Women and pipelines:
Afghanistan's proxy wars

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Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, was captured by the forces of the Islamic Taliban movement in September 1996 after a period of hostilities which marked the downfall of the old Afghanistan. This article sets the military and political manoeuvres that preceded and followed this event in the regional political and economic context, and examines the involvement of external actors, including Russia, the United States, Iran and Pakistan. It explores the repercussions for the Kandahar population of the Taliban's draconian measures restricting the activities of women as well as the salience in foreign attitudes towards the Taliban of interests in the transportation of oil supplies within and across Central Asia.¹

The capture of Kabul by the forces of the Taliban (Islamic student) movement on 26 September 1996 quickly realigned political forces within both Afghanistan and the region. The Taliban's repressive policies, especially against women, attracted international media attention for the first time, now that they were carried out in the capital city.² Their brutal public castration and execution of Afghanistan's last communist president, Najibullah, who since his downfall in April 1992 had lived in the sanctuary of the Kabul UN office, consolidated their brutal image, especially since Najibullah's own past responsibility for torture and executions had faded, at least in the memory of non-Afghans. The Taliban's restrictive policies played a role in preventing states from recognizing them as the new government of Afghanistan, despite their control of the capital and most of the country's territory and population.

¹ The author is Director, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, New York. The Council on Foreign Relations takes no position on policy issues, and all statements are the sole responsibility of the author.

² Portions of this article were originally written for the WRITENET project of the Center for Documentation and Research of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and appear here with permission. I would like to thank CDR for permission to use this material here. In preparing this article I have benefited greatly from conversations with Ashraf Ghani of the World Bank, but all opinions and judgments are my own, not those of CDR, Ashraf Ghani or the World Bank.

³ Amnesty International, Afghanistan: great shame by the Taliban in the name of religion, 18 Nov 1996.
Within Afghanistan, faced with the control of most of the country by the Taliban, a movement based in the dominant Pashtun ethnic group, the non-Pashtun forces allied again as they had after the fall of Najibullah. This time, however, the Tajik president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and his military leader, Ahmad Shah Masoud, had been defeated, and the alliance was clearly under the leadership of the Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former general in Najibullah's army. Dostum did not recognize Rabbani as president, though he accommodated him and Masoud in an alliance together with the Shia Hizbi Wahdat, led by Abdul Karim Khaliqi. The country was effectively partitioned between areas controlled by Pashtun and non-Pashtun forces.

The regional context became even more polarized. The advance of the Taliban, with aid from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (and, many believed, the United States), alarmed Russia, the Central Asian states and Iran, though for somewhat different reasons. Some in the former Soviet states feared that the Taliban might sweep north of Kabul, intensifying the civil war in Tajikistan and threatening the former Soviet border, now the security border of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Iran saw this extremist Sunni force both as excluding the Shia in Afghanistan from power and, more importantly, as being part of a US strategy to encircle and contain Iran. Not only Iran, but many others in the region, continue to believe that the United States was allied with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in this effort, as in giving aid to the mujahedin during the pre-1992 war. The State Department steadfastly denies these charges, both publicly and privately.

The regional dimension of the situation was clearly one of its key aspects. The independence of Central Asia and the opening of its borders had created a state system that had never existed before and where there were no clear rules of the game. The independence of ethnically defined Central Asian states strengthened ethnic identities in Afghanistan. Competition over control of trade and pipeline routes from Central Asia transformed relations between Iran and Pakistan. The UN began to deal more systematically with the regional dimension of the problem by convening a meeting of all states concerned with Afghanistan on 18 November.

State collapse

The new round of fighting and realignment was the latest stage in the process of the disintegration of the old Afghanistan and the failure of efforts to reconstitute it as a state. Afghanistan, along with a handful of countries in Africa (Somalia and Liberia are the purest examples), exemplifies the syndrome of "the failed nation-state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community". Such states 'descend into violence and anarchy — imperilling their own citizens and threatening their neighbors through refugee flows, political instability, and random warfare'.

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As Afghanistan shows, however, such states do not fall on their own, solely because of internal deficiencies. On the contrary, failed states are states whose history leaves them vulnerable to shifts in the international power configuration. Afghanistan had its own history as a state, dating back to a Pashtun tribal dynasty that established a short-lived empire in 1747, but it took its modern form as a buffer state between the British and Russian empires in the late nineteenth century. Its rulers consolidated their weak hold over the territory with foreign arms and cash, first from the British empire, and then from the protagonists of the Cold War, especially the former Soviet Union.

