Afghanistan, 1989-1996:
Between the Soviets and the Taliban

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by,

Brandon Smith

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ABSTRACT

by, BRANDON SMITH

This paper examines why the Afghan resistance fighters from the war against the Soviets, the mujahideen, were unable to establish a government in the time period between the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan in 1989 and the consolidation of power by the Taliban in 1996. A number of conflicting explanations exist regarding Afghanistan’s instability during this time period. This paper argues that the developments in Afghanistan from 1989 to 1996 can be linked to the influence of actors outside Afghanistan, but not to the extent that the choices and actions of individual actors can be overlooked or ignored. Further, the choices and actions of individual actors need not be explained in terms of ancient animosities or historic tendencies, but rather were calculated moves to secure power. In support of this argument, international, national, and individual level factors are examined.
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by, Brandon Smith

Approved by:

_________________________________, Advisor
Karen L. Dawisha

_________________________________, Reader
John M. Rothgeb, Jr.

_________________________________, Reader
Homayun Sidky

Accepted by:

_________________________________, Director,
University Honors Program

iii
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Table of Contents

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1

II. A Heterogeneous Society ....................................................................................... 8

III. Overthrowing Najibullah ...................................................................................... 11

IV. Civil War for Kabul ............................................................................................. 25

V. The Role of Individuals .......................................................................................... 35

VI. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 46

Notes ............................................................................................................................. 49

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 52
I. Introduction

In May of 1996, Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, where he had aided in the fight against the Soviets during the 1980s. Already stripped of his Saudi citizenship, when the Sudanese government asked him to leave their country, bin Laden settled in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan. The group of religious students that came to be known as the Taliban was not yet in control of the Afghan capital, Kabul, nor were they in control of Jalalabad. In August, however, the Taliban in a surprise attack seized control of Jalalabad, and then began their relationship with Osama bin Laden. As one report has it, bin Laden initially provided $3 million to the Taliban to hasten their conquest of Kabul. Bin Laden would go on to befriend the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and move to Kandahar, where Taliban rule was more firmly entrenched. In Kandahar, bin Laden and the Taliban developed an “intimate relationship” whereby bin Laden carried out construction projects and donated huge sums of money to the Taliban, and the Taliban for their part offered bin Laden their protection.

On August 7, 1998, two truck bombs exploded, one in Nairobi, Kenya, the other in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in the two cities. Bin Laden and his terrorist organization al-Qaeda were named responsible for the attacks, and all the attacks’ perpetrators had links to Afghanistan. A month later, Saudi Arabia’s chief of intelligence met with the Taliban’s leadership in Afghanistan and requested that bin Laden be turned over to his country’s government. Mullah Omar responded by asking, “Why are you doing this? Why are you persecuting and harassing this courageous, valiant Muslim?” By 1998, Afghanistan was “truly a haven for Islamic
internationalism and terrorism and the Americans and the West were at a loss as to how to handle it.”5 The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are a later chapter in this story of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

It is impossible to say what might have happened had the Taliban turned bin Laden over to the Saudis, or the Americans, or otherwise denied him safe haven in Afghanistan. Because they never did, the Taliban become important players in the story as well. Apart from their harboring of bin Laden, the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Taliban are well documented. As Ahmed Rashid puts it, “The Taliban’s brand of Islamic fundamentalism was so extreme that it appeared to denigrate Islam’s message of peace and tolerance and its capacity to live with other religions and ethnic groups.”6 Given that the Taliban’s interpretation and application of Islamic law proved disagreeable even to many Afghans, it is interesting to note that as the Taliban first came onto the Afghan political scene in 1994 and 1995, many Afghans “turned gratefully” to them, hoping that the Taliban would be the group that could bring peace to their war-ravaged country.7 Indeed, as the Taliban were consolidating their power in Afghanistan, some of the group’s leaders pledged that, “the Taliban would cleanse Afghanistan of its criminal warlords and create a fresh political start.”8

The Taliban were the first group able to consolidate power throughout enough of Afghanistan in the post-Soviet era to be thought of as a genuinely national government. By 2000, the Taliban were in control of almost 90 percent of Afghan territory.9 However, it was not until September 1996 that the Taliban had gained control of Kabul and proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Given that the Soviet army had
withdrawn from Afghanistan in early 1989, and that the hand-picked leader the Soviets left behind in Kabul, Mohammed Najibullah, was overthrown in 1992, the question emerges: why didn’t a functioning national government emerge until the Taliban? As this paper will demonstrate, that is a question to which there is no simple answer.

As a starting point for discussion, one might point to the views expressed by Afghanistan’s current president, Hamid Karzai, regarding the sources of instability in Afghanistan. An Australian journalist, Jonathan Harley, spoke with Karzai in September 2001, on the eve of the imminent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The following is an excerpt from that conversation:

Harley: “. . . Afghanistan is extremely factionalised, you’ve been part of the Mujahideen movement yourself—the Mujahideen turned their weapons on themselves—we’ve seen how that culture of violence can be so destructive.”
Karzai: “No, no—the Afghan people are not factionalised, it was clearly the weakness of the Afghan state in the form of an administration after the Soviets left and we went in, and interference from all around Afghanistan that caused that kind of fighting. The Afghan people have had nothing to do with it.”

Karzai in his public statements consistently attributes the failure of central government in the post-Soviet era to the political machinations of outside powers, as in the case above. In another interview, this one from June 2002, Karzai’s interviewer asked, “Was there an ethnic component to the strife in Afghanistan, because of tribal differences and different languages? Or do you think that’s off the subject?” Karzai responded,

No, off the subject. It was foreign intervention, it was terrorism that brutalized the whole of Afghanistan. They tried to give it names and justifications, and those names and
justifications were ethnic or political, but it was clearly a terrorist movement, backed by outsiders, to take Afghanistan and to create a different kind of warlord.\textsuperscript{11}

Here again, Karzai points to foreign interference in explaining Afghanistan’s troubled recent history. At the same time, he attributes little or no importance to the manifest divisions in Afghan society such as ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and religious cleavages. David Edwards asserts that there exists an “Afghan obsession to blame ‘secret hands working behind the curtain’ for internal problems whose causes are difficult to assess.”\textsuperscript{12}

The question remains, is this “Afghan obsession” justified for the time period at issue here?

Another view, which sometimes crops up in the press, implies that warfare of the sort that gripped Afghanistan in the early 1990s is, if not natural, at least unsurprising for Afghanistan and the Afghans. The idea stems from the fact that Afghanistan is a country with phenomenal potential for internal divisiveness. It is not surprising that Afghanistan would be inclined toward civil war, given the animosities present, the argument might go.

In March 2002, \textit{National Geographic} ran a story about U.S. combat troops who were operating in conjunction with General Abdul Rashid Dostum (an Afghan warlord about whom more will be said later) against the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. The author offers the following insight on Dostum:

The most significant tidbit I glean about his childhood is that he was adept at the game of \textit{buzkashi}, in which teams of horsemen attempt to toss the headless carcass of a calf into a circle. Dating at least to the days of Genghis Khan, the violent game is not so much about scoring as it is about using every dirty trick possible—beating, whipping, kicking—to prevent the opposing team from scoring. Buzkashi is the way Afghan boys
learn to ride—and it’s the way Afghan politics is played: The toughest, meanest, most brutal player takes the prize. Afghan politics is thus likened to a traditional Central Asian game that is not only violent, but probably also difficult for the American reader to understand and appreciate. The implication is that civil conflict in Afghanistan is likely to be equally vile and unfathomable to outsiders. A more recent magazine article, one from December 2004, makes an even more explicit point:

The Pashtun [Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group] may be the most ungovernable people on Earth. They are divided into dozens of tribes and hundreds of clans, which are usually at war with each other. The presence of an invader . . . unites the tribesmen just long enough to drive out the interlopers. Then they go back to shooting at each other. The only time the Pashtun are at peace with themselves, it is said, is when they are at war.

If one accepts this viewpoint, then after the withdrawal of the Soviets (the “invader”) from Afghanistan, the civil war that followed was just a perpetuation of traditional tribal maneuverings for power, supplemented of course by a decade’s worth of externally supplied weapons.

