Invited Paper

Neglectful Archives: Representations of Afghanistan*

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Davetli Yazı

İhmalkâr Arşivler: Afganistan Temsilleri*

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The United States, through its military occupation, has been directly involved in Afghanistan for over fourteen years now. Under President George W. Bush, the U.S. intervention was described not only as part of the so-called "War on Terror," it was also defined essentially as a triumphal "mission civilisatrice" that insisted on "nation-building" and "creating democratic institutions" in the war-ravaged country. President Barack Obama – who had once characterized the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as "a war of necessity" – has withdrawn the bulk of U.S. troops from the country and has been outlining, at least in public, a seemingly different course of action: extricating the U.S. involvement in the Afghan theatre by training and revamping Afghan security forces to stand up against the Taliban insurgency, that is, in essence, "Afghanizing" the Afghan conflict.

My intention in this presentation is not to analyze the geo-strategic goals and politico-military options of the U.S. in Afghanistan. Think-tank affiliates have done enough of such analyses already. Rather, the objective of my talk is, at least in part, to point out how fundamentally Orientalist, cultural-reductionist, and essentialist the representation of Afghanistan has been, both prior to and – especially – since the September 11, 2001 incidents, and to show how this extraordinary representation, within an elaborate, yet ahistorical,

archive, has shaped the overall tenets of the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan. This representation – or, to be more precise, *mis*representation – has precisely contributed to the recognition of intellectual futility, political imprudence, and strategic blunders of the overall U.S. strategic presence in Afghanistan.

The image of Afghanistan and the Afghan society (whether in the journalistic descriptions of it in the media, in most of the "serious" scholarship on the country, or in the corridors of power and influence, i.e. the hallways of the Congress, the State Department and the Pentagon where U.S. policies towards Afghanistan are charted out) has been predominantly that of a "failed" state and a "fragmented" polity, a "traditional" society inhabited by wild tribes and rival ethnic groups involved in protracted inter- and intra-ethnic feuds; a totally uneven community of heterogeneous people with divergent, and often conflicting, interests, intentions, and aspirations.

The Afghans, it is argued, are incapable of imagining themselves as a cohesive entity, a nation in the *real* sense. They cannot, and therefore ought not to, narrate themselves as a nation, for they cannot be but a fabricated whole, a constructed scheme, a recently arranged patchwork of semi-nations, with little common history and culture to hold on to and even lesser hopes to look forward to the future. Precisely because of the endurance of this "fact," it is claimed that the Afghans, as an Oriental species, have a *natural tendency* – within a peculiar cultural sphere – to resort to violence. Often pointing to the natural ferocity and valor implicit in the "culture" of Afghanistan, it is suggested, in a purely reductionist way, that if there is no foreign enemy to fight against, the Afghans turn against each other: the Pashtuns vs. the Tajiks, the Tajiks vs. the Uzbeks, the Uzbeks vs. the Hazaras, and the Hazaras vs. everybody else. Since the Afghan is characterized to be naturally prone to fighting, the argument goes, the Afghan society is essentially a society in constant state of war.

I would like to take issue with the widely held view that sees the contemporary dissolution of the Afghan state and disintegration of Afghan society as undisputed givens – a result of "cultural" propensity of the Afghans to resist social cohesiveness and for violent reaction to modern progress and antagonism towards change. To me this view presupposes that *phenomena afghanica* are invariably above and beyond historical contextualization, economic interpretation, or sociological explanation. I shall attempt to contextualize the state of contemporary Afghan conflict and analyze the dynamics that gave rise to the persistent and perpetual warfare

that has engulfed and destabilized the country – dynamics that, at least since the "Communist" Coup of 1978 to this moment, have made the two terms, Afghanistan and war, pretty much to be analogous. My larger intention is to show that the complicated situation prevalent in Afghanistan has been a direct consequence of an array of political and economic reasons that are *not* necessarily reducible to the traits inherent in the Afghan culture or the activities and decisions of the Afghan people. Rather, the shaping, defining, and perpetuation of the war has been inevitably and inexorably connected to the often destructive role, conflicting policy goals, and short-sighted strategic intentions of foreign powers, superpowers as well as regional powers.