During most of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence in Afghanistan by aiding different parts of the state. The USSR sponsored the development of a modern military from the mid-1950s, and the United States acknowledged that geography dictated a predominantly Soviet presence. Nonetheless, this state, sandwiched between the Soviet Union and American allies Iran and Pakistan, steered a precarious course of non-alignment, and both sides aided the authorities rather than political groups seeking to overthrow them. The resulting flows of aid enabled the state to gain a monopoly of the major forms of violence and modestly expand the services it provided to at least some of the population.

This changed in 1973, when Daoud Khan, cousin of the king, Zahir Shah, overthrew his kinsman in a coup and abolished the monarchy. For a variety of reasons, local, regional and global, the superpowers and regional powers began to aid anti-system actors. When military officers allied with pro-Soviet communist factions took power in a 1978 coup, a resistance movement was sparked off. That movement began in many areas as a spontaneous social protest, but it increasingly came under the leadership of Islamist leaders who had established bases in Pakistan. When the Soviet Union invaded in December 1979 in order to control a renegade communist leader, the resistance (the mujahideen) spread and began to receive massive support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China and Iran, among others.

The resistance movement hindered the Soviets, but it did not unite the country. The Pakistan-US policy of aiding numerous parties, combined with the existing fragmentation of Afghan society, ensured that no national leadership emerged. As long as the Soviet troops controlled major roads and urban centers, the resistance groups remained largely local. After February 1980, when Soviet troops withdrew under a UN-mediated agreement, mujahideen in some regions formed more consolidated groups, but this led to the beginnings of ethnic and regional rivalries rather than to national unity. Najibullah held on with Soviet arms and cash, but when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did his

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regime. A UN effort to establish a transitional coalition government was undermined by factional manoeuvres. The massive arms supplies still held by both the Soviet-aided army and the Islamic resistance fighters ensured that a civil war would continue; however, the former pattern of conflict (communists versus mujahedden), sustained by Cold War flows of arms and money, was immediately transformed into one based largely on ethnic lines. One superpower dissolved, and the other disengaged, but the regional powers—Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Russia, India and Saudi Arabia—continued to back one group or another. Groups allied and split around the twin poles of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar’s mainly Pashtun Islamic party, supported by Pakistan with help from Saudi Arabia and international Islamic groups, and the mainly Tajik Islamic ‘government’ led by Rabbani and Massoud, which was aided by Russia, Iran and India.

Starting in 1994, the UN belatedly reactivated a special mission led by a representative of the Secretary-General. But the regional powers which voted for the mission in the General Assembly continued to undermine it through their policies of covert aid to the warring factions. The capital city of Kabul was pounded into ruins by rocket attacks and street fighting.

The violent stalemate became unstable when Pakistan seized on the opportunity to arm and fund a new movement: the Taliban, or Islamic students. Formed of Afghans raised in exile and trained in ultra-conservative madrasas (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan, this movement galvanized the resentment of Pashtun tribes against the corruption of the former mujahedden leaders and the domination of the government by non-Pashtuns. For Pakistan, the Taliban might finally provide a means to re-establish Pashtun predominance in Afghanistan, ensuring that ethnic Pashtuns on both sides of the border would not focus their nationalist aspirations on Pakistan. Equally important, however, was the Taliban’s ability to provide security for trade and, potentially, oil and gas pipelines that would link the newly independent states of Central Asia to the international market through Pakistan rather than Iran. While one route was blocked by the fighting in Kabul, the Taliban opened another route through Qandahar (their base, which they captured in October 1994) and Herat (which they captured in September 1995) to Turkmenistan.