Given the competing views about the sources of the country’s problems, analyzing Afghanistan’s period of civil war and instability from 1989-1996 is difficult. The developments in Afghanistan during this period can be linked to the influence of actors outside Afghanistan, but not to the extent that the choices and actions of individual Afghans can be overlooked or ignored. The choices of individual actors need not be explained in terms of ancient animosities or historic tendencies, but rather were calculated moves to secure power. There is no simple cause, no single actor or group of
actors, that can be “blamed” for Afghanistan’s failure to develop into a working state. Accordingly, the goal of this paper is not to simplify, but to examine Afghanistan in a way that will clarify and examine the realities behind the conflicting explanations commonly offered today regarding the post-Soviet, pre-Taliban era.

This paper will be divided into three main sections. The first (Chapter III) will cover the period between the withdrawal of the Soviet army in 1989 and the proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in April 1992, after Najibullah stepped down as president. The focus of this section will be on the roles played by outside actors and their impact on events within Afghanistan. This is appropriate since, even though the Soviet Union’s direct presence was gone after 1989, the war in Afghanistan continued as it had for the past decade in many key respects. The second section (Chapter IV) will analyze the fighting that developed in and around Kabul as the former Afghan resistance leaders occupied the city. This section will consider the ethnic, religious, and tribal cleavages present in Afghan society to determine to what extent the conflict that erupted was ethnically or tribally motivated. The third section (Chapter V) will continue the discussion of the civil war centered on Kabul through March 1995, when the only major players left vying for political control of Afghanistan were the government and the Taliban. The emphasis of this section will be on the mujahideen commanders at the forefront of the fighting. Analyzing each of the three above-mentioned time periods from a different perspective generates an air of artificiality in some respects. During any time period, there was a combination of internal and external explanatory factors at work. My choice of this somewhat stylized presentation is intentional. By way of a conclusion, I
will highlight some of the areas of overlap among the earlier sections that I deliberately withheld comment on initially. To begin, however, it is helpful to look briefly at some of the potential obstacles to state-building immediately apparent in Afghanistan.
II. A Heterogeneous Society

Afghanistan has a highly diverse population. Commenting on the origins of this diversity, Vartan Gregorian writes,

Afghanistan has justly been described as a “highway of conquest” for migratory peoples and expanding empires, a crossroads of civilizations and religions, and a “roundabout” for various trade routes linking Europe with the Far East and the Indian subcontinent . . .

The sharp racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences throughout the country reflect its particular historical geopolitical position.\(^1\)

Some researchers have gone to great lengths to identify and classify all the various ethnic groups that constitute Afghanistan’s population. Louis Dupree, for example, identifies 21 distinct ethnic groupings in his classic study.\(^16\) Maps that attempt to illustrate the distribution of these groups around Afghanistan show a dizzying hodgepodge of ethnic enclaves, though these maps may be misleading. Barnett Rubin points out that, “Ethnic maps are deceptive, since no single dimension of identity—language, tribe, region—always dominates and no areas of Afghanistan are ethnically uniform.”\(^17\) This paper, when considering issues of ethnicity, will focus primarily on the ethnic groups comprising the largest percentages of the Afghan population. Such a simplification will not detract from the arguments made, but the reader should bear in mind that in terms of heterogeneity, Afghanistan in reality is even more diverse than this paper may at times make it out to seem.

The largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, and the Turkmen. The Pashtuns comprise some 40-50% of Afghanistan’s population, making them the most numerous ethnic group. Historically, they have also
been politically dominant. As is the case with most of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups, the
area inhabited primarily by Pashtuns does not correspond with Afghanistan’s borders.
The Pashtuns are concentrated in the south and southeast of Afghanistan, but there are
also many Pashtuns just across the border in Pakistan. The second most numerous group
is the Tajiks. There are roughly half as many Tajiks in Afghanistan as there are Pashtuns.
This predominantly Persian-speaking group is most heavily concentrated in the north and
northeast of the country (i.e., adjacent to Tajikistan), and also in and around Kabul. The
Hazaras are the third largest group. They speak a language similar to Persian and are
concentrated primarily in the mountainous central region of Afghanistan known as the
Hazarajat. The Hazaras are the only ethnic group that is wholly contained within
Afghanistan’s borders; however, since the majority of Hazaras are Twelver Shi’a, they
have a religious link to present-day Iran. The next largest ethnic grouping is that of
Turkic language speakers. The Uzbeks are the most numerous group among Turkic-
speakers, followed by the Turkmen. Both the Uzbeks and the Turkmen are concentrated
in the north of Afghanistan. They share cross-border ethnic ties with groups in
Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, two states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Clearly, Afghanistan does not fit into the idealized mold of a “nation-state,”
conceived of as a territory inhabited by a single group of people with a common culture,
history, and language. For that matter, neither do a great many other states in today’s
international system. What is interesting in the case of Afghanistan, however, is the
manner in which its borders were defined. To use the words of Olivier Roy, “The
establishment of the frontier was carried out more or less single-handedly by the British,
in agreement with the Russians . . . The frontiers thus defined were purely strategic and did not correspond to any ethnic or historical boundary.”

Although the days of Europe’s colonial advance are past, Afghanistan is left with its markedly diverse population as a result of decisions made in the colonial era. What remains to be examined is the extent to which Afghanistan’s heterogeneity has been a serious hindrance to state-building, in particular between 1989 and 1996.
III. Overthrowing Najibullah

In the period of time between the withdrawal of the last Soviet troops in February 1989 and the removal of President Mohammed Najibullah from power in April 1992, the mujahideen made little progress toward establishing a new government, and foreign influences played a major role in affecting developments within Afghanistan. This period must be understood as a continuation of an already long and brutal war, so a brief consideration of the legacy left by the war against the Soviets is necessary. Even after the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, however, they still continued to support Najibullah’s government heavily. Likewise, the United States and other countries continued their support for the mujahideen. In addition, Pakistan, which was host to seven important mujahideen political parties, was active throughout this period trying to influence the eventual outcome of the war in Afghanistan, to the detriment of the Afghans. Only once the Soviet Union ceased to exist in late 1991, and the flow of weapons into Afghanistan from foreign patrons was largely reduced, did international conditions change such that the mujahideen could make an attempt at governing Afghanistan.

A Legacy of War

With the departure of the final contingent of Soviet troops in February 1989, Afghanistan saw the end of almost a decade of foreign occupation. The Red Army’s withdrawal did not mark the end of war in Afghanistan, however. Nor, for that matter, had the Soviet invasion in December 1979 marked the beginning of war; fighting had broken out in Afghanistan over a year earlier. In April 1978, the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan was overthrown in a coup d’etat known as the Saur
Revolution. Karl Meyer recently wrote that the coup, which brought the Afghan communists to power, was “the first engagement in a war that still continues.”\textsuperscript{20} Although certainly there have been changes in the nature of the conflict, Afghanistan has played host to ongoing warfare, between different actors at different times, over the entire period from 1978 until today. It is thus impossible to examine the post-Soviet phase of Afghanistan’s war without at least being mindful of what came before. Of particular importance to this paper is the fact that the primary belligerents in the civil war that developed following the departure of the Soviet army were largely the same individuals that had risen up against communist rule as early as 1978. Back then, the Afghan rebels, or \textit{mujahideen}, were far from a united front, but they did at least share some common goals. Initially, they sought to overthrow the communist government in Kabul, then, after 1979, to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

At the time of the Soviet withdrawal, the government of President Mohammed Najibullah was in power in Kabul. Najibullah formally replaced Babrak Karmal as president of Afghanistan in 1987, by which time Karmal had fallen out of favor with Moscow. Prior to becoming president, Najibullah had headed Afghanistan’s hated Government Intelligence Agency, KHAD. KHAD’s record for brutality was well-known among Afghans, and prisoners were routinely tortured.\textsuperscript{21} Najibullah had a reputation for being very pro-Soviet and was an effective head of the secret police.\textsuperscript{22} One constant from Karmal to Najibullah was steady Soviet support in the form of advisors, troops, and military equipment. Ostensibly, the reason for the Soviets’ involvement in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s was to support a fellow communist government that had requested
Soviet aid and could not otherwise support itself. The Afghan communist government managed to survive for over three years after the Red Army withdrew. However, it does seem clear that the survival of Najibullah’s government was dependent to a large degree on continued Soviet aid, in one form or another. Apart from being only dubiously self-sufficient, Najibullah’s government in Kabul had only limited control over Afghanistan’s territory. In 1989, generally speaking, the government was in control only of Afghanistan’s major cities, as it had been throughout the war.

