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Battered pearls: War in Afghanistan

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Abstract

As the majority of the refugees gravitated towards Pakistan's north-west frontier, this region also became the political base for most of the resistance parties. Up to 1992, when the communist regime fell in Afghanistan, the activities of the so-called Peshawar parties were directed by the Pakistani secret service (ISI) and funded by Saudi Arabia and the United States. This nexus brought about the radicalisation of the Afghan resistance and helped to create an international network of Islamist activists. The pipeline of arms and funds bypassed the parties representing traditional tribal and Sufi networks and fostered the militant Islamist groups instead. These were instrumental in killing and silencing those Afghans who stood for democratic alternatives to the communists. The war entered a new phase in 1986, when the U.S.A. deployed Stinger anti-aircraft missiles against the Soviet Union and permitted the ISI to recruit and train radical Muslims from other parts of the world for the "jihad" in Afghanistan. The CIA helped to create the basis for an international network of Islamist terrorism and even provided the Yemeni millionaire Osama Bin Laden with funds to build a training camp for resistance fighters in eastern Afghanistan. This and other camps later became the strongholds of Bin Laden and Pakistani radical groups involved with the wars in Kashmir, Chechnya and Bosnia. In August 1998 they were attacked by US cruise missiles in retaliation for Bin Laden's alleged role in the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Talib means "religious student", and the main body of this movement is indeed recruited from students attending a network of "madrasas", theological schools, in neighboring Pakistan. These are young Afghans who grew up in refugee camps with no other prospect than war and no other opportunities for education. Offering instruction and board for free, the "madrasas" attract the poorest segments of the refugee population. In an allmale environment the boys are fed a violent interpretation of Islam heavily tinged by tribal perceptions. However, the Taliban do not stand for the good, old ideals of rural life either. Educated in a setting distant from their homeland and ordinary social relations, they carry an imagined tradition back to Afghanistan.

The Taliban injunctions on use of the veil illustrate the composite nature of Taliban ideology, which can be neither categorised as entirely Islamic or tribal. The Koran is explicit that women should cover their heads and bodies in public, but there is no precedent for the veil prescribed by the Taliban. The "chadari" (burqa) is a pleated sack-like garment enveloping the entire body, allowing only minimal vision through a crocheted mesh square in front of the eyes. Originally a town fashion, it was formerly donned by middle class women, who thus signalled that they did not have to work with their hands. The urban elite, by contrast, shunned it as a symbol of backwardness. For rural women busy in the fields, a head scarf (chadar) draped over an embroidered cap was more practical. Here, the "chadari" was reserved for visits to town. It also served as an item of distinction for those women whose husbands had secured government employment. Now the "chadari" has come to symbolise the Taliban's control over women's bodies.

Full Text

battered pearls: War in Afghanistan

When the Taliban marched into Kabul in September 1996, they met with little resistance. In fact, the population seemed to be relieved at the prospect of an end to years of factional fighting, harassment, abductions and rapes. This sense of relief quickly gave way to shock as a religious police brutally punished all perceived deviations from decency. The new rulers set out to establish a new order in the capital, an order that reflected a backward-looking, tribal world view entirely alien to the urban setting. The stream of edicts "to put women in their place" that followed was one of a series of actions designed to stop the process of social disintegration brought about by a prolonged civil war. Women were denied any role in the public sphere, lost their freedom of movement and found themselves subject to rigid injunctions on veiling. High-heeled shoes and nail polish were branded as particularly un-Islamic.

In no time, the Taliban faced huge international criticism, not only because of their poor human rights record, but also because of the discrimination against women and girls. The United States became the driving force behind the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in October 1999 and December 2000. These sanctions were less concerned with the situation of the population than with the need to curb the burgeoning trade in opium, to dismantle terrorist training camps and to gain the extradition of Osama Bin Laden. Yet America's present dismay at the activities of the Taliban can hardly disguise the fact that these phenomena, including the Taliban's rise to power, are at least in part of their own making. In order to make sense of the current situation of women in Afghanistan it is necessary to look in more detail at the factors that brought about the war and the rise of the Taliban.