**The Taliban capture of Kabul**

By the spring of 1996, the Rabbani government still controlled at most a quarter of Afghanistan’s territory. The Taliban held sway over Qandahar, Herat and most of the eastern Pashtun areas. Jalalabad and the other northern Pashtun areas remained non-aligned, as did Dostum’s areas in the north and the Shia (Hazara) areas in the centre. In May, Rabbani and Massoud scored a symbolic political coup; when Hikmatyar agreed to join their government as prime minister and brought some of his few remaining troops to Kabul to join in the fight against the Taliban.
As prime minister, Hikmatyar immediately attacked Afghanistan’s most pressing problem by issuing new regulations about proper dress for women. This decree was criticized by Massoud, on the grounds that the prime minister had not consulted with the government. Tragicomic as it may seem for the nominal leader of a country whose capital city had been demolished by rockets (largely his own) and which had the lowest literacy rate and the highest rates of both infant and maternal mortality in the world to focus his energy on women’s clothes, this incident illustrates the importance of control over women as a highly charged symbol of political and social legitimacy in Afghanistan, a symbol that assumed new importance with the capture of Kabul by the Taliban.

This change, however, like so many events in Afghanistan, largely reflected political alignments in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto’s government, under the leadership of Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar, had shifted its support from Hikmatyar (mediated by the political party Jamaat-i Islami) to the Taliban, mediated by the party Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i Islam (Fazlur Rahman group). The Jamaat had supported Pakistan’s military ruler Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, who had hanged Bhutto’s father, and was allied both with her political opponents in Pakistan and the Islamic radicals abroad. The JUI, while extremely conservative, opposed the Jamaat’s brand of Islam in favour of a more traditional type, dominated by tribal mullahs. It was allied with Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party.

The Jamaat, aided by former Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) chief (and Babar rival) Hamid Gul, sponsored the reconciliation of Rabbani and Hikmatyar. The result, however, mainly showed the weakness of Hikmatyar. The realignment, which reunited all the surviving original leaders of the Islamist movement from Kabul University, had little effect on the military balance.

The real change came as a result of other Pakistani and Saudi decisions. While such reports are impossible to verify, it appears that a significant decision to increase aid to the Taliban was taken during a visit to Pakistan by Prince Turki al-Faisal, head of the Saudi General Intelligence Agency, in July. Pakistan still found that the Tajik-dominated government in Kabul posed a threat to Pakistan by keeping the Pashtuns, uncontrolled by any state, in a condition of agitation. Furthermore, while Pakistan waited for Afghanistan to open up as a stable land bridge to Central Asia, Iran was moving forward with its plan to serve as that region’s major outlet to the international market. In April 1996 it had opened a rail link between Mashhad and Turkmenistan, providing the first such connection to the south for the former Soviet rail network. Iran was constructing a major free-trade zone on the Iran–Turkmenistan border. It was also proceeding with swap deals for Central Asian oil and gas, under which the Central Asian states would supply northern Iran, Iran would export its own hydrocarbons from southern Iran instead of shipping them by the more costly overland route to its north, and Iran would pay the Central Asian states in hard currency.

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1 Interview with senior official of humanitarian organization, Morges, Switzerland, 5 Oct. 1996.
3 “Kazakhstan, Iran to start oil swaps in November”, Reuters (Dubai), 1 Nov. 1996.
At the same time the stakes for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had greatly increased. Not just trade routes, but potentially lucrative oil and gas pipelines were at stake. In the spring of 1996, press reports revealed that a partnership between the American company Unocal and the Saudi company Delta had concluded plans for multimillion-dollar oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to Pakistani Baluchistan via Herat and Qandahar.7

Originally these companies had concluded separate agreements with commanders along the projected pipeline route, and the Taliban, who now controlled the entire route, had become their major partner. It became apparent, however, that the billions of dollars of financing required for this route would not be available without the agreement of the government of Afghanistan. Rabbani, naturally, was reluctant to sponsor a project that would strengthen his opponents. His government thus became an even greater strategic obstacle to Pakistan’s goal of reaching Central Asia and Saudi Arabia’s goal of containing Iran.

The United States appears to have looked benignly on Pakistani moves, though there is no evidence of direct US assistance to the Taliban. The pipeline project would serve the economic interests of a US company and a Saudi company, would serve Washington’s goals of isolating Iran, and might provide funds needed for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s conservative, tribal brand of Islam was also hostile to the radical, revolutionary Islamic movements involved in international terrorist activities, some of which had training camps in Afghanistan. The Taliban, moreover, made some early statements against the drug trade, though since taking control of the Helmand Valley, the largest of Afghanistan’s three major opium-producing areas, they appeared to have profited from it as had the previous authorities, the Taliban-controlled areas producing about 95 per cent of Afghanistan’s opium crop.8 Hence, while the United States probably did not participate directly in organizing or assisting the Taliban, the movement appeared to serve some of its strategic and economic interests.

