The Taliban’s emergence as a political and military force marks “the latest evolution of more than two decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Since the April 27, 1978, ‘Sawr Revolution’ brought a communist party to power, Afghanistan has moved from one stage to another of civil war and political disintegration without seeming to get any closer to peace, political order, or sustainable development.”

Afghanistan under the Taliban

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On August 8, 1998, the Taliban movement of Afghanistan took control of Mazar-i-Sharif.1 With the city’s capture, the Taliban now hold nearly all the country’s territory that had remained outside their power since they had marched into Kabul, the capital, on September 26, 1996. Upon capturing Mazar, the Taliban killed thousands of civilians, mainly Shia Muslims from the Hazara ethnic group, in revenge for the killing of thousands of their own fighters who had been taken prisoner the previous year during a failed attempt to take the city.

Just as the Taliban prepared to campaign for international diplomatic recognition, however, the United States launched a cruise missile attack on August 20 against camps in Afghanistan that it charged contained the terrorist infrastructure of a movement led by Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi exile. The United States claimed to have strong evidence implicating bin Laden and his network of exiled Islamists in the bombing of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7. The Taliban’s continued defense of bin Laden and their denunciation of the American raid ruled out any dialogue between the Taliban and the United States that perhaps might have led to United States diplomatic recognition and the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan.

1 *Taliban* is the Persian and Pashto plural of the Arabic word *talib*, which means a religious student (the Arabic plural is *talaba*). Despite the tendency of Western media to treat *Taliban* as a singular noun referring to the movement, it is treated here as a plural. Transliteration of Afghan terms has followed the author’s preferred style.

The Taliban’s behavior complicated their relations with regional states as well. Saudi Arabia, one of only three states that recognized the Taliban’s government, expelled their diplomatic representative on September 22 in reprisal for the Taliban’s continued harboring of bin Laden. Most dramatically, the Taliban’s killing of nine Iranians (eight diplomats and a journalist) during their takeover of Mazar-i-Sharif has led to an extended confrontation with Tehran. While UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi defused the tension that might have led Iran to take military action, Tehran continues to deploy troops along the border.

These events marked the latest evolution of more than two decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Since the April 27, 1978, “Sawr Revolution” brought a communist party to power, Afghanistan has moved from one stage to another of civil war and political disintegration without seeming to get any closer to peace, political order, or sustainable development. The combination of an inimical regional environment, along with the destruction of much of the country’s elites, institutions, and infrastructure, has assured the continuation of war among forces based in different regions of the divided country. The victory of the Taliban may reduce the scale of open warfare, but it is likely to result in continued guerrilla or commando activities. The emergence of an assertive Islamic traditionalism in the form of the Taliban has also placed new obstacles in the way of international humanitarian and peacemaking programs.

**Who are the Taliban?**

Perhaps the best-known fact about the Taliban is the restrictions they have imposed on women. These restrictions require women to be fully veiled, forbid them most education and employment, and
impose strict limitations on their access to public services, including health care. The Taliban have also required men to grow full untrimmed beards, cut their hair short, and attend mosque. They forbid any social mingling or communication among men and women outside the family. These rules (and others) have led to a series of confrontations with the representatives of the international community, largely the UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) present in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, however, do not represent a totally new phenomenon in Afghanistan. The network of teachers and students from private, rural-based madrasas (seminaries for the training of ulema, or Islamic clergy) in Afghanistan and the neighboring Pashtun-populated areas of Pakistan has played an important part in the history of the country for centuries. During the jihad against Soviet forces in the late 1970s and 1980s, they were an important source of recruitment for mujahedin (holy warriors) in the tribal areas. They were particularly prominent in the Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami (Movement of the Islamic Uprising) of Mawlawi Muhammad Nabi Muhammad and the breakaway faction of Hizb-i Islami (Islamic Party) that was led by Mawlawi Yunus Khalis.

The students and teachers of private, rural madrasas had become marginalized as a result of years of state building by Afghanistan’s royal regime, which created a new elite (including Islamic scholars and judicial officials) trained in modern schools and universities. The royal regime, the communists, and the Islamists recruited primarily from different sectors of this new elite. The internecine battles of the past 20 years, in which one faction after another of that intelligentsia succeeded to power, each decimating its rivals, eventually led to the eclipse of this modernizing group. At the same time, as millions of Afghans became refugees and the country’s educational system collapsed, rural madrasas provided almost the only education available to the generation of Pashtun boys who reached school age after 1978 (when the communist regime came to power). The rise of the Taliban occurred a generation after the start of this new educational process, just as the communist coup d’état (and Islamist resistance) had occurred a generation after the massive expansion of the state educational system.

Today’s Taliban movement—Da Afghanistan da Talibano Islami Tahrik, or the Islamic Movement of Taliban of Afghanistan—formed in response to the failure of the mujahedin to establish a stable government after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the collapse in 1992 of the government they left behind. While various militias fought over and destroyed large swathes of the national capital, mujahedin commanders in parts of the countryside became virtual warlords. In the southern city of Qandahar, in particular, internecine fighting had led to chronic insecurity—women were raped and abducted—and omnipresent checkpoints where armed men extorted tribute from traders and travelers.

A group of madrasa teachers and students led by Mullah Muhammad Umar formed the Taliban movement to end the power of these warlords and establish a pure Islamic regime. They succeeded largely because of military aid from Pakistan. This aid enabled them initially to seize control of Qandahar city and province in October and November 1994 and to expand their area of authority until they took control of virtually the entire country in August 1998.

