a quarter of a century, the Afghan warlords have thrived on war and violence. Will the Afghan National Army provide external defense, internal security and social cohesion; and thereby render the warlords redundant? Sometimes armies do serve as “melting pots”, helping to forge diverse social strata and ethnic groups into cohesive nations, but just as often they do not. Either the army is composed of (or at least commanded by) one ethnic group and used as a means of ethnic domination or cleansing or

even genocide.⁵⁶ In the best case scenario, the Afghan army would require a lot of time and favorable circumstances to rise up to the tasks ahead.

Will Afghanistan evolve into an inclusive political system with a functioning administration within a reasonable time-frame? The past experiences yield different assessments. The optimists cite the examples of Kosovo and East Timor, where there was incremental transfer of power beginning with a shadowing of ministers followed by the gradual handing over of responsibility, which allowed for schooling in ministerial best practices.⁵⁷ The pessimists point at Lebanon, where the curtailment of the power of local leaders has not led to a functioning state; as Syria has continued to retain effective control over its politico-security institutions. Will Afghanistan witness a successful and smooth transfer of power, which will be perceived as authentic and legitimate? Or will the US control most of the sinews of power behind the curtain? At a more fundamental level, the US does not seem too averse to local centers of power. In fact, it needs the warlords. They maintain law and order and run the administration in the outlying areas; they help nab the Taliban/al-Qaeda, who are beyond the American reach; and they sustain an illusion of a plural socio-political order. Additionally, empowerment of the warlords helps dis-empower Karzai just enough to make him amenable to American policies and preferences.

The circumstances of space and time have shaped the role and relevance of a warlord at a given point in time and place. In Afghanistan and also in Somalia, the relief agencies have had to work with them to provide humanitarian assistance to the needy, thereby contributing to the consolidation of their power. By positioning themselves as guarantors of relief (primarily food aid), the warlords have elevated their popularity, maintained their clientelistic network and channeled resources to their war capacities.⁵⁸ In the case of

embargoed Serbia, the warlords assumed the role of indispensable service-providers rather than cross-border smugglers. In Liberia, Charles Taylor, who smuggled timber and iron-ore in the underground economy as a warlord, continued to export them in official global market after he became the head of the state. Thus, the warlords have proved to be adept at carving out multifarious roles for themselves as the situations demanded. As the theory of International Relations seeks to come to grip with non-state actors, the phenomenon of warlord deserves a more serious and systematic inquiry. It is certainly not passe; nor is it an aberration. And it is definitely not a flat, uniform, uni-dimensional, unchanging rarity.

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¹ Warlords are those prepared and able, by force or its threat, to deny ideological and operational space to a state or who put forward, to the populations under their control, an articulated alternative to citizenship and who secure allegiance through a combination of that force and articulation, allied sometimes with charisma or claims to certain ancestries more compelling to their adherents than affiliation to a state. Stephen Chan, "The Warlord and Global Order" in Paul B. Rich, ed., Warlords in International Relations, (Macmillan Press, Houndsmill, 1999) p.164.

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³ Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, "The Decline of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan", Asian Survey (Berkley), Vol.35, No. 7, July 1995, p. 629.

⁴ Barnett R. Rubin, The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System (Yale University Press, 1995), p.247

⁵ Bob Woodward, Bush at War (Simon and Schuster, London, 2003), p.314

⁶ Dilip Hiro, War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and Global Response (Roli Books, New Delhi, 2002), p.356

⁷ Sonali Kolhatkar, "Warlords Stand in the Way" Asia Times (Hong Kong), 8 October 2003

⁸ Ahmed Rashid, Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia (I.B.Tauris, London, 2000) p. 17

⁹ Rubin, n. 4, p.9

¹⁰ Middle East Economic Digest (London), 15 September 1995, p.18

¹¹ John K. Cooley, Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism (Pluto Press, London, 2000) p. 104

¹² Jalali and Grau, n. 2, p. 397

¹³ Hiro, n.6, p. 204

¹⁴ Rubin, n. 4, pp.239-40

¹⁵ Angelo Rasanayagam, Afghanistan: A Modern History: Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The Problems of Governance in the Muslim Tradition (I B Tauris, London, 2003) p. 132

¹⁶ Rubin, n. 4, pp.248-9

¹⁷ Olivier Roy's personal communication. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 260

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.277

¹⁹ Babar had requested to be put in charge of Afghan policy: "I'll see to it that Iran is neutralised in Afghanistan". Rasanayagam, n. 15, p.133

²⁰ Rashid, n.8, p.127

²¹ Hiro, n. 6, p. 244

²³ General Malik Pahlawan, the estranged deputy of Dostum, is believed to have cut a deal that in exchange for Uzbek autonomy, he would switch his support to the Taliban. He handed over Ismail Khan and his followers as a token of his allegiance. Rasanayagam, n. 15, p.153.

²³ Carlotta Gall, "Iranian Influence Felt in Afghanistan's West" New York Times, 22 January 2002

²⁴ Woodward, n 5, p. 231

²⁵ Hiro, n.6, p 357 and 462.