While this author does not have any direct evidence linking the pipeline plans to the new Taliban offensive, the context is too suggestive to overlook. Soon after the pipeline plans were finalized, Prince Turki visited Islamabad. Within two months, the Taliban were on the move against Jalalabad, a target that Pakistan had previously forbidden them, control of which enabled them to cut off Kabul’s main supplies of food and fuel. They captured this previously autonomous eastern zone, the second of Afghanistan’s three major opium-producing areas, on 21 September. The governor fled, apparently as a result of economic inducements, many other local commanders were apparently paid off with the Taliban’s now ample supplies of cash, and most of the members of the provincial shura were assassinated by tribal rivals in an ambush as they

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7 Douglas Farthing, ‘Afghan leader says will not yield to his foes’, Reuters (Almaty, Kazakhstan), 7 March 1996; ‘Afghanistan to study Turkish-Pakistan gas pipeline’, Reuters (Islamabad), 5 June 1996.
8 ‘Opium poppy production in Afghanistan high but stabilized, says UN survey finds’, UN Information Service (Vienna), 25 Sept. 1995.
attempted to flee. \(^9\) Osama bin Laden, the Saudi businessman who bankrolled many radical Islamic movements, also appears to have fled from his refuge in Jalalabad at that time, thus meeting another Saudi and US security aim. Later it turned out that he continued to operate from the mountains around Jalalabad. \(^10\)

In the Taliban's advance on Kabul, resistance also mysteriously evaporated at key points. When they captured a key road junction, they threatened to move north-east of Kabul and cut off Massoud's supply lines to his base in Panjshir, leading him to evacuate his troops from Kabul on 26 September. When the Taliban arrived in Kabul, some of their troops captured Najibullah, whom they tortured, killed and hanged in a public square. \(^11\) This violation of UN sanctuary brought a brief reproof from the Security Council. \(^12\) The Taliban then made their own distinctive assault on the problems confronting Afghanistan by issuing decrees requiring women to wear the full burqa (covering them from head to toe), closing girls' schools, and forbidding women to work or appear in public without a male guardian. They also required men to grow beards, wear turbans and attend the mosque. They forbade music, kite flying and chess. \(^13\) These decrees were denounced by the religious leadership of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. \(^14\) Amnesty International also accused them of arresting thousands of people thought to be sympathetic to any of the various former governments in house-to-house searches. \(^15\)

A movement which had started as a group of former students at madrasas belonging to the Deobandi movement had now expanded far beyond that, though the core of the movement still consisted of leaders from that ultra-conservative movement (founded as a reaction against Islamic modernism in nineteenth-century India). \(^16\) The fighters from this background were young men raised in refugee camps and all-male madrasas in Pakistan, who had hardly lived in Afghan society. They had been raised in an ideologically supercharged environment against a background of pervasive violence and deprivation. The

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\(^9\) According to one account, the governor of Nangarhar (the province of which Jalalabad is the capital), Haji Abdul Qadir, was given $10 million to leave. According to another account (more reliable in my view), he was told by the Pakistani security services that if he did not leave the Taliban he would be allowed to keep the $10 million he had in Pakistani banks, which otherwise would be confiscated.


\(^11\) For a relatively detailed account of this event, see Fred Halliday, "Kabul's patriarchy with gain" The Nation, 12 Nov. 1996, pp. 19-20.


\(^15\) "Muslin Brotherhood leader lashes out at Taliban militia," AP (Gros), 3 Oct. 1996.

movement's extreme ideology provided a much-needed sense of discipline and purpose in their disrupted lives and supplied an outlet for the pervasive generational and gender conflicts that Afghanistan's social disruption had caused. It also gave them the only occupation for which they were qualified.

At the same time, as the Taliban expanded their control and became the principal vehicle for the distribution of weapons and cash, many others joined them. The movement provided a vehicle for many tribal Pashtun youths with no religious training to reassert Pashtun honour after the country's domination by a Tajik-led government. It also provided a harsh but at least initially effective check on the anarchic tyranny of small commanders in the Pashtun areas. And, by exerting strict control over women, it reasserted the honour of Pashtun men and legitimated their power with an Islamic symbol, even if it was one not accepted by the vast majority of the world's Muslims. In addition, a significant number of Pashtun professional military officers joined the Taliban, including, by some reports, the former leaders of the Khalq communist faction, who had been protected by the ISI since the failed coup d'etat against Najibullah in March 1992. The Taliban thus led a formidable but unstable alliance. They were strengthened in addition by a significant number of Pushtuns in their ranks, including tribal youths who fought along with them and, apparently, officers giving them assistance in radio communications and other technical fields. Some Pakistan prisoners captured by Massoud recounted how they had been recruited by the ISI to join units to fight in Afghanistan.