Rural Afghanistan in 1989 lay largely outside the control of the government. The mujahideen had first risen up in 1978 in response to the program of reforms that the radical Afghan communist government under Hafizullah Amin had initiated. This program encompassed agricultural reform, the promotion of literacy, and the strengthening of the central government. Olivier Roy suggests that it was not so much the content of the reforms, but rather the heavy-handed and sometimes brutal manner in which the government tried to implement them that sparked what would become a nationwide rebellion. In any case, the discontent that first arose in the countryside had by spring of 1979 led to major revolts against the government, first in the western city of Herat, then in Jalalabad. Because of the Afghan resistance fighters’ dependence on villagers for food and shelter, the Afghan government forces, and later the Soviet army, developed a strategy of brutality in the countryside intended to erode support for the rebels. Of the villagers, Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin wrote, “The mujahedins are their husbands, sons, fathers, brothers. The resistance and the civilian population are inextricably entwined.” So the situation remained in 1989. While Najibullah’s
government could do little to undermine support for the mujahideen in the countryside, neither had the mujahideen been able to gain control of any significant Afghan cities.

Given the legacy of a highly destructive, decade-long war against a superpower, the obstacles to establishing a central government that could bring stability to Afghanistan were daunting. Of an estimated pre-war population of 15-16 million, over one million Afghan civilians were killed by the Soviets. Many cities and towns had been destroyed in the fighting, and the Afghan economy was in shambles. During the years of Soviet occupation, countless Afghans fled to neighboring countries. Over five million Afghans were thought to be living as refugees, mostly in Pakistan and Iran, at the time of the Soviet pull-out. Human rights abuses by the Soviet army, including village massacres, rape, torture, and forced conscription, were extensive. Even after the Soviets had left there were ubiquitous reminders of their presence. In 1990, the journalist Robert Kaplan noted that, “Even though the Russian phase of the war has ended, mines threaten to kill and maim thousands more, some of whom haven’t been born yet.”

Apart from the millions of landmines that the Soviets left scattered all over Afghanistan, the U.S.S.R. continued to support the government of Mohammed Najibullah materially for several years after 1989.

*Afghanistan’s Foreign Patrons*

Both the Soviet Union and the United States continued to fund their respective proxies in Afghanistan following the Soviet exodus. Beginning in 1982, the United Nations mediated a series of conferences between representatives of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in Geneva, Switzerland, the ultimate goal being to extricate the Soviets from
Afghanistan. A critical aspect of the eventual 1988 settlement, known as the Geneva Accords, was the issue of “positive symmetry.” “Symmetry” in this case refers to the circumstances under which the United States and the Soviet Union would cut off funding to their respective clients in the Afghan conflict. Early in the Geneva negotiations, the draft agreement was premised on a unilateral U.S. termination of aid to the mujahideen.30 In 1988, however, the United States suggested a simultaneous cessation of arms aid by all parties (i.e., “negative symmetry”).31 When the Soviets refused such a provision, the U.S. secretly agreed with the Soviets that Washington could continue arming the mujahideen as long as Moscow continued to arm Najibullah (i.e., “positive symmetry”).

Diego Cordovez was appointed in 1982 to be the U.N. Secretary General’s personal representative to Afghanistan, and he was the chief U.N. negotiator of the Geneva Accords. In his judgment,

The chaos that followed Najibullah’s ouster was foreordained by the American and Soviet attitude toward the key military aid provisions of the Geneva Accords. After an interval in which the accords were respected, both sides blatantly violated the central philosophy and intention of the settlement: that once concluded it should lead to international disengagement from Afghanistan in all essential respects.32

Thus, although the Geneva Accords were successful in bringing about a Soviet withdrawal, they were in the end no guarantee of peace for Afghanistan.

The Soviets continued to fund Najibullah’s regime almost until the very dissolution of the U.S.S.R., and the U.S. continued funding the mujahideen even longer. The Soviet Union’s support took numerous forms. Military hardware was airlifted to Kabul, including new technologies such as SCUD ballistic missiles, numerous Soviet
personnel (technicians and advisors) remained in the country, and the Soviets still provided some air support to the Afghan government. The monetary value of this ongoing Soviet aid is estimated to have been between $250 million and $350 million per month, or over $3 billion a year. The coup attempt against Gorbachev in the U.S.S.R. in August 1991 was instrumental in bringing about a cessation of Soviet aid to Najibullah. As William Maley and Fazel Haq Saikal explain,

The failure of the coup resulted in the temporary or permanent disgrace of a number of senior figures suspected of favoring continued Soviet support for the Kabul regime, notably the commander in chief of Soviet ground forces, General Valentin Varennikov, and General Boris Gromov, the Soviet commander in Afghanistan at the time of the withdrawal. In September 1991, parallel announcements were made in both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. that the delivery of “lethal materials and supplies” to all parties within Afghanistan would end as of January 1992. Recent reporting suggests, however, that the United States’ provisioning of arms to the mujahideen did not stop with the arrival of 1992, but in fact continued for several months into the year. The United States provided $200 million dollars over the course of fiscal year 1992, and in addition “a cornucopia of new weaponry sources . . . opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen.” Thus, the flow of arms continued well after the Soviet army had withdrawn from Afghanistan, providing the necessary supplies for the warring groups within Afghanistan to continue fighting.

In addition to the United States and the Soviet Union, several other countries had important roles in influencing events within Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992. At the time
of the 1979 invasion, many of Afghanistan’s neighbors were alarmed at what appeared to be the absorption of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Accordingly, many regional countries cooperated with the United States, or worked on their own, to aid the mujahideen and force a Soviet withdrawal. Saudi Arabia, for example, agreed with the Carter administration to match U.S. contributions to the mujahideen dollar for dollar. This arrangement continued until the 1990s when U.S. funding to the mujahideen finally ceased. Iran, although it did not cooperate with the United States in its program of support for the mujahideen, had a natural interest in events within Afghanistan because of the two countries’ shared border and the hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees that had spilled across it into Iranian territory. A number of political parties emerged among the Afghan refugees in Iran, which merged together into one organization, Hezb-i-Wahdat (Unity Party), at the behest of the Iranian government in 1989. Tehran held some sway over the actions and ability of this organization to operate. By far the most important regional player during the war against the Soviets and in the post-Soviet period, however, was Pakistan.

**Pakistan, Peshawar, and Problems**

As a matter of necessity, the weapons and other supplies provided by the United States and its partners to the Afghan mujahideen were funneled through Pakistan. The Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet army’s sealing of the Sino-Afghan border left Pakistan as the only coterminous country through which supplies could be moved on the ground into Afghanistan. Although the United States and other countries such as Saudi Arabia provided the bulk of the funds and weapons that went through Pakistan,
Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) was the organization really responsible for managing the Afghan program on a day to day basis. The important corollary of this fact is that it was the ISI that largely determined the levels of material support the various mujahideen factions would receive over the course of the war.

Apart from its role of managing the covert program of support to the mujahideen, Pakistan was also important because by February 1989, it was host not only to several million Afghan refugees, but also to several political parties formed by Afghans that had fled their home country. As early as 1973 there were Afghan political parties based in Peshawar, in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province. The number of parties grew as increasing numbers of Afghans fled to Pakistan as refugees in the wake of the Saur Revolution and the Soviet invasion. Belonging to some sort of organized group became a prerequisite to receiving material support once Pakistan began arming the mujahideen. As Barnett Rubin describes it,

In 1981 the Pakistani authorities recognized six mujahidin parties out of dozens clamoring for aid. Later a seventh was added because of the strong support it had in Saudi Arabia . . . Henceforth all refugees and resistance commanders had to join one of these seven parties to receive aid.

By the time of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the leaders of the seven Pakistan-based parties agreed upon a model for an interim government, known as the Afghan Interim Government (AIG), that would take over in Kabul once Najibullah was removed from power. However, the particular arrangements of the AIG are not as important as its membership. Although Najibullah would outlive the AIG, it was the AIG’s leaders who were the main political actors in the attempt to establish a government in Kabul in 1992.
The seven officially-recognized Afghan political parties are typically grouped under the headings of either “Islamist” or “traditionalist.” The orientations of the parties in each camp differed in that the Islamists sought a reorientation of Afghanistan as an Islamic state, whereas the traditionalists sought only the liberation of Afghanistan from Soviet occupation and communist rule. The Islamist parties were Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party), led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, another Hezb-i-Islami, led by Yunis Khalis, Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society), led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Ittihad-i-Islami Bara-i Azadi Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan), led by Abdul-Rab al Rasul Sayyaf. The traditionalist parties consisted of Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami (Islamic Revolution Movement), led by Maulvi Nabi Mohammedi, Mahaz-i-Melli-i-Islami (National Islamic Front), led by Sayyid Ahmad Gailani, and Jabha-i-Nejat-i-Melli (National Liberation Front), led by Sebghatullah Mujadidi. It is worth reiterating here that there were resistance parties based in Iran as well, but the Peshawar parties received more support from the international community and were better equipped to try to establish a state following the Soviet withdrawal.