²⁶ Some reports suggest that Karzai worked for the American oil company Unocal and was its representative in Afghanistan to negotiate oil pipeline deals with the Taliban government.

²⁷ Quoted in Kolhatkar, n.7.

²⁸ Mahendra Ved, "Phoenix Rising: Karzai Government at Work" in Sreedhar, ed., Afghanistan in Transition (Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 2003) p.44

²⁹ The TAGP was formally signed into an agreement in Islamabad by the Heads of States of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan in May 2002

³⁰ Bay Fang, "The US and Iran jockey for Influence in Western Iran", US News and World Report (Washington, D C), 12 August 2002, p.16

³¹ David Zucchino, "General Values Alliance with the Warlords", Los Angeles Times, 4 November 2002.

³² John Pilger, "What Good Friends Left Behind", The Guardian (London), 20 September 2003.

³³ According to some estimates, his militias number 70,000. Lucy Morgan-Edwards, "Old Warlord Proves Thorn in the Side of Afghan Government", Telegraph (London), 13 April 2003

³⁴ Duncan Campbell, "This Malign Spell Has Yet to be Broken", Guardian, 21 July 2004.

³⁵ Paul Watson, "Afghan Warlord Cedes His Citadel" Los Angeles Times, 15 September 2004.

³⁶ Fareed Zakaria, "The Stakes in Afghanistan", Washington Post, 3 August 2004

³⁷ Craig Smith, "NATO Runs Short of Troops to Expand Afghan Peacekeeping", New York Times, 18 September 2004

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- ³⁸ Scott Baldauf, "Afghans Yet to Lay Down Arms", Christian Science Monitor (Paris), 14 October 2003
- ³⁹ Disputes among them are of three main kinds: first, over land and water, two of the most important and scarce resources; second, ethnic and often closely linked to land and water but also to the struggle between political parties; and finally, family-based, frequently revolving around women. Peace-building in Afghanistan, www.crisisweb.org. Accessed on 18 October 2003
- ⁴⁰ Thalif Deen, "Army Desertions Cause Problems: Afghan Elections", Dawn (Karachi), 13 March 2004.
- ⁴¹ April Witt, "Bridging Two Afghan Worlds", Washington Post, 7 June 2003
- ⁴² April Witt, "Herat's Powerful Leader Nods to Kabul's Authority but Defends Conservatism", n.41
- ⁴³ Hamida Ghafour, "Karzai Shifts Three Militia Leaders to Civilian Posts", Los Angeles Times, 21 July 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Witt, n.41
- ⁴⁵ Baldauf, n.38
- ⁴⁶ Daily Star (Beirut), 13 October 2003
- ⁴⁷ Pamela Constable, "Defense Minister Denies Reports of Split With Karzai", Washington Post, 7 October 2003
- ⁴⁸ Halima Kazem, "In a Rare Interview Afghan Defense Minister Denies that He's a Warlord in Waiting", Christian Science Monitor, 17 October 2003
- ⁴⁹ Mike Collet-White, "Powerful Afghan Governor Slams Disarmament Plan", Reuters, 10 May 2004
- ⁵⁰ He criticised the Afghan army for merely getting into the way, rather than destroying his rival's forces. Halima Kazem, "New Afghan Army Asserts Itself" Christian Science Monitor, 23 August 2004. The comment as also his expectation that Amanullah Khan would be detained in Kabul and would face justice seems naïve in view of the fact that the attack, the imposed cease-fire and the arrival of the army to monitor the same came in a co-ordinated sequence. His earlier statement that Nayeبزادا would be punished for the killing of his son was equally naïve.
- ⁵¹ Declan Walsh, "Day of Reckoning for the Emir of Herat", Guardian, 4 September 2004
- ⁵² New York Times, 13 September 2004.
- ⁵³ Stephen Graham, "Aid Workers Evacuate Western Afghan City", Associated Press, 13 September 2004. See also Pamela Constable, "Afghans Riot over Dismissal of Governor in Herat", Washington Post, 13 September 2004.
- ⁵⁴ Walsh, n. 51.
- ⁵⁵ Mohammed Ayoob, "South-west Asia after the Taliban" Survival (London) vol. 44. No. 10, Spring 2002. P.53
- ⁵⁶ Bjoern Moeller, "Post Trinitarian War and the Regulation of Violence", in Stepahno Guzzini and Dietrich Jung, eds., Contemporary Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research (Routledge, London, 2004) p. 88.
- ⁵⁷ Gordon Peake, "From Warlords to Peacelords?", Journal of International Affairs (New York), Vol. 56, No.2, Spring 2003, p.190.
- ⁵⁸ Joakim Gundel, "Assisting Structures of Violence?: Humanitarian Assistance in the Somali Conflict", in Dietrich Jung, ed., Shadow Globalization, Ethnic Conflicts and New Wars: A Political Economy of Intra-State War (Routledge, London, 2003) p.177