Despite their expansion beyond their original home base, the Taliban leaders remain a group of mainly Qandahari mullahs trained in madrasas affiliated with the Deobandi movement—a movement that will be discussed in detail later—in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This leadership thus has a regional and an ideological component. The two are related but not because, as is sometimes said, the Taliban represent in any simple way the traditional code of the conservative Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. On the contrary, the Taliban represent an Islamic ideological radicalization of elements of that code under the impact of war and mass displacement. While their restrictions on women may bear some resemblance to the tribal code, other regulations, such as forbidding celebration of Nawruz, the spring New Year derived from pre-Islamic Persian traditions, are opposed to traditionalism. Especially in the non-Pashtun cities that they rule, the Taliban enforce this ideology through a new disciplinary apparatus alien to tribal traditions.

CREATING AN ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT

The Taliban ruling structure is based on their understanding of Islamic precepts of government. It is headed by an amir (Mullah Muhammad Umar) who is assisted by shuras, or consultative bodies. Since their concept of Islamic authority is that of the amir leading a millat (community) of Muslims, Mullah Umar renamed the Islamic State of Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in October 1997.
In making the transition from a militant movement to a would-be government, the Taliban have changed their institutional structure. They do not seem to be maintaining the Taliban Islamic Movement as a formal structure parallel to the state. Instead, the movement is becoming an informal network connecting the leading figures in the new state structure, where power now resides. Mullah Umar, as amir, is head of state. Originally Mullah Umar headed a 10-member supreme shura and a military shura, both based in Qandahar. After the Taliban captured Kabul, they established the Kabul shura, consisting of the ministers and acting ministers of the Taliban government. Several analysts initially reported that the supreme shura and military shura coexisted with the Kabul shura for some time, constituting a parallel power structure similar to that of a communist party in a Leninist regime. These structures may have persisted, but today Taliban leaders claim that they have been abolished in favor of a more conventional government structure.

Mullah Muhammad Umar was "elected" as amir al-mu'minin (commander of the believers) by an assembly of about 1,200 invited ulama held in Qandahar in the spring of 1996. He apparently has the final say on all matters. Subordinate to him is the Kabul shura, effectively a cabinet of ministers, chaired by Mullah Muhammad Rabbani, whose position is analogous to that of a prime minister or head of government. Mullah Rabbani, a reputed moderate, disappeared from view in late 1998 amid rumors of factional disputes; the Taliban claimed he was undergoing medical treatment in Qandahar.

Although their government has few resources and many parts of it barely function, the Taliban have increasingly adopted a discourse of Afghan nationalism in addition to their Islamic traditionalism and claim to be trying to recreate a centralized Afghan state. In areas under their control they have appointed provincial governors and administrators of districts, cities, towns, and precincts from the center. The administrators are invariably natives of areas other than those they govern. The location of the head of state in Qandahar and the government in Kabul, however, encumbers decision making. It also continues to send the message that the Taliban's power is not based in the national capital.

Most of the Taliban's resources go to the war effort and maintaining security in the areas under their control. They have reduced checkpoints on the roads to a minimum, and petty crime has diminished. They have also established a new security service, the Ministry of Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice, which bears the same name, based on a Koranic verse, as its homologue in Saudi Arabia. Originally a department in the office of the Kabul shura chairman, it was promoted to the status of a ministry in May 1998. This ministry is responsible for the enforcement of all Taliban decrees regarding moral behavior (Mullah Umar charged it with all responsibilities for "guidance," or imad, the Islamist term for political and moral control), including the decrees restricting activities of UN agencies and NGOs. It appears to have had an independent source of funding (probably from Saudi Arabia before relations worsened) and has become the most powerful agency within the Islamic emirate.

Mullah Umar and all but one member of the supreme shura are Qandahari Pashtuns. All the members of the military shura whose ethnic and regional origins are known to the author are Qandahari Pashtuns. The Kabul shura is also predominately Qandahari Pashtun but includes more eastern Pashtuns, a couple of Persian-speakers, and one Uzbek.

Most of the Taliban leaders participated in the jihad as minor commanders or fighters. Few of them were born before 1960, and they thus belong to a younger generation than the leaders of the Islamist groups (who were born in the 1940s or 1950s) or the traditionalist parties (born even earlier). Their troops (and even some members of the leadership) are too young to have participated in the jihad, and their formative political experience was not the Soviet invasion and the resistance but the subsequent civil war among the supposedly Islamic parties.

DEOBANDI CONSERVATISM

The Taliban's core leaders are not simply mullahs, but mullahs who belong to a common political network, the Deobandi madrasas in the Pashtun tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Deobandi movement, which owes its name to the Indian town where a famous madrasa was established in the nineteenth century, developed from conservative reform movements among Indian Muslims. During the nineteenth century Indian
Muslims were split between the followers from Aligarh, home of the Aligarh Muslim University, which provided a Western-style higher education to Indian Muslims, and Deoband, where the madrasa provided a conservative education focused on Islamic law (sharia) and jurisprudence (fiqh). Deobandis looked back for inspiration to Shah Waliullah, an eighteenth-century Indian thinker. Waliullah was influenced by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab of Arabia (whose followers are called Wahhabis by their opponents), a contemporary of Waliullah who provided the ideological legitimacy for the dynasty of Ibn Saud. Hence the Taliban’s Saudi connection, like their antipathy to Iran, has roots several centuries old.

Deobandis reject all forms of ijtihad, the use of reason to create innovations in sharia in response to new conditions. (The revival of ijtihad is a key plank in the platform of the Islamic modernists.) Deobandis oppose all forms of hierarchy within the Muslim community, including tribalism or royalty, favor excluding Shia from participation in the polity, and take a very restrictive view of the social role of women. All these characteristics of the Indian and Pakistani Deobandis are found in exaggerated form among the Afghan Taliban.

AN OPPOSITION UNITED IN NAME ONLY?