Pakistan’s policies toward the various mujahideen parties contributed in part to their lack of cohesion. The seeming inability of the different mujahideen factions to work together for any significant period of time proved to be one of the most considerable obstacles to the establishment of an Afghan government by the mujahideen. Pakistan had leverage over the Peshawar-based parties by virtue of the parties’ members being, first, refugees on Pakistani soil, and second, dependent on Pakistan for material aid in the form of weapons and other military supplies. The Pakistani government’s choice
to recognize only seven specific mujahideen parties out of the myriad that had developed is a clear example of Pakistan’s ability to organize the Afghan rebel parties according to its own interests. Of these Pakistani interests, Zalmay Khalilzad writes,

Even though it acted as something of a consolidating force by taking steps to reduce the number of parties, Pakistan did not want a strong and united Afghan resistance leadership on its territory. It worried that the rest of the world would seek to deal directly with the Afghans and thereby diminish its own role as the channel for distributing assistance.45

Because it was the parties that served as the avenues for mujahideen commanders’ access to weapons, divisions among the mujahideen politically engendered a lack of cohesion in the mujahideen’s military actions. Clearly, this was detrimental to the mujahideen’s ability to overthrow the regime of Najibullah, the action that was the necessary first step on the road to establishing a new government.

The manner in which Pakistan allocated arms to the mujahideen parties fostered an atmosphere of competition among the Afghan groups, preventing cooperation. Mohammad Yousaf was the head of the ISI’s Afghan program, and was the closest Pakistani official to the mujahideen. As he describes the international arms pipeline, “As soon as the arms arrived in Pakistan the CIA’s responsibility ended. From then on it was our pipeline, our organization, that moved, allocated and distributed every bullet that the CIA procured.”46 Although Yousaf says the parties themselves chose which specific rebel commanders would receive weapons, Pakistan had total freedom in deciding which parties to supply arms to. The Pakistani criteria used in the allocation of arms, according to Yousaf, were based on the battlefield competence, the ability to control illicit activities (e.g., the illegal sale of arms), and the general efficiency of the structure of each party.47
The United States in particular charged, however, that Pakistan was clearly biased towards supplying fundamentalist parties over their traditionalist counterparts. Selig Harrison asserts that, “Islamabad made a conscious effort beginning in 1978 to keep the resistance divided and to favor fundamentalist groups in the allocation of aid. Rabbani, Hekmatyar, and another fundamentalist leader, Abdul Rasool Sayyaf, received the largest share of aid.” Yousaf himself does not deny that Pakistan favored the fundamentalists. Yet as he tells it,

In 1987 the broad percentages allocated to the Parties were Hekmatyar 18-20 per cent, Rabbani 18-19 per cent, Sayaf 17-18 per cent, Khalis 13-15 per cent, Nabi 13-15 per cent, Gailani 10-11 per cent, and Mujaddidi trailing with 3-5 per cent. Certainly the Fundamentalists came out on top with 67-73 per cent, much to the CIA’s chagrin, but using strict military criteria it could not be otherwise.

Regardless of whether Harrison’s or Yousaf’s portrayal of the situation hits closer to the truth, a similar result obtains in either case: hostility and animosity within the Afghan resistance. If Pakistan favored the fundamentalists out of some preference for their ideology, resentment would be bred among the traditionalist parties towards both Pakistan and the fundamentalist Afghans. Alternatively, if as Yousaf suggests, strict military considerations were driving the allocation of arms, a given mujahideen party could only gain a greater share of supplies by improving its performance relative to the other parties. Thus each party had an interest in securing successes for itself individually, and not necessarily as a part of a larger community with common interests.
A Host of Setbacks

Shortly after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, the Pakistan-based resistance groups attempted to capture the eastern city of Jalalabad from forces loyal to Najibullah’s government. This ill-fated attack seems to have been at least partly inspired by Pakistan. Amin Saikal and William Maley consider the consensus on the AIG that emerged in late 1989 to have been partially a product of Pakistani influence. In their view,

The next step in the strategy of Pakistan’s military establishment was to attempt to boost the credibility of the interim government, and particularly its own clients, by securing a city within Afghanistan from which the interim government could operate, and consequently gain international recognition.50

Pakistan perhaps cannot be proven to have been the primary instigator of the mujahideen attack on Jalalabad, however, the attitudes of hostility among the various mujahideen parties fostered by Pakistani policies did prove detrimental to the attack’s eventual outcome. Theodore Eliot wrote in early 1990, “The mujahedin had been neither equipped nor trained for the kind of war required to seize a town from the Kabul regime, and they have been slow to develop the tactics and the degree of coordination that had not been so necessary when they were engaged in a guerrilla war of harassment.”51 The inability to coordinate has clear roots in the tactics the diverse mujahideen groups developed over the years of operating independently of one another in order to secure the maximum proportion of foreign arms aid possible for themselves. When, a month after the attack was initiated, the Jalalabad offensive failed to capture the city from
government forces, the fallout for the mujahideen was significant. Saikal and Maley explain,

The negative effects of the Jalalabad shambles can hardly be overstated. The effects on the Mujahideen were complex. The failure of the operation was of course immensely dispiriting for those combat Mujahideen who bore the brunt of the regime’s ferocious counterattack . . . The adverse international publicity which the Jalalabad failure attracted, and the drop in international interest in the Mujahideen cause which the operation produced, damaged not only those who orchestrated the operation but the Mujahideen as a whole.\textsuperscript{52}

Jalalabad was only the first of many bumps on the road that the mujahideen encountered on their way to governing Afghanistan.

The period from the spring of 1989 until the April 1992 saw minimal development in terms of the mujahideen establishing a government since Najibullah, supplied by continued Soviet arms shipments, maintained his hold on Kabul. The Peshawar mujahideen met another significant setback in late 1989 when the AIG broke down. When the acting AIG president, Mujadidi, condemned Hekmatyar and his men for fighting with mujahideen from rival groups, Hekmatyar withdrew from his position as foreign minister in the interim government.\textsuperscript{53} Martin Ewans writes that, “as it became progressively clearer that no winners were in sight, many of those concerned became more ready to talk to each other.”\textsuperscript{54} By November 1990, Najibullah met with a delegation of mujahideen leaders in Geneva. In May 1991, the United Nations re-entered the picture, as its secretary general, Perez de Cuellar, presented his plan for a resolution of the Afghan conflict.\textsuperscript{55} The mujahideen showed little initial interest de Cuellar’s
proposal, but with the coup attempt against Gorbachev in the U.S.S.R. in August 1991, the international circumstances that had contributed to the prolongation of the Afghan war began to change rapidly. In September, the United States and the Soviet Union announced that all arms shipments to Afghanistan would soon end, and by December 1991, the U.S.S.R. ceased to exist. From that point, Najibullah’s days were numbered.
IV. Civil War for Kabul

The first year of the mujahideen’s occupation of Kabul saw the outbreak of internecine violence among competing mujahideen factions. As a prolonged struggle for control of the capital developed, very little in the way establishing a government could be accomplished. Initially, the fighting that erupted took on the appearance of ethnic and sectarian war, but a closer look, and subsequent developments, reveals a more complicated picture. The ethno-religious tensions that existed in Afghanistan following Najibullah’s ouster were not self-generated products of Afghanistan’s diversity. Rather, tensions developed over time in response to the manner in which Afghanistan’s past rulers sought to consolidate the state’s power to the benefit of specific groups and the detriment of others. In addition, many Afghans conceptualize their identities not primarily in terms of ethnicity, but with regard to sub-ethnic loyalties. These loyalties may have played some role in fostering the conflict that developed in 1992. In the past, however, the Afghan state had been able to develop in spite of the myriad conflicting loyalties of its citizens. With the overthrow of Najibullah ending the Pashtuns long dominance of Afghan politics, national power was up for grabs among several competing groups. As Afghanistan’s civil war evolved from its earliest stages, it became clearer that it was the desire for power above all other considerations driving local actors’ decisions.