To start with, the war raging in Afghanistan in the past three-and-half decades can be seen as a remainder of the old Cold War where the former Soviet Union and the United States were competing for global hegemony. When, after the April 1978 coup, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan succeeded in taking over power in Kabul, Afghanistan became effectively a Soviet satellite state. Contrary to the claims of some critics of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East and South Asia, it was not the "progressive" and "leftist" policies of the new "Communist" regime that alienated so many conservative Afghans, and paved the way for the U.S. exploitation of the Soviet debacle, but rather the brutal manner in with which these policies were carried out that led to widespread resentment of the PDPA regime by nearly every segment of the Afghan society.

Revolts and rebellions, both in the countryside and in urban centers, dramatically increased subsequent to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979. A crucial point that needs to be made here is that, largely because of the ferocity of the Soviet occupation, and the indiscriminatory nature of Khalq-Parcham oppression, Afghans from across the country, largely irrespective of sectarian or tribal affinities, and irrespective of ethnic, regional, or linguistic affiliations, took part in the uprisings. It will not be an overstatement to suggest that early anti-Soviet uprisings had had the potential to become an anti-colonial revolution on a comprehensive, sweeping, and broadly national setting.

It is all too clear that, by the end of 1980's, the struggle that can be roughly described as a movement for liberation and emancipation in Afghanistan had utterly failed. In explaining this failure one cannot, and ought not to, minimize, let alone discount, external factors that contributed directly to the transformation of the resistance from an emergent "national" movement to

a little more than a U.S.-financed, Saudi-inspired, and Pakistani-led proxy arrangement composed of disparate Mujahideen parties.

In cultivating a formidable military challenge to the Soviet "menace" in the region, the U.S.-Pakistani-Saudi coalition in the early years of the 1980's, did not object to the Afghan resistance assuming an increasingly extremist "Islamic" definition. In this context, a huge number of missionaries and volunteers were recruited en mass from across the Islamic world to take part in the Afghan "Jihad." Those democratic, secular-minded, progressive Afghans (including many of the prominent intellectuals) who were opposed to the Soviet occupation of their homeland but were also alarmed by the increasing Islamic radicalization of the resistance and the increasing reliance on, and support of, foreign missionaries, were actively shunned or forced into exile, their voices silenced, and their potential threat to the Mujahideen forces eliminated in every possible way.

Expectedly, when, at the end of the Cold War, the Soviets withdrew their troops from Afghanistan and, in April 1992, the Najibullah regime they'd left behind in Kabul fell unceremoniously, the disunited, fractured, and mutually suspicious Mujahideen parties were unable to come up with a unified political structure to replace the former regime. When one of the groups (namely, Ahmad-Shah Massoud in coalition with Abdul-Rashid Dostum) triumphantly entered Kabul, the rest of the heavily armed, rival groups of the Mujahideen also hastily converged on the capital, intent on receiving some share of the much coveted spoils. The displeased militant leaders who missed the opportunity to take over the capital first – above all, Gulboddin Hekmatyar, the recipient of the by far the largest share of U.S. military aid through the Pakistani Intelligence Agency (ISI) – rocketed the city of Kabul and turned a large segment of it into rubbles. According to many credible sources, some 50,000 people lost their lives in Kabul during a period of two years. A significant outcome of the disappearance of the "Communist" regime and the ensuing infighting among former Mujahideen was the increasing ethnicization of the Afghan conflict: the Pakistani intelligence (perhaps with the tacit support of the Saudis and other Gulf States) started to play ever more openly the ethnic card vis-à-vis Afghanistan. This emergent ominous development led to the heightened and overt ethnicization of the Afghan society at large.