The groups arrayed against the Taliban formed a nominal alliance in 1996 called the National Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (Jabha-yi Muttahid-i Islami-yi Milli bara-yi Nijat-i Afghanistan). The fate of several of the elements of this group after the Taliban capture of northern Afghanistan remains unclear. While the group’s membership varied from time to time, at least the following belonged to it:

- Islamic State of Afghanistan (Jamiat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan)–Supervisory Council of the North (SCN, Shura-yi Nazar-i Shamali). This group, primarily composed of Tajiks, is nominally led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Jamiat and president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA), the government deposed from Kabul by the Taliban. The Jamiat was one of the original Islamist parties in Afghanistan, and Rabbani was a lecturer at the Islamic Law Faculty of Kabul University. Rabbani became president pursuant to an agreement among exiled mujahidin party leaders in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1992. The de facto leader of this group is Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Jamiat commander of the Panjsher Valley, who was officially Rabbani’s deputy and minister of defense. Both are Sunni Persian-speakers (hence “Tajiks”) but are from different sub-regions and have different power bases. There are recurrent rumors that Massoud is about to break with Rabbani, but this has not happened. Though the ISA holds Afghanistan’s UN seat and claimed to rule the entire area outside of Taliban control, it did not have a coherent state structure even before the Taliban victory in the north. Massoud controlled an area including much of Parwan and Takhar provinces. While in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban capture of Mazar Massoud controlled only his original home territory, he took advantage of Taliban overextension and new supplies to recapture much of the northeast by the end of 1998.

- National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA, Junbish-i Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan). This group brought together northern, mostly Uzbek, former militias of the communist regime who mutinied against the Soviet-supported president, Najibullah, in early 1992. It also includes former leaders and administrators of the old regime, mainly Persian-speaking, from various ethnic groups and some Uzbek mujahidin commanders. NIMA has lost all the territory formerly under its control, and some of its commanders have defected to the Taliban, while others are seeking alliance with Massoud. It is not clear if the group has a future. NIMA’s founder and principal leader was Abdul Rashid Dostum, who rose from security guard to leader of Najibullah’s most powerful militia. NIMA took control of Mazar-i Sharif in alliance with other groups in early 1992 and ruled several provinces partly through the remaining state structures of the former regime. A coalition of militias, it was subject to internal disputes. General Dostum is thought to have assassinated a principal rival, Ghulam Rasul Pahlawan, whose brother, Abdul Malik Pahlawan, sought revenge by revolting against Dostum and allying with the Taliban in May 1997. Malik then turned on the Taliban and is accused of killing several thousand Taliban prisoners taken in Mazar that May. Dostum fled to Turkey but with the assistance of Uzbekistan returned to Afghanistan in September to oust Malik and lead the successful relief of Mazar against another Taliban assault. NIMA was the strongest force in the north during 1992–1997, but its internal disputes have weakened it considerably.

- Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan (Hizb-i Wahdat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan, or Wahdat). The principal Shia Muslim party in Afghanistan, with support mainly among the Hazara ethnic group, this party

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was originally formed under Iranian sponsorship in order to unite eight Shia parties. Its leader, Mohammad Karim Khalili, has asserted his independence from Iran and was based in the Hazarat, a region in central Afghanistan. The leader of its executive council in the north, Haji Ayatollah Muhammad Muhaqqiq, commanded the party's forces in Mazar-i-Sharif and was favored by Iran. The Wahdat became the major military force in northern Afghanistan and provided the backbone of resistance to the Taliban's attempts to capture Mazar-i-Sharif. In March 1995 the party's founding leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, was killed in Taliban custody in an incident whose details are disputed. Wahdat's forces were ousted from major population centers of the Hazarat by the Taliban in September with little fighting and Khalili has sought to work under Massoud's umbrella.

- Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan (Hizb-i Wahdat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan)—Akbari faction. This faction is a breakaway faction of the Wahdat led by Hujjatul-Islam Sayyid Muhammad Akbari. Akbari is a non-Hazara Shia who had religious training in Iran. This faction allied with Massoud and Rabbani at times when the main Wahdat allied with Dostum against the leaders of the "Islamic State." In October, Akbari surrendered to the Taliban and made public statements of support for them, possibly under duress.

- Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (Harakat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan). A Shia party that never joined the Wahdat, this group is led by Ayatollah Muhammad Asif Muhsini, who was long allied with the Jamiat. Its relations with Iran are strained. Its leadership is mostly non-Hazara Shia.

- Islamic Party of Afghanistan (Hizb-i Islami-yi Afghanistan)—Hikmatyar. This formerly radical Islamist party, led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, was favored by Pakistan throughout the jihad and subsequently became Pakistan's main vehicle for attempts to oust the Rabbani regime. In the face of the Taliban, who captured most of his heavy weapons and became Pakistan's newly favored clients, Hikmatyar joined Rabbani's government as prime minister in June 1996, thereby claiming a role he had formally exercised under an agreement reached in Islamabad in March 1993. After a sojourn in Iran, he returned to northern Afghanistan to join the United Front. He now controls few military or political resources. Some of his commanders have joined the Taliban, while others in the north are apparently joining forces with Massoud.

- Council of the East (Shura-yi Mashriqi). This faction regroups some former leaders of the shura of Jalalabad, notably Haji Abdul Qadir. Qadir, a former governor, reportedly made millions of dollars smuggling consumer goods from Dubai to Pakistan and from involvement in the drug trade, which had one of its centers in his province. Some small groups in the east are still said to be loyal to this group. Like Hikmatyar, Qadir is Pashtun, and his presence serves to show that the northerners aspire to a genuinely national identity. Some men allegedly affiliated with this group were arrested by the Taliban in Jalalabad in November on charges of subversion.