Najibullah Ousted

Within four months of the Soviet Union’s disintegration, Mohammed Najibullah’s tenure as president of Afghanistan would end as the mujahideen advanced on Kabul. An important catalyst for Najibullah’s fall, apart from the cessation of Soviet aid, was a
rebellion in the north of Afghanistan in early 1992 led by a general in the Afghan army, Abdul Rashid Dostum. The rebellion united dissident army officers, their troops, and mujahideen fighters in a loose alliance against the government. It was thus from an increasingly precarious position that Najibullah announced in mid-March 1992 that he would transfer power to an interim government once the United Nations had worked out with the mujahideen an agreeable plan for the composition of that government. The day after Najibullah’s announcement, Dostum’s forces, allied with mujahideen under the control of Burhanuddin Rabbani’s top commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, seized the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. With the prospect of Najibullah being overthrown before an interim government could be put into place to replace him, the U.N. accelerated its efforts to broker a power-sharing agreement among the mujahideen parties in Peshawar. However, no U.N. plan was ever implemented. As mujahideen forces advanced on Kabul from the north and elsewhere in the country, Najibullah began to worry that whichever group arrived first in Kabul might try to remove him from office by force.

On April 15, Najibullah went to Kabul’s airport, hoping to leave Afghanistan in secret. He was prevented from doing so by the combined forces of General Dostum and Massoud, which had seized control of Kabul’s airport on their drive south towards Kabul. Najibullah then fled to the U.N.’s compound in the city, seeking asylum. This left a power vacuum in Kabul. Dostum’s and Massoud’s forces were massed just north of Kabul, and there was no longer a head of government in power, but the mujahideen leaders in Peshawar had still not worked out an agreement for an interim government. Meanwhile, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had advanced with his forces from the south, and he
was camped just on the other side of Kabul from Dostum and Massoud. Within days of Najibullah vacating the office of president, fighters loyal to Hekmatyar began filtering into Kabul. Fearing a coup by Hekmatyar, Dostum and Massoud moved their forces into Kabul en masse. The capital then became the battleground for a direct confrontation between the rival *mujahideen* factions of Massoud and Hekmatyar.

By late April, after several pitched confrontations, the combined forces of Massoud and Dostum forced Hekmatyar to withdraw from Kabul, and he established a position just south of the city. From that position, however, Hekmatyar rained artillery shells on the capital. Meanwhile, the *mujahideen* leaders in Pakistan reached an agreement on a transition government known as the Peshawar Accords. At the end of April, they arrived in Kabul. The complex governing arrangements of the Peshawar Accords were indicative of the distrust that the individual party leaders held for one another’s ambitions. The plan was for Sebghatullah Mujadidi to serve as president for a two month period, then to transfer power to Burhanuddin Rabbani, who would hold the position for another four months. Shah Tarzi suggests that the *mujahideen* were able to agree on making Mujadidi the first president only “because he threatened no one and did not have a strong political support base.”

Mujadidi was to act on behalf of a “leadership council” comprised of leaders of the various *mujahideen* parties. The party leaders acted as ministers during this period. The most important cabinet position was that of defense minister, which was held by Massoud. This meant that Massoud’s forces were officially the government’s forces. After the first six months of *mujahideen* rule, an interim government was to be formed that would lay the groundwork for nationwide
elections. With this elaborate scheme as the foundation for a new government, the triumphant mujahideen proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on April 29, 1992. The transfer of presidential power from Mujadidi to Rabbani occurred after two months as planned, but continued fighting in and around Kabul undermined the ability of the mujahideen to devote sufficient resources to much needed state-building.

One constant dimension of the battle for Kabul was that of fighting between Hekmatyar’s forces, entrenched to the south of the city, and the government’s forces (i.e., Massoud’s). Hekmatyar’s repeated attacks against the government were presumably based on his stated objection to General Dostum and his forces remaining in Kabul. He viewed them as an illegitimate holdover from Najibullah’s government and the communist era, and he demanded their withdrawal.59 Faced with Dostum’s refusal to leave the capital, Hekmatyar opted to fight, rather than compromise, with the government. The battle between Hekmatyar and the government was not, however, the only dimension of the conflict that developed in the first months after the mujahideen moved into Kabul. In addition to the Peshawar mujahideen, Iranian-backed Shi’a mujahideen had moved into Kabul following Najibullah’s hasty departure, and they controlled approximately a quarter of the city.60 In June 1992, fighting erupted between the Shi’a mujahideen and members of Abdal-Rab al Rasul Sayyaf’s Ittihad-i-Islami.61

Barnett Rubin asserts that by summer 1992, there were “Two linked conflicts [that] took thousands of lives in Kabul: these were sectarian [Sunni-Shi’a] and ethnic [Pashtun-non-Pashtun].”62 The sectarian element of the battle for Kabul was the one mentioned just above, between Sunni mujahideen loyal to Sayyaf and Shi’a mujahideen
who had been based in Iran during much of the Soviet war. The ethnic component of the conflict was the ongoing fighting between Hekmatyar’s forces and the government. Hekmatyar himself was a Pashtun, as were most of his Hezb-i-Islami followers. Rabbani, who was serving as president, headed a party whose membership was comprised mainly of Tajiks and other non-Pashtuns. Rabbani and Massoud both were, in fact, Tajiks. General Dostum, whose troops the government relied on in addition to Massoud’s, was Uzbek, as were many of his men. Is it sufficient, however, having identified these cleavages dividing the belligerents in Afghanistan’s civil war, to assert a priori that ethnic or religious differences in and of themselves were primary factors driving the conflict?

M. Nazif Shahrani comments that,

> The failure of Afghan governments to achieve their goal of building a strong, centralized, and unified nation-state is generally justified and explained, by government officials and researchers alike, in terms of the country’s geophysical problems, ethnolinguistic and religious-sectarian differences, and tribal organization extant in the nation . . . More specifically, social and cultural heterogeneity and pluralism are equated with social and political disagreement, fragmentation, and opposition to centralized rule, independent of the policies and practices of the state-building agents.\(^6^3\)

Shahrani suggests that it is incorrect to assume that simply because Afghanistan has a highly diverse society, ethnic conflict is all but inevitable. In the case of the civil war that developed post-Najibullah, it is similarly inadequate to simply label the conflict “ethnic war” and move on. Some consideration of pre-Soviet Afghan society is helpful in unraveling what really may have been driving Afghanistan’s ongoing conflict of the early 1990s.
Ethnicity in the Afghan Context

The Afghan state, prior to the Saur Revolution of 1978, was consolidated in such a way that a clear hierarchy was created among the country’s varied population groups. Shahrani explains that by the time Amir Abdur Rahman (the “Iron Amir”) died in 1901, Afghanistan had all the trappings of a modern state: clearly defined borders, political unification, and central government.64 What is interesting, however, is the manner in which the Iron Amir pursued his goal of consolidating the Afghan state:

Through the use of military force, savage reprisals, tyranny, marriage alliances, subsidies, intrigues, religious injunction, and a policy of divide and rule, the Amir was able to weaken, and effectively contain, the powers of local, regional, tribal, and religious leaders who either opposed him or posed a threat to his rule. The Amir’s internal policy favored Sunni over Shi’a and the Pashtun over the non-Pashtun, and among the Pashtun he relied on his own clan, the Muhammadzai and the Safis of Tagaw.65

One result of Amir Abdur Rahman’s policies was a state structure that demonstrated a clear inequality in terms of the distribution of power among various groups. At the time of Saur Revolution, the following pattern could be observed:

The Muhammadzais were at the top of the social hierarchy. Below them came the other Durranis [the Durranis are one of the three major confederations of Pashtun tribes], then the rest of the Pashtuns. After the Pashtuns came the other predominantly Sunni ethnic groups, the largest being Persian-speakers (primarily but not exclusively Tajiks) and Uzbeks . . . Shi’a, most of them belonging to the Hazara ethnic group, were at the bottom.66

Thus out of the highly pluralistic Afghan society, a specific pattern of ethnic relations was deliberately fostered and perpetuated over time by Afghanistan’s rulers. The source
of tensions among Afghanistan’s varied ethnic and religious groups likely had more to do with Afghanistan’s particular state structure, and the pattern of relations it embodied, than with the mere existence of a pluralistic society.