War has become a way of life in Afghanistan. It has generated its own economy, a new entrepreneurial elite and a huge underclass of young men who know no other means of livelihood. More than twenty years of war have destroyed the traditional social fabric and have weakened those segments of society that might provide political alternatives. Until the 1970s, by contrast, Afghanistan was a poor but relatively stable country. At the time of the Marxist take-over in 1978, different branches of the royal house had ruled the country with the help of small administrative elites for 150 years. About a decade before, the educated urban youth had begun to push for political reforms. Even earlier, women had gained a number of rights, conceded as part of the government's endeavour to project its vision of a progressive nation. The first high school for girls was established in 1935. In 1959 Prime Minister Muhammad Daoud (1953-63) officially ended seclusion for women and made use of the veil voluntary. With the constitution of 1964 both men and women gained the right to vote for the first time in Afghanistan's history.

These reforms mostly affected the capital. The urban way of life, its fashions and the professional opportunities offered to women were far removed from the traditional rural setting in which the vast majority of the Afghan population lived. To the villagers, Kabul represented an alien world that called their tribal values into question, and they avoided the changes emanating from it. For most of the twentieth century there was little contact

between the central government and the periphery. With the Marxist coup d'état this uneasy relationship developed into open conflict. In order to gain a popular base for their alleged revolution, urban party members crossed the divide between city and countryside and attempted to impose well-intentioned but poorly conceived reforms among the rural population. To their utter surprise, the supposed beneficiaries of the enforced redistribution of land and literacy campaigns were the first to openly resist communist rule. The Soviet occupation in December 1979 exacerbated this conflict. The authority of the government was reduced to the capital and a number of major provincial towns. Engulfed on all sides by "reactionaries", as the communists termed the mujahidin, Kabul became an island of stability and progress entirely dependent on Soviet support. In the countryside, meanwhile, the scorched earth tactics of the Soviet army caused millions of villagers to flee to Pakistan and Iran, thus creating the largest known refugee population on earth.

As the majority of the refugees gravitated towards Pakistan's north-west frontier, this region also became the political base for most of the resistance parties. Up to 1992, when the communist regime fell in Afghanistan, the activities of the so-called Peshawar parties were directed by the Pakistani secret service (ISI) and funded by Saudi Arabia and the United States. This nexus brought about the radicalisation of the Afghan resistance and helped to create an international network of Islamist activists. The pipeline of arms and funds bypassed the parties representing traditional tribal and Sufi networks and fostered the militant Islamist groups instead. These were instrumental in killing and silencing those Afghans who stood for democratic alternatives to the communists. The war entered a new phase in 1986, when the U.S.A. deployed Stinger anti-aircraft missiles against the Soviet Union and permitted the ISI to recruit and train radical Muslims from other parts of the world for the "jihad" in Afghanistan. The CIA helped to create the basis for an international network of Islamist terrorism and even provided the Yemeni millionaire Osama Bin Laden with funds to build a training camp for resistance fighters in eastern Afghanistan. This and other camps later became the strongholds of Bin Laden and Pakistani radical groups involved with the wars in Kashmir, Chechnya and Bosnia. In August 1998 they were attacked by US cruise missiles in retaliation for Bin Laden's alleged role in the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Until the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the various factions of the Afghan resistance worked towards the common cause of evicting foreign invaders. Yet early on, observers were baffled by the fact that the Peshawar parties devoted at least as much energy to fighting each other as to the war itself. At intervals Pakistan and the U.S.A. attempted to enforce a modicum of unity, which invariably broke down within days. This phenomenon intensified as the nature of the war shifted. With the waning of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, Afghanistan became the site of a regional conflict. As well as Pakistan, all the other immediate neighbours entered the fray, sponsoring a variety of warlords and fostering the disintegration of Afghanistan along ethnic lines.