The United Front functioned, rather poorly, mainly as a framework for negotiating with the Taliban. It did not have joint political or administrative functions in the areas under its member groups' control. Until August 1998, the northern areas had four main administrative and political centers: Mazar-i-Sharif, which some groups sought to turn into a temporary capital for an ISA government-in-exile; Taloqan, the headquarters of Massoud's SCN; Shiberghan, General Dostum's headquarters; and Bamiyan, headquarters of the Hizb-i Wahdat administration of Hazarat. Some elements of the former state administration survived in each region, but political power resided in the various armed groups rather than in a unitary structure. By September Bamiyan, the last holdout, fell to Taliban control. Massoud, however, soon recovered Taloqan and has been using it as an operational and supply center.

The groups in the United Front had somewhat different aims. Wahdat and NIMA articulated the need for regional autonomy and power sharing among various groups in Afghanistan. Hazara groups in particular insisted on control over their own areas and recognition of Shia law in their own affairs. The Jamiat's plans for the future Afghan state seemed as centralized as the Taliban's, though Massoud was said to have developed a plan for a federal system based on nine regions. These groups' attempts to establish a temporary government in Mazar-i-Sharif suffered a major setback when a plane carrying 40 of their leaders, including Abdul Rahim Ghaffurzai, the prime minister designate, crashed in August 1997, killing all passengers. Ghaffurzai, a Pashtun from Afghanistan's royal clan (the Muhammadzai) with extensive foreign affairs experience, would have given this alliance a more national image and a better international presence. Thereafter, the United Front was unable to agree on a prime minister.
On paper, several of these groups acknowledged the ISA and held positions within it. All groups, however, maintained their own military and command structure, and did not carry out a unified strategy to mobilize resources in their struggle against the Taliban. This disunity was accentuated by the divisions among the northerners’ several patrons.

AFGHAN GEOPOLITICS

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan lost the strategic position it had previously enjoyed as a buffer state, first between the Russian and British empires and then between the Soviet- and United States-led blocs. A buffer state, of course, is consistent with closed frontiers, and for the past century several of Afghanistan’s frontiers, especially the northern one, were effectively closed. The isolation imposed on the country by Amir Abdul Rahman (1880–1901) gradually eased, but almost all the country’s population remained isolated and relatively immobile. This constituted a break with much of the region’s history. For millennia before the development of blue-water navigation technologies, today’s Afghanistan was at the crossroads of overland trade routes linking South, East, and West Asia and beyond to the Mediterranean and Europe. These routes brought Greek armies and art, Indian Buddhism, Mongol conquest, and Arab Islam together with its Turkic military formations and Persian administration, all of which helped shape the country’s heritage.

The combined effects of the jihad and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have restored Afghanistan’s previous status as a country with open borders crossed by trade routes and subject to the conflicting ambitions of regional powers. The relevant international actors now include not only states in Afghanistan’s neighborhood and beyond, but international oil companies, Islamic movements based in the Middle East, the United Nations, and NGOs both Western and Islamic. And the United States cruise missile strike against alleged terrorist camps has now fixed Afghanistan, at least in American public discourse, as a base for terrorists.

The state with the closest ties and strongest links to Afghanistan is Pakistan. Pakistan has been generally supported in its policy, as it has been for decades, by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf Arab nations. Afghan nationalism across Pakistan’s border and Pashtun nationalism within Pakistan posed one of the threats to the integrity of this relatively new country. Pakistan’s extreme insecurity results from: its confrontation with its much larger neighbor, India; the loss of over half its population when its eastern province became the independent country of Bangladesh after the 1971–1972 civil war (which ended with Indian intervention); and Afghanistan’s historic challenge to the incorporation of the Pashtun areas into Pakistan (Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan’s admission to the United Nations).

Pakistan saw the jihad in Afghanistan as a way to reverse its relations with the country and provide itself with a secure border to the west and north, thereby giving it “strategic depth” in its confrontation with India. Hence, successive Pakistani governments, regardless of ideology, supported only Islamic rather than nationalist groups in Afghanistan, as the former opposed nationalist claims against a fellow Muslim state or at least did not raise them so loudly. But Pakistan’s deep involvement in the jihad also helped incorporate many Pashtuns more firmly into its key military and civilian elites. As a result, the Pashtun question changed for Pakistan. Pashtun elites in the Pakistani state could now exercise clientelistic control or influence over religiously oriented Pashtun groups in Afghanistan. Pashtun rule of the right kind in Afghanistan thus became an instrument of Pakistani influence, rather than a security threat.

The opening of Central Asia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union added a new dimension to the concept of strategic depth. Drawing on historical memories of political, cultural, and economic links among Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, some in Pakistan saw trade and pipeline routes through Afghanistan to Central Asia as a key to Pakistan’s future security. These would add yet greater strategic depth.

Until over two years after the fall of Najibullah, support for Gulbuddin Hikmatyar’s Hizb-i Islami remained the main means through which Pakistan pursued the goal of installing a Pashtun-dominated client regime in Kabul. In mid-1994, however, the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto shifted support to the Taliban. Originally the goal seems to have been limited to clearing the road from Quetta to Qandahar and the Qandahar-Herat highway of tribal militias who had regularly extorted tolls from traders and terrorized travelers. The Taliban developed their own ambitions, how-

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ever, and Pakistan eventually threw the full weight of its support behind them as the future government of Afghanistan. Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan signaled a new level of public support in May 1997 when he flew to Mazar-i Sharif with a large delegation immediately after the Taliban’s initial, short-lived capture of the city, recognized the Taliban government, and announced that all others should follow suit, as the civil war was now over. Pakistan was supported in this policy by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

In the following year, some different perspectives emerged in the Pakistani government. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief of Staff General Jehangir Karamat (both Punjabis) supported a more neutral policy and a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub (a Pashtun) and the intelligence services (Pashtun dominated) held to a more strictly pro-Taliban line. This line clearly won out after the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in May 1998 and led to the Pakistani-supported Taliban offensive of July and August. It was strengthened further when Prime Minister Sharif dismissed General Karamat in the fall in a dispute over the prime minister’s highly personal and noninstitutional way of making decisions, including nuclear policy.