A second point worth considering is the fact that ethnicity might not be the most important category of identity Afghans think of when conceptualizing who they are. Olivier Roy asserts that every Afghan is “conscious of belonging to a larger entity which takes the form of a more or less endogenous community (the qawm), whether its sociological basis is tribe, clan, professional group, caste, religious group, ethnic group, village community or simply extended family.”67 This suggests that although all Afghans think of themselves as belonging to some qawm, this primary group affiliation is not always ethnic. In Afghanistan, tribalism68 has long existed as both a method of identification with a group and an underlying feature of the state’s structure. The Pashtuns are the group among which social organization into tribes is most prevalent, though among some subdivisions of the Pashtun ethnicity tribe matters more than among others. Within Pashtun tribal society, competition among individuals for preeminence is common. Nancy Dupree and Thomas Gouttierre offer the following explanation:

Rivalries within and between tribal segments and between tribes and subtribes have consequently always existed. It is these internecine feuds that have earned the Pashtun their reputation as an unruly and warlike people. Both internal as well as intergroup conflicts are most often rooted in matters of personal and group honour, personal enmities, family dissensions concerning brides and property, struggles for material possession, access to resources, territorial integrity and extensions of power, rather than in intrinsic attitudes of ethnic discrimination.69
Though it may initially sound as if this perpetual feuding all but precludes the emergence of a stable Afghan state under any circumstances, that is not necessarily the case. Louis Dupree comments,

Need “tribalism” (however it is defined) necessarily be bad? A desire to retain group identity and, more important, sets of rights and obligations within the group are not in themselves a threat to the creation of a nation-state. Unfortunately, many of the national leaders in the non-Western world have been educated in the West . . . [and] look on attempts to perpetuate tribal prerogatives as anarchistic, archaic, and anti-unity.\(^7^0\)

In Afghanistan politics has always paid heed to the importance of kinship groups, but that did not prevent an Afghan state from developing, fragile as it may have been, until the time of the Saur Revolution.

To return to the situation in 1992, the battle for Kabul can be viewed as a scramble for power among a number of groups that, although divided into factions based on ethnicity and religion, were not necessarily fighting primarily with regard for those divisions. Zalmay Khalilzad puts it well when he says that the civil war centered on Kabul was a “civil conflict fought not over ideological, sectarian, or ethnic differences—although these factors are part of the setting—but over who should govern.”\(^7^1\)

Afghanistan’s ethnic groups in general, and the Pashtuns in particular, should not be thought of as monolithic, strongly united entities because there are other levels of identification at work. Although Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was a Pashtun, he was of the Ghilzai tribal confederation. It was the Durransis, however, a rival Pashtun confederation, that were dominant in the founding and ruling of the Afghan state from 1747-1978. Hekmatyar’s striving for a position of preeminence in the new Afghan government might
be explained in terms of his unwillingness as a Pashtun to allow non-Pashtuns to gain control of the government. Alternatively though, he may have been looking to advance the prestige of his tribe vis-à-vis other Pashtun tribes. The overthrow of Najibullah was a unique moment in the history of Afghan politics because a number of different groups had an equal likelihood of seizing power, whereas in the past a narrow group of Pashtuns had held the monopoly on running the state. Subsequent developments in the battle for Kabul support the notion that in the scramble for power beginning in 1992, ethnic, religious, and tribal considerations are not the best explanatory factors for the chaos that developed.

_Kabul under Attack_

In the early summer of 1992, there was a brief lull in the fighting over Kabul. Presented with an agreement that Dostum would leave Kabul and that he could rejoin the government in the capacity of prime minister, Hekmatyar stopped his shelling of the capital. When Dostum remained in Kabul, however, Hekmatyar quickly tired of cooperating, and in August he began his assault on Kabul afresh. Tarzi gives the following description:

> Within a 24-hour period in August, 3,000 residents of Kabul died in a barrage of rocket fire; in the months following, the world’s single largest internal refugee flow took place during which an estimated 700,000 people fled Kabul to escape rocket and artillery shells raining indiscriminately on residential neighborhoods.

In response to Hekmatyar’s actions, the government withdrew its offer to let him resume a position in the interim government.
V. The Role of Individuals

As the civil war in Afghanistan continued through 1992 and after, shifts in the alliances among the various warring groups marked a breakdown in the previous ethnic and sectarian divisions that were evident. Amidst the waves of violence centered on Kabul, some patterns can be discerned that stand out as key factors prohibiting the formation of a government by the mujahideen, and that precluded any efforts toward state-building. One was the ongoing conflict between the forces of two prominent mujahideen leaders, Ahmed Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Though the two had a long history of antagonism, their rivalry ran deeper than mere personal animosities, and in fact mirrored pre-Soviet splits among the groups that would comprise the Afghan resistance during the war against the Soviets. Another problem was Hekmatyar’s continued unwillingness to compromise or cooperate in becoming a part of the nascent Afghan government. Hekmatyar, as well as other leaders, had much at stake personally in securing a position of power for himself in post-Soviet Afghanistan. The purpose of focusing on the actions and motivations of individuals throughout this section is not to condemn specific actors, but to illustrate that certain individual choices were critical in determining the course of events in Afghanistan.

The Melee Continues

Developments in late 1992 and early 1993 brought Afghanistan to a new, more nuanced stage of civil conflict in which ethnic and sectarian divisions ceased to be conspicuous potential explanatory factors for the continued fighting. To use Barnett Rubin’s words, “regionalism and warlordism proved to be stronger forces than ethnic
nationalism. By 1993 it was clear that political society in Afghanistan lacked the coherence necessary for any clear bipolar conflict, whether ideological or ethnic.”74 In December 1992, Burhanuddin Rabbani called a shura to hold a vote for a constitution and an interim government, as the Peshawar Accords charged him to do. Rabbani, however, convened the shura such that its membership was made up of a disproportionate percentage of his own supporters.75 Not surprisingly, Rabbani was elected president of the interim government. The rival party leaders refused to accept Rabbani’s presidency as legitimate. In addition, General Dostum was excluded from the choice and eventual makeup of the interim government.76

Also in late 1992, Afghan government forces under the control of Ahmed Shah Massoud tried to gain control of the parts of Kabul controlled by the Shi’a mujahideen.77 That act, coupled with Rabbani’s handling of the December shura, combined to precipitate a critical shift in the alliances that had held among the various mujahideen factions since the overthrow of Najibullah. Prior to Massoud’s moves against them, the Shi’a mujahideen parties had been allied with the government. Massoud’s actions, however, caused the Afghan Shiite groups to ally with Hekmatyar against Massoud and the government. That switch brought about another, as the forces of Abdal-Rab al Rasul Sayyaf, who had previously been opposed to the cooperation of the government with the Shi’a groups, allied with the government as the Shiites withdrew their participation.78 These changes eroded the prior clear-cut ethnic divisions evident between the warring factions. Whereas previously the forces loyal to Hekmatyar had been Pashtun, and were fighting a government dominated by non-Pashtuns, Hekmatyar had now allied with the
non-Pashtun, Hazara Shiites. Thus, by the end of 1992, the battle for Kabul began to look considerably less like a conflict based primarily on ethnicity than it originally had. At its center, the struggle for Kabul was a struggle for power among a handful of groups, many of which were willing to make whatever practical alliances were necessary to enhance their respective likelihoods of success.