The strife was no longer limited to the countryside but began to focus on the possession of Kabul, where Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik territorial claims intersected. It was against this backdrop that the Taliban emerged in 1994 and promised to establish peace within the framework of a truly Islamic state. Yet the war continues to the present day. While the Taliban are said to control 95% of the country, they are still battling their political foes in northeastern and central Afghanistan, causing a renewed flow of refugees.

The Taliban did not come from nowhere, as some political observers surmised in the beginning. They are a product of the war itself. Their inner circle consists of men who had formerly fought the communists. Determined to end the exactions and abuses of the various warring groups that had sprung up all over the country, they gathered around Mullah Omar in the southern city of Qandahar.

Talib means "religious student", and the main body of this movement is indeed recruited from students attending a network of "madrasas", theological schools, in neighboring Pakistan. These are young Afghans who grew up in refugee camps with no other prospect than war and no other opportunities for education. Offering instruction and board for free, the "madrasas" attract the poorest segments of the refugee population. In an allmale environment the boys are fed a violent interpretation of Islam heavily tinged by tribal perceptions. However, the Taliban do not stand for the good, old ideals of rural life either. Educated in a

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The Taliban injunctions on use of the veil illustrate the composite nature of Taliban ideology, which can be neither categorised as entirely Islamic or tribal. The Koran is explicit that women should cover their heads and bodies in public, but there is no precedent for the veil prescribed by the Taliban. The "chadari" (burqa) is a pleated sack-like garment enveloping the entire body, allowing only minimal vision through a crocheted mesh square in front of the eyes. Originally a town fashion, it was formerly donned by middle class women, who thus signalled that they did not have to work with their hands. The urban elite, by contrast, shunned it as a symbol of backwardness. For rural women busy in the fields, a head scarf (chadar) draped over an embroidered cap was more practical. Here, the "chadari" was reserved for visits to town. It also served as an item of distinction for those women whose husbands had secured government employment. Now the "chadari" has come to symbolise the Taliban's control over women's bodies.

Yet to urban women the veil is no more than a nuisance compared to the fact that they are denied access to education and employment. Since the advent of the Taliban the relationship between city and countryside has been reversed. Life has returned to normal for great parts of the rural population. Traditionally clad women work in the fields, girls attend school up to grade four, as was customary prior to the war. In Kabul, on the other hand, the infrastructure has been destroyed in more than one sense. Between 1992 and 1996, a constant barrage of rockets reduced the city to rubble. Afterwards Taliban policies added to the general depression. While 230,000 women formed part of the urban work force in the 1980s, they are now confined to the domestic sphere or have opted for exile. "Underneath our veils we are still the same," says Fahima, waiting for her turn at one of the few hospitals open to women. "We feel free when we are among ourselves. Outside on the streets we turn into prisoners."

In supposing that women should be protected and represented by men, the Taliban ignore social realities. In Kabul alone 30,000 to 50,000 widows are left to fend for themselves. Rather than enhancing morality, Taliban rule further tears at the social fabric: begging and prostitution are on the rise. At the same time, the population is beginning to take matters into their own hands. All over the city, schools for boys and girls have sprung up in mosques and private homes, currently tolerated by the ministry for religious affairs. This raises hopes that education might not be entirely out of reach for girls after all.

Glossary:

Burqa': from Arabic barqa'a, "to veil", a garment enveloping the entire body

Jihad: from Arabic jahada, "to strive", spiritual struggle against one's lower instincts as well as war against the enemies of Islam

Madrassa: from Arabic darasa, "to learn, study", religious school with a special curriculum focusing on Koranic teachings and rational sciences

Mujahid, pl. Mujahidin: someone fighting for Islam

Talib, pl. Taliban: from Arabic talaba, "to search", religious student

1 y 2 - Hospital Nazoo Anaa in Kabul, 1999.

3 y 4 - Home school in the Andkhai city.

5 - 1996, Mazar-i-Sharif city, before the Talibanes were in power.

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