The Taliban’s Pakistani Roots

But the Taliban’s links to Pakistan do not end (and did not begin) with the government. As was noted, the Taliban derive much of their religious inspiration from the Deobandi movement in Pakistan. Virtually all the Taliban leaders had been refugees in Pakistan for several years and studied in madrasas there affiliated with one branch or another of the Deobandi political party Jamiat ul-Ulema-i Islam (JUI). The main branch of the JUI is run by Maulvi Fazlur Rahman, who served as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission in Benazir Bhutto’s government. An important offshoot of the JUI that is led by Maulana Samiul Haq runs two large madrasas, the Dar ul-Uloom Haqqania in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province and the Jamia Uloom-ul-Islamiya in Karachi. The various Taliban leaders using the name “Haqqani” are not related to each other; they are graduates of Dar ul-Uloom Haqqania.

These links remain important and provide new recruits (both Afghans and Pakistanis) to the Taliban. Samiul Haq boasted that most of his Pakistani and Afghan students had joined the Taliban after the latter’s defeat in Mazar-i Sharif in May 1997. He claimed that “Mullah Umar personally rang me to request that I let these students go to Afghanistan on leave since they are needed there.” These same madrasas provided the Taliban with thousands of new Afghan and Pakistani recruits after the final takeover of Mazar-i Sharif in August 1998.

These madrasas and the political parties with which they are affiliated are also a political force in Pakistan. Through them the Taliban are linked to more extreme Sunni groups, such as the Sipahi-i Sahaba and Lashkar-i Jhangvi, both of which are thought to have been involved in acts of terrorism against Shia in Pakistan. Many of their members are reported to have gained military experience with the Taliban. Some have been implicated in killings of international UN staff in Kabul after the American cruise missile raids and in the murder of the Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i Sharif.

The Taliban also receive support from traders based in Quetta, Peshawar, and Karachi who are engaged in the transit and drug trade. These traders include both Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns. The removal of checkpoints and the establishment of public order in southern and western Afghanistan were of great benefit to them, and they have contributed to the Taliban’s treasury and are regularly assessed as needs arise. Afghan, Pakistani, and Arab traders based in the United Arab Emirates have contributed to the Taliban as well. These traders also affirm their newfound social status through contributions to the madrasas where Taliban are trained. They are linked to the local administrations of Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan, which are remunerated for permitting smugglers’ markets to continue. Officials of these provinces also benefit from the system of permits in force for the export of food and fuel to the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. The Taliban thus have a broad set of links to Pakistan’s society and polity.

Saudi and Iranian Connections

Saudi Arabia appears to have continued to fund much of Pakistan’s policy in Afghanistan through both official and unofficial channels. Until mid-1998, Saudi Arabia supplied heavily subsidized fuel to the Taliban through Pakistan and also provided general funding. Saudi Arabia feels some affinity to the Taliban interpretation of Islam, and support for the Taliban is consistent with its rivalry with Iran and long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan. Some Saudi companies and individuals also have interests in the various pipeline proposals under consideration.
A specific Saudi concern, however, has been the activities of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, the wealthy businessman who has funded militant Islamic groups in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. The United States considers him a major supporter of terrorism and, as was noted, charges him with responsibility for the bombings of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August.

Bin Laden was one of the first Arabs to join the mujahidin's struggle against the Soviet Union, and he stayed throughout the war. He funded much of the participation of Arab and other international volunteers. Throughout that time he worked in collaboration with the Saudi intelligence agency and its Pakistani and United States counterparts. He turned against his erstwhile sponsors at the time of the Persian Gulf War, when he opposed the invitation of United States troops to Saudi Arabia. After being deprived of his Saudi citizenship in 1994, he lived for a time in Sudan, which expelled him under United States pressure. He then returned to Afghanistan. Pakistani intelligence agencies assisted his entry to Afghanistan, in return for his agreement to help train fighters for Kashmir, where Pakistan supports a guerrilla war against Indian forces; most of those killed in the United States raid were Kashmiris and Pakistanis training to fight in that disputed region. Bin Laden, together with a group of his followers, was living under the protection of the Jalalabad shura until the Taliban captured the area in September 1996. He moved to Kandahar in 1997.

According to diplomatic sources, the Taliban promised Saudi Arabia that bin Laden would not use his refuge to support any acts of violence abroad, but in mid-1998 the Saudis seemed to have become skeptical of whether this agreement was being observed. Together with a warming of Saudi-Iranian relations after the election of Muhammad Khatami as president of Iran, this seems to have led Saudi Arabia to reduce or terminate its aid to the Taliban in the summer of 1998.

Iran's links to Afghan groups have changed and deepened over time. Iran's policy is dictated by a combination of solidarity with the Shia in Afghanistan (and in Pakistan) and strategic concerns over the United States embargo, access to Central Asia, and rivalry with Saudi Arabia. It has reacted forcefully to the Taliban takeover of northern Afghanistan, especially to the murder of 9 Iranians in its consulate in Mazar-i Sharif in August. This incident, together with the capture of 35 other Iranian nationals by the Taliban, led Iran to build up a military presence on the Afghan border and threaten military action. UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi negotiated the return of the detainees and the bodies of the slain, defusing the threat of military action.