In the Pakistani state propaganda and the media, the victorious Massoud and Dostum were now presented not as Afghan military leaders but as militia

chiefs of the minority ethnic groups, the Tajiks and Uzbeks, respectively. Hekmatyar, on the other hand, was portrayed as a Pashtun leader, a member of the majority in the ethnic makeup of Afghanistan. I must say that, in an ancient, complex politico-juridical entity such as Afghanistan, where no reliable statistical data exist about the actual ethnic composition of the population (or, rather, how people themselves define their ethnic identity), this whole "majority"/"minority" denominations become largely a futile exercise in playing with numbers and percentages. This exercise, however, could at times lead to potentially dangerous consequences.

Let me add one more point here: The Mujahideen entry into Kabul came not long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the termination of the Cold War. Consequently, the U.S., now triumphant in its Cold War rivalry with the Soviets, no longer needed Afghans to bleed the Russians; Pakistan (now a nuclear state), too, lost its centrality in the conflict; and the Saudis were reeling from the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's disastrous invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf War.

The impact of such developments – which divulged conflicting interests of three different powers – on the subsequent events in Afghanistan was far-reaching. With the supply of foreign money (principally U.S. dollars and Saudi riyals) dwindling, the Mujahideen found themselves left in the cold by their erstwhile generous foreign patrons. In the words of Michael Griffin (in *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*), the Mujahideen now had to learn the art of "self-finance." They promptly turned into drug (as well as human) smuggling, poppy production and cultivation, gun running, money laundering, and other criminal activities. Thus, in an ironic twist of events, the very people that President Ronald Reagan had once described as "freedom fighters" and "moral equivalents of [U.S.] founding fathers," found themselves acting as *de facto* warlords and drug lords.

During the chaotic years of the Mujahideen rule (or better, *mis*-rule (1992-96)), it became commonplace for commanders to set up checkpoints in city intersections, in provincial highways, and in key trade routes and, through their paid militias – whose loyalty to the commanders (or the political parties they belonged to) were more economic and financial than anything else – they forcibly "taxed" passengers, harassed common people, pillaged farmlands, and terrorized those who they suspected of belonging to a rival group. It was in this period of anarchy and total chaos that the Pakistani intelligence dropped their traditional ally (Hekmatyar) and found a new, more reliable

ally: the Taliban. The ISI, the puppet master of this whole game, was quick to portray this new player as a truly "authentic" Muslim movement that prided itself in restoring people's dignity and safeguarding their honor and dignity after years of turmoil and disorder.

It is easy to forget *how* the Taliban emerged as an entity and the context that gave rise to their prominence. The Taliban were recruited mainly from Pakistani students of madrassas, or religious schools, close to the Afghan border; from the ranks of rural Afghan refugee students of Pakistani madrasas; and from the disaffected, disillusioned former Mujahideen fighters. As such, from the very early on, the Taliban proved themselves to be staunchly pro-Pakistan and pro-Gulf Arab states. Consequently, then, when they successfully marched onto Kabul (in September 1996) only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistani madrassas remained a constantly replenished, and replenishing, reservoir of Taliban manpower. It is widely reported that, over the years of the Taliban struggle against the opposition (centered principally around Massoud in the north of Afghanistan), regular examinations would be postponed in Pakistani madrassas in order to allow students to cross the frontiers and fight alongside the Taliban and, of course, gain practical military training in the Afghan conflict, with the anticipation of expanding the war beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

The rapid rise of the Taliban in 1994 in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, and their dramatic seizure of power in Kabul in September 1996 – with the direct help of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI) – appears to have had the initial blessing of the Clinton Administration in Washington. On the surface, the Taliban were seen to have brought some form of (draconian) order in a country that had seen, at least since the fall of Najibullah's government, nothing but anarchy and lawlessness. More importantly, in the early stages of the rise of the Taliban movement, Washington saw in the Taliban a convenient geo-strategic tool for the implementation of what Pepe Escobar, in the journal *Asia Times* has called "The New Great Oil Rush," that is, the construction of oil and gas pipelines from the (newly independent) Central Asian republics through Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean, with Karachi as a major destination. The U.S-Saudi coalition of Unocal and Delta was supposed to be the main beneficiary of this Oil Rush.