Kabul saw a brief respite from armed conflict as the mujahideen factions negotiated the Islamabad Accords in March of 1993. The accords extended and somewhat legitimized the presidency of Rabbani, and, in an attempt to broker a cessation of hostilities on the part of Hekmatyar, called for Hekmatyar to be installed as prime minister and to form a cabinet. One immediate problem with the agreement was the fact that Massoud, since April 1992, had been serving as de facto defense minister. Hekmatyar was unwilling to allow Massoud to maintain that position, but Massoud was similarly unwilling to step down at the behest of his rival. In the end, the Islamabad Accords did very little to end Afghanistan’s civil war. Massoud did eventually step down as defense minister, though the change this brought was only cosmetic; Massoud maintained his positions in Kabul, commanding the same forces he had previously. In addition, Hekmatyar and a cabinet he chose with Rabbani’s approval were sworn in during June of 1993. In spite of this, the battle for Kabul continued as before, with the majority of the fighting occurring between the forces of Hekmatyar and Massoud. The only difference was that now Hekmatyar became a part of the government, and thus was commanding the government’s forces (for whatever that was worth), and Massoud was controlling fighters who had formerly been the government’s forces.
Another pivotal shift of allegiance came in January 1994, when General Dostum aligned his forces with Hekmatyar’s. This represented a fairly puzzling development, given that Hekmatyar’s originally stated justification for not taking part in the government formed in April 1992 was his objection to Dostum’s participation. There is a remarkable paucity of concrete evidence to explain why Dostum, who had supported Massoud and the government since the end of Najibullah’s reign as president, would align himself with Hekmatyar. Part of the explanation likely has to do with Rabbani’s exclusion of Dostum from the government formed by the December 1992 shura. In addition, the British weekly the Economist offered the following explanation for Dostum’s decision:

One theory is that he believes that the Hikmatyar forces are marginally stronger than the president’s, and he wants to be on the winning side in the decisive battles. Until now it has been assumed that the president’s men, under the command of Ahmad Shah Massoud . . . were unbeatable. But Mr. Dostam probably read the runes correctly when he turned against Mr. Najibullah, and he may turn out to be right again.81

Whatever Dostum’s precise motivations may have been, his partnership with Hekmatyar underscores the notion that realism and pragmatism were driving the decisions of the military commanders of the Afghan civil war. Ethno-religious animosities were secondary considerations, if they were indeed thought of at all.

The result of the merger between Hekmatyar and Dostum was a renewed wave of violence centered on Kabul beginning in January 1994. It is estimated that over the course of 1994, some 600,000 Kabul residents fled their homes to escape the violence.82 In June, Massoud’s forces dealt a significant defeat to Hekmatyar and Dostum, and
Dostum retreated to the north of the Afghanistan. The waves of fighting over Kabul represented the focal point of a civil conflict that spanned almost the entire period from 1992 until the consolidation of power by the Taliban in 1995. Given that throughout most of this period no mujahideen group could truthfully claim to have full control over Kabul, there was virtually no capacity for any would-be national government to extend even a modicum of control over the rest of the country. And indeed, as competing mujahideen factions vied for control of Kabul, new power centers developed throughout Afghanistan. One such power was the Taliban, which emerged in late 1994. Zalmay Khalilzad presciently wrote of the Taliban movement that, “From its base in Kandahar, it began moving forces toward Kabul, and might become involved in the fight for the capital in 1995.”

Massoud and Hekmatyar: A Long History

One constant that withstood the alliance shifts of 1993 and 1994 was the animosity between Ahmed Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. This was the rivalry that gave rise to the initial outbreak of civil war in Kabul as Najibullah was vacating his office and the two commanders approached the capital from opposite ends of Afghanistan. Stripped of its peripheral elements, the battle for Kabul was, at its core, a struggle between these two leaders. As discussed earlier, Massoud was a Tajik and Hekmatyar a Pashtun, but ethnic differences were only the most evident potential source of animosity between the two. For example, in the summer of 1989, before Najibullah was overthrown, there had been a significant incident between the forces of Massoud and Hekmatyar. Theodore Eliot mentions the incident in passing in his summary of that
year’s events saying, “Hekmatyar’s forces in Afghanistan have been notorious for fighting other mujahedin forces. In July 1989 they killed a number of commanders of one of the most effective mujahedin organizations, that of Ahmad Shah Masud in northeastern Afghanistan.” Mohammad Yousaf provides a few more details. According to his account, “Thirty six men died in a storm of automatic fire. They were the lucky ones. The others, who were captured, were gruesomely tortured before being killed.” Among the 36 ambushed mujahideen were, Yousaf claims, some of Massoud’s top leaders and friends. Massoud, in response to the attack, “combed the countryside rounding up suspects,” and in the end hanged four high-ranking members of Hekmatyar’s party. This internecine violence came during the very first months after the Soviet withdrawal when, had they not been killing each other, the mujahideen could have perhaps toppled Najibullah more quickly and avoided a protracted civil war.

The personal rivalry between Massoud and Hekmatyar also masked a deeper, older division among the mujahideen. The fighting between the two commanders overlaid a pre-Soviet split among those Afghans who would, by 1978, make up the bulk of the Afghan resistance. Larry Goodson explains,

An early split of the [Afghan] Islamist movement had occurred in 1976-1977 when Burhanuddin Rabbani formed the Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society), leaving Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party). This would become the most significant division among the Afghan mujahideen, culminating in their struggle for control of Kabul in the mid-1990s . . . Jamiat would be less rigid ideologically than Hekmatyar’s party, and the Jamiat commanders enjoyed much greater autonomy. Perhaps for this reason, several rose to prominence, notably Ahmed Shah Massoud.”
Thus the ongoing conflict between Massoud, Rabbani’s top field commander, and Hekmatyar had roots extending back to an ideological division that ruptured the Afghan Islamic movement before the Afghan communists had even seized power. Rabbani and his followers, as well as Hekmatyar, all sought the establishment of an Islamic state, but they had different conceptions of how that goal should be realized. As Olivier Roy describes,

The Hizb of Hekmatyar anathematized its opponents, and thus gave the Islamic revolution pride of place in the struggle against the communists and the Soviets (an attitude which was close to that of revolutionary Iran), while Rabbani sought the broadest possible coalition of all Muslims, whatever their political attitudes.89

One might call into question the extent to which ideology was a very important consideration behind individual actors’ decisions by 1994. After all, Hekmatyar did ally with Dostum, a “moderate” in that “he [was] less interested in the theology of Islam than in the simplicities of power.”90 The key point, however, is that there were long-standing, significant disagreements between Rabbani, Massoud, and their followers on one hand, and Hekmatyar and his followers on the other.

A Closer Look at Hekmatyar

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is an interesting character to reflect on in a bit more depth here towards the end of this paper. Although his party was the largest and received the greatest proportion of foreign supplies of the seven Peshawar groups, Hekmatyar himself was the youngest of the seven party leaders.91 Mohammad Yousaf, who knew Hekmatyar personally, describes him as “a staunch believer in an Islamic government for Afghanistan, an excellent administrator and, as far as I could discover, scrupulously
honest . . . He is also ruthless, arrogant, inflexible, a stern disciplinarian, and he does not get on with the Americans.” 92 More revealing, however, is Yousaf’s description of the mentality that emerged among Hekmatyar and the other mujahideen leaders and commanders:

A Commander considered himself king of his area; he felt entitled to the support of the villages and to local taxes. He wanted the loot from attacking any nearby government post, and he wanted the heavy weapons to do it with, as they increased his chances of success and prestige, which in turn facilitated his recruiting a larger force. Such men often reacted violently to other commanders entering, passing through or “poaching” on their territory. 93

Hekmatyar and others like him thus came to have a great personal stake in the success of their military operations and their control of territory within Afghanistan. Territory was a source of income for commanders, so increased power and control of territory brought with it tangible benefits. Kabul represented the greatest potential prize of all. Also, as an additional source of income, Hekmatyar (as well as other mujahideen) was reportedly involved in the drug trade. Steve Coll writes, “From fertile Helmand in the south to the gorge valleys of the northeast, Afghanistan flowered each spring with one of the world’s largest crops of opium poppies . . . By the early 1990s, Afghanistan rivaled Colombia and Burma as a fountainhead of global heroin supply.” 94 Hekmatyar reportedly allowed his fighters time off from fighting the Soviets during the 1980s to take part in the poppy harvest. 95 Hekmatyar thus had a further interest in preventing a rival group, which might jeopardize his drug operation, from gaining control of Kabul and the rest of the country.
It seems clear, however, that no Afghan government could be legitimate without the participation of the leader of the largest mujahideen party. Hence, the government’s repeated attempts to include Hekmatyar in spite of his contrary behavior. Hekmatyar lost his position as defense minister in 1989’s Afghan Interim Government because of the incident between one of his commanders and Massoud’s men detailed above. In spite his even more brazen attacks against Massoud and the government in Kabul beginning in early 1992, Hekmatyar was offered the position of prime minister by year’s end. This brought only a brief cessation to the conflict centered on Kabul, and Hekmatyar went on to bombard the capital, killing thousands of civilians. Even after that, however, the government extended the premiership to Hekmatyar yet another time with 1993’s Islamabad Accords. That time he finally accepted, only to have the position later revoked because of his further attacks on Kabul.