Iran originally became involved through its links to revolutionary Shia groups that took control of the Hazarajat from the more traditionalist formations established in 1979. As it emerged in 1988 from its war with Iraq and adjusted to the changes in the Soviet Union, which coincided with the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, Iran's policy became more assertive. It united most of the Shia parties into the Hizb-i Wahdat in 1988 and pressed for the Wahdat's inclusion in international negotiations, which had been dominated by the Sunni parties supported by the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. From the Soviet troop withdrawal in February 1989 until the fall of President Najibullah in April 1992, Iran saw the Soviet-backed Kabul government as the main force blocking the takeover of Afghanistan by Sunni Wahhabi parties backed by these three countries. While it continued to support Shia parties politically, it did not support their making war on the Najibullah government.

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Taliban led Iran to undertake a more active policy in which it provided economic and military assistance to groups beyond its traditional Shia beneficiaries. As the Najibullah regime collapsed, Iran helped form and arm the "Northern Alliance," including the Jamiat-SCN, the newly formed NIMA, and the Wahdat. It was partly motivated to do so by the desire to block the parties supported by the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia from coming to power.

Initially, an attempt to use Iranian-Persian cultural identity as an instrument of foreign policy also affected Iran's decisions. This was the period when Iran was deeply involved in supporting the nationalists and Islamists of Persian-speaking (though predominantly Sunni) Tajikistan. Iran had initiated a cultural agreement among Persian-speaking political entities, the signatories of which were Iran, Tajikistan, the Jamiat, and the Wahdat. After a brief moment of enthusiasm, this consideration waned.

Strategically, the opening of Central Asia and the Caucasus—the Caspian basin—was, if anything,
more important for Iran than for Pakistan. Bordering on the Caspian itself as well as the newly independent littoral states of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Iran offered the shortest route to the sea for that region’s oil and attractive routes to customers such as Turkey for the region’s natural gas. Its location as the only state on both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea increased Iran’s strategic and international importance and its leverage over United States sanctions.

Gas and oil pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan would be the only other direct southern route. Construction of such pipelines would enable the United States to promote its goal of linking Central Asia to the international energy markets by routes other than through Russia while still bypassing Iran. Iran therefore suspected that support for the Taliban by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was not merely an attempt to impose an extremist Sunni, anti-Shia regime on Afghanistan but part of the United States plan to encircle and isolate Iran. By guaranteeing security for the pipeline route, the Taliban would weaken the leverage that Iran had gained. Hence Iran’s efforts to stop the spread and consolidation of Taliban power were dictated by both ideological and strategic considerations.

Since the Taliban’s first approach to Kabul in early 1995, when Massoud also crushed the remnants of Hizb-i Wahdat within Kabul city, strategic considerations have dominated. Iran has become the principal supplier of fuel, weapons, and other equipment to all groups fighting the Taliban, including those, such as Massoud’s, that have also opposed Hizb-i Wahdat. Iran supplies these groups by air, since it has no border with the areas they control.

The rivalry between Iran and Pakistan has thus become the principal external factor fueling the war. It has been worsened by one of the war’s by-products: increasing Sunni-Shia violence in Pakistan. This has taken the form of assassinations by small extremist groups, not mass violence. The Sunni groups engaging in this violence, Sipah-i Sahaba and the yet more extremist Lashkar-i Jhangvi, derive from splits in the jihadi, the Deobandi political party.

Nonetheless, Iran and Pakistan have since 1997 intensified their dialogue on Afghanistan in an attempt to prevent this conflict from contaminating their entire bilateral relationship. Iran was very supportive of Pakistan’s position on the nuclear tests it conducted in May 1998. Thereafter the two states began a joint diplomatic demarche to the Taliban and northern groups. But the Taliban offensive and the killing of the nine Iranians, whose safety Pakistan had undertaken to guarantee, convinced Iran that Pakistan was not serious, and relations between the two countries have deteriorated. Iran spoke out strongly against the United States attack on bin Laden’s base, but this position does not appear to have mended its relations with the Taliban. Indeed, Iranian hard-liners have criticized President Khatami for not acting more firmly against the Taliban.

**RUSSIA’S INTERESTS...**

Russia has also played an important role in supplying the northern groups, especially Massoud’s forces. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia, which no longer had a border with Afghanistan, withdrew from the region. The war in newly independent Tajikistan drew Russia back in; it provided about 25,000 troops and border forces to stabilise control of that country by the victors in the 1992–1993 civil war.

Russia saw Pakistan’s ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a threat to its security sphere, which it now defines as the entire former Soviet Union. It found common interest with Iran there, as in the Caucasus, where Turkey and the United States are the main external powers. Russia provided some support to the Rabbani-Massoud government, as well as to General Dostum, in the interest of resisting Hikmatyar.

Moscow and Kabul, however, had a conflict over the Islamic guerrillas from Tajikistan, who found shelter and received aid and training in the predominantly Tajik areas of northeastern Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban led Russia, Iran (where some exiled Tajik Islamic opposition leaders lived), and the Rabbani-Massoud forces to attempt to liquidate this problem in order to consolidate the rear bases of resistance to the Taliban. Joint pressures by them on the parties in the Tajikistan conflict led to the signing of a peace accord in June 1997 and the subsequent repatriation of most of the refugees and fighters. At the same time, Massoud was granted access to an air base in Kulab, home of Tajikistan’s Russian-supported ruling clan. There he received both Russian and Iranian assistance and was able to keep his small air force in repair. While Tajikistan had few resources of its own to give, it did facilitate the use of its territory in this way, in conjunction with Russia and Iran.