After some difficult years amid the forgotten rubble of the post-Cold War world, Afghanistan was suddenly propelled from the periphery to the heart

of the energy wars in the region. Even before the Taliban had taken over the capital Kabul, Unocal – intent to shut out its rival, the Argentinian oil company Bridas – was actively negotiating with the Taliban the construction of pipelines from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea, via Afghanistan and Pakistan. A point-man in this enterprise was Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghanistan-born neo-con analyst at RAND who, after the events of September 11, 2001, assumed positions of significant importance in the Republican administration of George W. Bush, including ambassadorships to Kabul, Baghdad, and the U.S. Mission in the United Nations, respectively.

Things did not proceed as Unocal and the U.S. administration had planned, however. What complicated matters most, and prevented the Clinton Administration from recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, was that the capture of Kabul by the Taliban (as welcome as it was) was partly financed by none other than the Saudi businessman and Islamist activist Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda. The Bin Laden connection proved vital as the Taliban were bogged down fighting the remnants of the Mujahideen regime they had supplanted in Kabul. With the active assistance of ultra-conservative militants from all over the Middle East and Asia, the brutal regime of the Taliban, assisted by Al-Qaeda functionaries, engaged itself in a bloody, ruthless war to eliminate any form of potential resistance to its rule.

And then, of course, came the bombing of the American embassy compounds in East Africa – in which Osama Bin Laden was implicated – followed by the events of September 11, 2001. The unleashing of the U.S. war machine on the Taliban, coupled with the actions of the emboldened forces of northern-based anti-Taliban United Front, led to the rapid demise of the Taliban state and the ensuing (and continuing) U.S. occupation of the country.

Now, what is important to note here is that, if there was any degree of illusion about the essential and formative connection between the Afghan war and powerful interests of foreign, regional and global powers in the 1990's, the terms of the *present* state of the war in Afghanistan is *per force* dictated, if not entirely controlled, by the United States. Afghanistan has turned into an important – if not the central – component of U.S. strategy in what is called "War on Terror" in the regional as well as global contexts. Undoubtedly, U.S. interests, strategic or otherwise, are heavily invested in the current warfare in Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, it became apparent to American policy makers that Afghanistan was not only important in terms of fighting "the War on Terror" and implementing a strategy of counter-insurgency (COIN) but also an excellent candidate for launching a relentless, but hardly well-defined, process of "nation-building," a set laboratory for experimenting with political engineering and state fabrication.

The unfolding of events in the past fourteen years, however, clearly indicates that on both counts – war on terror *and* nation-building – the U.S. approach has been far less than successful, if not outright a failure. A resurgent Taliban, which remains to its core attached to the Pakistan military intelligence (ISI) and continues to receive financial assistance from the Gulf states and military aid and training in Pakistan, has proven a resilient military adversary, despite repeated U.S. surges and drawdowns of its forces in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the enterprise of "nation-building," notwithstanding its discernibly functioning original results, has proven itself more of a "mirage" (to borrow from Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie in *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*) – a fantastic case of nation-unraveling and nation-wrecking.

I believe that a credible reason for the continuing chaos in Afghanistan, particularly the lack of success against an enemy that was soundly defeated (though not destroyed) in the early stages of the conflict in late 2001 and early 2002, and is generally detested by the vast majority of the people in Afghanistan, is to be sought in two factors. Firstly, one should look into the imposition of a short-sighted post-2001 economic order which has certainly failed to serve Afghans who are still struggling with the legacy of a horrific, nearly incessant four-decade long conflict. This economic order has had direct linkage with the widespread corruption throughout U.S.-occupied Afghanistan, a development that has been feeding the insurgency and the rapid resuscitation of an erstwhile weakened Taliban. Secondly, one cannot ignore the rapid, and rapidly deteriorating, re-ethnicization and ethnic polarization of Afghan society and an unprecedented heightening of tensions among various ethnic groups in the country. While this second factor is inevitably connected to the first factor mentioned above (namely, the imposition of the current economic order and the method and manner of the allocation and distribution of post-occupation resources and power), its re-emergence in the post-2001 era can be traced to two profound elements. On the one hand, at the time the U.S. and its allies were readying to invade Afghanistan, the Pakistani state, led