The purpose of this focus on Hekmatyar has not been to vilify him (although one easily could). However, thinking back to the comments of Afghanistan’s current President Hamid Karzai presented earlier, it seems that it is by now reasonable to assert that it was not strictly foreign interference that contributed to the failure of a functioning Afghan state to form post-1989. The decisions made by leaders such as Hekmatyar, or Massoud, or Dostum clearly shaped the course of events in post-Soviet Afghanistan, and these individuals’ decisions cannot be viewed as entirely the products of foreign manipulation. The historian Joachim Remak once wrote that a deterministic view of history presumes that, “History makes sense. There is a ‘course of events,’ governed by
identifiable forces and perhaps even laws." He offered the following critique of such a view:

What is valid about the deterministic approach is that, without it, history is in danger of being atomized into an infinite number of minute and isolated fragments . . . What is dangerous about it is that it tends to make men’s actions appear morally irresponsible, since the historical actor is a person grappling with forces that are far beyond control. Whatever was, perhaps was not right, but it was bound to be, which makes any discussion of right or wrong irrelevant. Determinism and relativism are blood brothers.

With the regard to Afghanistan, the issue is not to analyze “right” or “wrong,” or to try and blame Afghanistan’s problems on one group or another. Rather, the point here is that one cannot say that if Hekmatyar had not demonstrated such a willingness to shell Kabul, or that if Dostum had not switched his allegiance from the government to Hekmatyar, or if any other significant decision had been made differently, that Afghanistan would have regardless been doomed to chaos and disorder. Certainly individual decisions in Afghanistan did not exist in a vacuum. Afghans have always had to contend with outside influences and the legacy of a highly heterogeneous society. Nevertheless, the decisions made by those in power mattered, and cannot be ignored in a balanced consideration of why central government did not form in Afghanistan until the Taliban.

The Final Chapter (Of This Story)

As in the past, Massoud’s victory over Hekmatyar in June 1994 proved only to be short-lived. Fighting broke out again in September as Hekmatyar attacked the city, and with that renewed wave of violence, Hekmatyar’s position as prime minister in the Afghan government was revoked, not that official titles and formalities meant much
given the atmosphere of the day.\textsuperscript{98}  As the latest round of conflict in Kabul intensified, the Taliban’s rapid ascension to power began. Afghanistan’s second largest city, Kandahar, was effectively without any leadership or governing authority in the summer of 1994.\textsuperscript{99}  That situation dramatically changed once the Taliban, with relative ease, gained control of the city in November. Ahmed Rashid gives the following synopsis of the events that were to follow:

The Taliban immediately implemented the strictest interpretation of Sharia law ever seen in the Muslim world . . . In the next three months the Taliban were to take control of 12 of Afghanistan’s 31 provinces, opening roads to traffic and disarming the population. As the Taliban marched north to Kabul, local warlords either fled or, waving white flags, surrendered to them.\textsuperscript{100}

This abbreviated account leaves out a lot, but gets at the point that as the \textit{mujahideen} fought over Kabul, much of the rest of Afghanistan was still up for grabs. The Taliban in January 1995 captured Hekmatyar’s headquarters outside of Kabul. He fled, leaving his men without a commander, and from that point, “it was . . . a one-on-one fight between the government forces and the Taliban.”\textsuperscript{101}  Although it took them until September 1996, the Taliban would go on to defeat the forces of Massoud and the government, and they were able to seize control of Kabul. With the assumption of power by the Taliban, the \textit{mujahideen}’s efforts at building a new Afghan state came to a close, ending in failure. Afghanistan would be rebuilt in the image of the Taliban.
VI. Conclusion

To revisit the conflicting explanations for Afghanistan’s instability from 1989 to 1996, it is now possible to make some sense of which explanations are valid and which are not. Hamid Karzai’s statements highlighted the damaging influence that outside powers have had on Afghanistan’s development. Afghanistan was the site of the last major proxy war between the superpowers during the Cold War. The effects of the war between the mujahideen and the Soviets were overwhelmingly negative, and Afghanistan was left armed to the teeth and without a strong government. The influences of other countries, such as Pakistan, were also destructive to Afghanistan, exacerbating the many divisions already inherent in Afghan society. Certainly Karzai is justified when he says that outside powers have played an important role in shaping Afghanistan’s recent history, but they have not played the only role. When Karzai says adamantly, “The Afghan people have had nothing to do with it,” it is difficult to agree with him completely. Certainly the great bulk of the Afghan population has been victimized by a war that has for years ravaged their country. However, there existed an Afghan elite who, by 1992 at least, had a genuine opportunity to overcome their past differences in the interest of trying to build a new Afghan state.

An advocate of the view that the Afghans have always fought each other and will always continue to fight would not be surprised by what happened when those individuals at the center of Afghan politics moved into Kabul. This paper has tried to demonstrate, however, that violence among Afghanistan’s diverse groups has not been the automatic result of the country’s diverse population, and that civil war is not an
inevitable state of affairs. Afghanistan’s civil war of the early 1990s was not so much driven by irreconcilable ethnic, religious, or tribal animosities as by the uniqueness of Afghanistan’s circumstances in 1992. Mohammed Najibullah stepped down on his own accord prior to anyone agreeing who should replace him as ruler. Under a different scenario, the mujahideen might have worked out a power sharing agreement peacefully. As it was though, a number of groups saw a chance to secure power for themselves, and acting on that impulse, ended up prolonging Afghanistan’s war. Individual calculations of the benefits from gaining power were thus critical to the events of the period.

The structure of this analysis naturally misses some important issues. For example, General Dostum does not enter the discussion until after the section analyzing foreign influences. Yet might his behavior from 1992 and after have been linked to the emergence of an independent Uzbek republic adjacent to Afghanistan with which he shared ethnic and linguistic ties? Or, regarding the Peshawar Accords, to what extent was the agreed-upon government structure that the mujahideen tried to implement in April 1992 the product of Pakistani pressure? Clearly, external influences continued to be important in influencing the events described throughout Chapters IV and V. Alternatively, an analysis of individual motivations driving mujahideen actions prior to 1992 could be revealing. For example, what precipitated the July 1989 incident in which Hekmatyar’s men killed 36 of Massoud’s? The rivalry between Hekmatyar and Massoud could certainly be studied in greater detail, and perhaps some original source of animosity could be pinpointed. Examining events in Afghanistan as I have done in this paper highlights the complexity of the many determinants affecting the country’s internal
developments, while maintaining (I hope) some measure of clarity. One could examine in much greater detail the many intersections between internal and external, historical and contemporary, personal and international factors affecting Afghanistan’s politics. However, such an examination would likely merit another paper entirely.
Notes

2 Ibid., p. 379.
3 Ibid., p. 403.
4 Ibid., p. 414.
6 Ibid., p. 2.
18 Twelver Shi’ism is the majority belief among Shi’a Muslims. It holds that the Twelfth Imam in the line descended from the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin/son-in-law, Ali, was hidden by God, but will return one day, bringing justice to the world. The key point is that although Twelver Shi’ism is the majority belief within Shi’ism, Shi’ism is a minority sect within Islam overall.
25 Laber and Rubin, *A Nation is Dying*, p. xiv.
26 Ibid.
28 Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin document in great detail the various abuses carried out by the Soviets between 1979 and 1987 in their book *A Nation is Dying* (cited above).
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 7.
33 Goodson, *Afghanistan’s Endless War*, p. 70.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 27.
43 Ibid., p. 218.
52 Saikal and Maley, *Regime Change in Afghanistan*, p. 127.
54 Ewans, *Afghanistan*, p. 244.
55 Ibid., p. 245.
64 Ibid., p. 39.
65 Ibid., p. 38.
68 It is not so important to specifically define what a “tribe” in the Afghan context is as it is just to be clear that a tribe is a sub-ethnic category of group identification.
73 Ibid., p. 165.
75 Goodson, Afghanistan’s Endless War, p. 74.
76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Goodson, Afghanistan’s Endless War, p. 74.
83 Ewans, Afghanistan, p. 252.
86 Yousaf and Adkin, The Bear Trap, p. 130.
87 Ibid., p. 129.
88 Goodson, Afghanistan’s Endless War, pp. 61-62.
89 Roy, Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan, p. 78.
91 Yousaf and Adkin, The Bear Trap, p. 40.
92 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
93 Ibid., p. 42.
94 Coll, Ghost Wars, p. 233.
97 Ibid., pp. 165-166.
98 Ewans, Afghanistan, p. 253.
99 Rashid, Taliban, p. 19.
100 Ibid., p. 30.
101 Ewans, Afghanistan, p. 257.
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