Uzbekistan also supported the resistance to the Taliban but was more strongly attached to one
leader, Abdul Rashid Dostum. It refused to provide assistance to Abdul Malik Pahlawan after the latter had ousted Dostum in May 1997. Iran, on the other hand, had given some aid to Dostum and continued to aid Malik. Uzbekistan supported Dostum's return to Afghanistan in September 1997 after his four-month exile in Ankara. Facing what appears to be the beginnings of an Islamic insurgency in the Ferghana Valley, which it blames on foreign-supported "Wahhabis," Uzbekistan continues to sound the alarm about the Taliban. It is also concerned about the Tajikistan peace agreement, which brings Islamists into the government and excludes the Uzbekistan-sponsored party in northern Tajikistan, and about the use of the Kulab base by Massoud. All this increases Uzbekistan's desire to have its own relations with an important force in Afghanistan.

AND AMERICA'S

Despite persistent rumors and charges that the United States supported the Taliban in order to build pipelines and isolate Iran, there is no evidence that Washington ever gave any material support. The United States attack on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan should finally lay these rumors to rest. Under the first Clinton administration, the United States government expressed some supportive views about the Taliban. It suggested it might consider reopening the United States embassy if security improved in Kabul following a Taliban victory, and it advocated engagement rather than isolation of the Taliban in UN forums.

Since Madeleine Albright became secretary of state, however, United States condemnation of Taliban policies on gender has been forthright. While the secretary's own views may have influenced this direction, so has the organization of an influential lobbying network of feminist, human rights, and humanitarian groups, supported by some Afghan women exiles in the United States, who have made Taliban gender policies a political issue. This network includes key constituencies of President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party. The link now drawn between the Taliban regime and international (non-Afghan) terrorists who have targeted United States installations and citizens assures that no reconciliation or even dialogue is possible for some time.

The region as a whole, including Afghanistan, has regained a certain level of importance to the United States. In the spring of 1997, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott announced a new policy that gives a higher priority to Central Asia. South Asia also received more attention because of India's economic importance, as an offshoot of the interest in Central Asia and pipelines, and because of the security dangers posed by nuclearization and the Kashmir conflict. Hopes for improved relations with Iran after the election of President Khatami in May 1997 also sparked interest in Afghanistan as a place where the United States and Iran have common interests and can collaborate. As a result, the United States became somewhat more engaged in Afghanistan in 1998, with United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations Bill Richardson making a one-day trip to the country in April. Richardson was the highest United States official to visit Afghanistan in over 20 years.

The United States has so far defined its policy mainly as supporting UN efforts at peacemaking, in the hope that Afghanistan can be reconstructed and pipelines built to Central Asia. The United States attack, however, redefined Afghanistan as a one-issue country: terrorism. The raids led to the murder of an Italian colonel seconded to the UN in Kabul by Taliban forces (probably Pakistanis), and all UN expatriate personnel were then withdrawn. By January 1999 the Taliban had still not carried out their obligations under a subsequently negotiated agreement on UN security, and UN expatriate personnel remained forbidden to visit the country, rendering both peacemaking and assistance efforts nearly impossible.

THE UN AND THE TALIBAN

The United Nations operates in Afghanistan without the major collaboration of or competition from other intergovernmental organizations. Unlike in Europe, Africa, or Latin America, regional organization has tended to be weak throughout Asia. On occasion the UN has worked together with the Organization of the Islamic Conference, but the conference's role has been largely symbolic. Alongside the UN are various NGOs, both Western and Islamic. The Western-based NGOs largely work under the umbrella of the UN system. The International Committee of the Red Cross has also performed the full range of its activities throughout the country.

The role of the UN system, like the strategies of states, has changed with the transformation of the international system and the war in Afghanistan. Its humanitarian role began with aid by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the first flows of refugees, mainly in Pakistan, in 1978, and its political role began in 1981, with the
The United States attack... redefined Afghanistan as a one-issue country: terrorism.

The humanitarian effort similarly tried to bridge gaps. Following the signing of the Geneva accords, a single coordinator was appointed for all humanitarian efforts for Afghans in and outside Afghanistan. The coordination operation, called Operation Salaam by the first coordinator, Sadruddin Aga Khan, negotiated agreements making it possible for humanitarian actors to cross political and military lines to provide assistance anywhere in Afghanistan.

While the humanitarian operations continued, the political effort of the UN lapsed after 1992. Political and strategic stakes were unclear, and humanitarianism emerged as an all-around response to state collapse, ethnic conflict, and other problems. Such an approach failed in Afghanistan as it did in Bosnia, Somalia, and elsewhere.

In December 1993, pursuant to a resolution of the General Assembly, the UN reestablished a political office, the UN Special Mission for Afghanistan (UNSMA). The mission languished until UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made Afghanistan a priority in July 1997 by appointing a high-level special envoy, Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, the former minister of foreign affairs of Algeria and a long-standing UN diplomat, to oversee the effort.

Brahimi took over at a time when the situation was particularly difficult and complex. Since the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in September 1996, the Rabbani government had continued to hold Afghanistan's UN seat, as no member state except Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban. Thus the UN did not recognize the single group that controlled the largest amount of territory and population, including the national capital.

The UN's humanitarian and development programs had their own dilemmas. The UN was attempting to implement a demanding kind of UN reform in Afghanistan, including new measures designed to deal with the problem of working in stateless environments, at the same time that its very presence remained in constant question. The various UN agencies all had separate mandates and funding sources and, without a government counterpart with which to develop a national plan, each agency and NGO pursued its own mandate independently.