by General Parvez Musharraf, revoked (though nominally) its recognition of Taliban and joined (though reluctantly) the U.S. side. As a crucial conduit for U.S. military supplies to reach the theater of war in Afghanistan, Pakistan was given a lot of say in determining the future course of the political organization of post-Taliban Afghanistan. It was Musharraf who, in the name of preserving "ethnic balance" in Afghanistan, insisted that the Pashtuns comprised the "majority" of the population there and, for any Afghan state to survive, the Pashtun dominance over the state should remain intact. In other words, the downfall of the (Pashtun) Taliban should not end the Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan; but not any Pashtuns, of course: only those who would serve Pakistani interests in the region. Islamabad insisted that Afghanistan is no more than a patchwork of insular, heterogeneous groups whose loyalty is not to the larger nation but only to the ethnic group they identify with, maintaining a majoritarian/minoritarian scheme should be a priority in the forming and sustaining the post-2001 Afghan state. While this approach was not necessarily similar to the neo-con definition of, and ambitions for, Afghanistan in Washington, D.C., it nonetheless greatly influenced the subsequent course of events in Afghanistan.

As such, as the American war machine, in collusion with local stipendiaries and mercenary recruits, was attacking Taliban strongholds, a laboriously charted "democratic" government for Afghanistan was being mapped in earnest in Bonn, Germany, ready to take power in Kabul. This elaborate political scheme under U.S. tutelage meant, above all, that, Pakistani insistence on the so-called "ethnic balance" in post-9/11 Afghanistan went unchallenged. Instead of a working, effective, efficient, and comprehensive political structure needed at this crucial juncture of its history, Afghanistan was given a compartmentalized government divided along ethnic lines, thus reinforcing the ethnic polarization of the country to an unprecedented degree. Precisely for this reason, then, all democratic, non-ethnic, non-sectarian, and egalitarian aspirations of *all* Afghans – including the Pashtuns – took a back seat. In a society deeply wounded by many years of conflict and destruction – and in desperate need for real, substantial change in all aspects of its life – this was a ready recipe for further descent into chaos.

Thus, the notion of "ethnic balance" (as fashionable as it sounded then) became an impetus for further ethnic tensions and polarization of Afghanistan. Instead of assisting Afghanistan to turn into a cohesive, open, democratic polity – which was genuinely desired by many Afghans (irrespective of

their ethnic affiliations) – the Bonn Agreement actually ended up making the Afghan state profoundly weakened, fractured, and fragmented. In the eyes of many Afghans, the chief legacy of the U.S. intervention has been the imposition upon their society of an inherently structurally weak and divided state. This weak state has proven itself inevitably to be susceptible to corruption and graft, thus making Afghanistan today on the very top of the list of most corrupt states globally. In the meantime, a divided and weak state, in a country reeling from years of war, would not only harvest corruption – notwithstanding its receiving billions of international financial assistance – but also provide a fertile ground for the insurgency to re-emerge and re-activate and wreck any development plans.

I would further like to maintain that, post-Taliban (and post-U.S. intervention) Afghanistan, instead of becoming a democratic country, has actually regressed into a radically and dangerously polarized polity, a development that reverberates daily in the upper echelon of the U.S. imposed and implemented "democratic" institutions of the country and will undoubtedly reverberate in the future.

Increasing ethnicization of the realm of politics is not the only foe Afghanistan needs to grapple with. Equally important, if only debilitating, has been the introduction in the war-battered society of a ruthless neo-liberal economic order, backed by hegemonic global capital and its closely affiliated financial and politico-ideological institutions. The preferred practical mechanisms, mechanisms whose ideological undertone can hardly be concealed, are said to function most effectively in conditions of free enterprise, of market economy, and of increasing privatization and deregulation, the usual mantra of U.S. imperial discourse in the rest of the (non-Western) world.

Since the imposition of this economic order, in a society that is still practically in a state of war, reconstruction efforts have been largely bungled and the infrastructure has remained shattered. The most visible indication of how billions of dollars of "international aid" are being spent on the "reconstruction" of the country, one can only point to the building of ostentatious towers, elaborate wedding halls, and spacious houses on the lands forcibly seized from the poor by old warlords and new elites returning from the West. The drug trade continues, the black market expands rapidly, and unemployment remains staggering. The rampant corruption and graft at every level of the government has engendered, and is complemented by, increasing poverty, the further shrinking of the already diminished

middle-class, continuing uneven distribution of resources, and endemic environmental decline and degradation. The Afghan youth, the very group that should embody most manifestly the supposed achievements of the U.S. imposed "democratic" order, is leaving the country in droves, undertaking precarious journeys across continents and dangerous seas, seeking relative safety and opportunities elsewhere.

As the discussion above demonstrates, it should not be difficult to see the clear connection, in the post-U.S. occupation period, between (1) the increasing polarization of current Afghan polity and the fragmentation of its political organizations; and (2) the rapid decline and degeneration of social cohesiveness due to the imposition of a ruthless economic *dis*-order, on the one hand, *and* the resurgence of Pakistani-backed Taliban terror network, on the other hand, resulting in the increasing degree of insecurity throughout the country, even in the once peaceful northern regions of Afghanistan.

To conclude: What I have tried to present in the above discussion is that the current complicated situation in Afghanistan has been the result of an array of political and economic reasons that were not necessarily the making of the Afghans themselves. Most studies of the Afghan conflict – being deeply ahistorical, reductionist, and culturalist in nature – overemphasize the ethnic, sectarian, and religious factors in Afghanistan and contain the claim that the Afghans have a "natural" tendency to resort to violence, precisely for this reason, prior to the events of 9/11, the so-called "international community" remained silent vis-à-vis (and complicit in) deliberate acts of violence by ruthless and horrific forces of the Taliban. After all, it was argued, Afghans have a natural propensity to violence, and if they cannot have a foreign adversary to fight, they fight each other. In the post-9/11 period, however, when the interests of the "international community" was directly threatened in the Afghan theatre, an imperially charted political order and an exceedingly corrupt government with dwindling degree of legitimacy have been imposed on the Afghans. The continuation of the war is seen as symptomatic of this very propensity to violence in part of the Afghans themselves, rather than as a result of the resurgence of ISI-backed Taliban or the U.S. installation of a fantastically corrupt system of governance and imposition of a ruthless free economy in the country.

The mis-guided and perilous insistence on Afghan propensity to violence gives tacit legitimacy to imperial attempts to "pacify" the Afghans by all means necessary. The struggle of the Afghans to rid themselves of both Taliban terror

and foreign occupation and to reject foreign interference into their affairs are considered not as a legitimate struggle for liberation and freedom – because the Afghans have no sense of nationalism, it is claimed – but as part of the customary Afghan propensity to violence. As such, based on this "culturalist" and "essentialist" perception of the Afghans, we encounter a classic case of "blaming the victim" both for his/her victimhood and for his determination to bring his/her victimhood to an end. Ignoring, or dismissing, this widely-held view of Afghans and Afghanistan external will constitute an insufficient understanding of Afghanistan in transition from war to post-war. The dissolution of this inherently Orientalist, and, if I may say so, racist category of the Afghan, of course, necessitates the insertion of a vigorous critique of the dominant forms of interpretation of the country and its people and a disavowal of the preponderant views of Afghanistan. After all, Afghanistan is no unresolvable enigma, no blurry area, unless one falls into convenient colonially designated and imperially charted and recycled culturalist and essentialist pitfall. In short, we must admit that the Afghan is, by all accounts, extraordinarily ordinary.