To bring some order into this chaotic situation, the UN began developing a "strategic framework" to set goals for its programs in Afghanistan and established a new organizational structure to assure that all agencies engaged in "common programming."
These structures aimed at bringing representatives of all agencies together with donors and NGOs to make joint decisions about priorities and programs. The UN also had to face some of the harshest dilemmas of humanitarian access. After its offices were sacked and looted during fighting in Mazar-i-Sharif in May and again in September 1997, the UN withdrew from all of northern Afghanistan except the Hazarajat. Hence it did not undertake any programs in most areas controlled by forces nominally loyal to the government it recognized. In Taliban areas, however, while the authorities provided full security for UN personnel and property—except when they arrested or harassed national (Afghan) staff for alleged espionage or violations of their various edicts—the UN and NGOs found it difficult to operate for other reasons: Taliban edicts, especially those regarding women, contradicted international principles and made it nearly impossible for many programs to reach their intended beneficiaries.

The conflict between the Taliban and the UN over these issues was punctuated by various incidents. The UN withdrew from Qandahar and southern Afghanistan from mid-April to mid-June 1998 after the governor of Qandahar threw a teapot at the UN regional coordinator for Qandahar. This dispute erupted over a Taliban decree banning the UN from employing foreign Muslim women staff in Afghanistan unless they were accompanied by a mahram, an adult male member of their immediate family. The Taliban also stated that they would henceforth refuse to deal with Alfredo Witschi-Cestari, the UN Development Program resident representative and head of the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs in Afghanistan; they apparently regarded his forceful advocacy of international principles as hostile to them.

In response to these conflicts, the UN sought to reach a written understanding with the Taliban on the principles governing humanitarian and development programs. After two weeks of negotiations in Kabul, the two sides agreed on a memorandum of understanding. The Taliban said they would respect the privileges and immunities of UN international staff. They conceded that women could work in the health sector. They also agreed to the construction of 11 schools each for boys and girls and to the improvement of some health and higher education facilities for both sexes. There was no agreement on the mahram issue, which was referred to international Islamic scholars. The UN agreed to language stating that women's access to education and health care would be "gradual," a word that provided a target for critics of the memorandum.

Even these conditions seemed difficult for the Taliban, who asked the UN not to publicize the memorandum. Soon after its signing, some elements within the Taliban appeared to be attempting to undermine the agreement by ordering the closure of non-health programs for women and ordering NGOs to move to new common quarters. The new quarters were to be in the Polytechnic, a ravaged former dormitory without water or electricity in a northern neighborhood of Kabul that was distant from most international offices but close to the front lines. By mid-July, special envoy Brahimi openly speculated that the UN might have to withdraw from Afghanistan entirely. The NGOs in fact left Kabul (though not all of Afghanistan) soon after. Virtually all expatriate personnel, UN and NGO, left Afghanistan after the killing of the UN officer following the United States cruise missile raids in August. Only the International Committee of the Red Cross and a few NGOs (a small minority) remain.

**Human rights forsaken?**

On human rights, the UN Human Rights Commission has repeatedly renewed the appointment of the special rapporteur. In 1997, the UN Human Rights Center in Geneva, upgraded under its recently appointed high commissioner, Mary Robinson, began to explore a new role in Afghanistan: forensic investigation of war crimes accusations. After his return to Afghanistan in September 1997, General Dostum announced the discovery of mass graves holding thousands of Taliban dead. He charged that these had been prisoners captured in Mazar-i-Sharif and executed by his rival, Abdul Malik Pahlawan. The Wahdat also charged that during the advance on Mazar-i-Sharif in September, Taliban (or, more precisely, Pashtun settlers who had sided with the Taliban) had massacred nearly 100 Hazara civilians in Qizilabad village south of Mazar.

The Taliban and other Afghan parties demanded a UN investigation, and some Afghans began to ask for international war crimes trials of those responsible. The UN Human Rights Center in Geneva sent some investigators to the region for a preliminary inquiry in November 1997. A further mission examined the sites again in May 1998, but the investigation had still not started when the Taliban captured Mazar-i-Sharif. This failure contributed to the environment in which the Taliban carried out the massacres in Mazar.
Since then the UN has proposed three investigative or monitoring missions. The Human Rights Center began to prepare to investigate both the mass killings of Taliban in 1997 and those by Taliban in 1998. Following an agreement in principle between the Taliban and UN special envoy Brahimi, the secretary general proposed the stationing of civilian observers in key locations to monitor basic humanitarian standards and prevent further massacres. And the Security Council proposed an intergovernmental mission to investigate the killing of the nine Iranians.

The political mission was put on hold. In April, under pressure from Pakistan's Prime Minister Sharif, the Taliban agreed to negotiate in Islamabad with a delegation from the United Front. At the insistence of the Taliban, the negotiations dealt with the naming of a commission of ulama from all sides who would be responsible for resolving the conflict. These negotiations led to a tentative agreement on a nomination procedure and a cease-fire. Nonetheless, all the agreements soon broke down amid recriminations. The Taliban stated that negotiations with the fragmented opposition were a waste of time, while the northerners argued that the Taliban were still intent on a military victory. Time seems to have proved both sides right.

The UN continued to call attention to foreign intervention as an important factor intensifying the conflict. The reports of the secretary general published in November 1997 and June 1998 spoke in unusually frank terms, describing supplies of arms and military training by foreign countries and explicitly questioning their sincerity in supporting the UN mission. Following a "Presidential Statement" of the Security Council in July 1998, special envoy Brahimi told the press: "The fact is that this war cannot go on unless it receives support from outside. The legend that the Russians have left enough arms for fighting to continue for 50 years is just that[—]a legend, it is not possible."

It would be difficult to disagree with Brahimi's prognosis. According to a July 1998 press report, he expected "the fighting to worsen in the near future. He [said] UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has been warning the international community about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and it appears his worst fears are now coming true."

While the Taliban victory might seem to bring the country together, it is likely to provoke a strong regional reaction and spark guerrilla warfare. The United States missile attack, which was followed by attacks on UN personnel in Kabul and the sacking of the UN office in Jalalabad, has further reduced the possibility that international involvement will bring peace to Afghanistan.