Political alignments after the Taliban capture of Kabul

The Taliban do not seem to have had a clear political strategy other than enforcement of their interpretation of the sharia. Their Pakistani sponsors did, however; namely, to reach a truce agreement with Dostum in order to open the main road from Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Kabul and Jalalabad. Indeed, Bagram flew to Mazar-i-Sharif several times in October to win Dostum over to this proposal. However, Uzbekistan took a position similar to that of most other CIS states, and Dostum responded accordingly. While it took some time to overcome the long-standing deep mistrust that Dostum felt, especially for Massoud, on 14 October he finally announced in Mazar-i-Sharif an alliance of his forces with those of the ousted Rabbani government and the Hezb-i-Wahdat. Iran stood firmly behind this alliance and began pouring aid in, both

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by airlift and over its new land bridge to Central Asia.21

Massoud’s forces soon drove the Taliban out of Panjsher, retook Bagram air base and pursued the Taliban back to the last pass north of Kabul, where the
front line stabilized.22 Dostum’s small air force mounted a few raids on Kabul
targets, killing some civilians in the process.

The Taliban launched an offensive from Herat against Dostum’s north-west
lines, where internal political dissension had weakened him. Inn airlifted
supplies in response and may also have permitted Dostum to transport Ismail Khan
and several hundred troops from Iran to join the battle. Ismail Khan, former
 governor of Herat, had fled to Iran after the Taliban took Herat. The Taliban
were pushed back but held the last pass before Herat. The fighting in this area
was violent enough to displace another 30,000 people. The increasingly ethnic
character of the conflict was indicated by ethnically separate flows of displaced
people: Pashtuns (mainly nomads) fled to Taliban-controlled Herat, while other
groups fled toward Dostum’s lines. Several thousand Afghan Turkmen were
reported to have fled to Turkmenistan.23

The result of these events was an increase in ethnic polarization. The Taliban
now controlled all the predominantly Pashtun areas of the country (as well as
Herat and Kabul), while non-Pashtun organizations controlled the areas bordering
on their co-ethnics in Central Asia. As a sign of the increase in ethnic
orientation, Hikmatyar reportedly initiated talks aimed at forming an alliance
with the Taliban.24

Afghan politics continued to be dominated by armed organizations recruited
from ethno-regional networks by leaders with access to resources from some
combination of foreign aid and local economic activity, notably the drug trade
and other forms of commerce, of all degrees of legality, in international terms
(there is no law in Afghanistan in the contemporary sense). All of these armed
networks, of course, are led by and composed entirely of men.

The principal role of women in Afghan politics in the past 18 years of war
has been to function as symbols of legitimization for political groups led by
men. At times, however, as in previous periods of Afghan history, women emerged
in the public space at moments of crisis. Schoolgirls and teachers led
some of the most militant demonstrations in Kabul against the Soviet occupation
in 1980-81.25 The extreme measures taken by the Taliban, combined with
some networks formed among exiled Afghan women who attended the Beijing
UN Conference on Women as members of NGO delegations (the Rabbani

21 Erik Marquith, ‘The role of the women in the Afghan war’, Inside Track on World News, ed./drafted by The
fears ethnic persecution in Afghan northwest’, Reuters (Islamabad), 13 Nov. 1996.
24 Azam Mawafiq Zaryab, ‘Hikmatyar’s deputy has travelled to Kandahar and discussed participation in
25 Rubin, Fragmentation of Afghanistan, pp. 23, 137.
government had declined to send a delegation to the conference on the grounds that politics was a subject for men, led to a few women, at least, finding a voice to become the subjects rather than the objects of politics. While these groups remain confined to a few elite women, they are potentially important in proportion to their size in challenging the monopoly of men over the symbols of both religion and nationhood. Efforts to resolve the conflict have also suffered from the lack of a domestic constituency for peace, as all of the political actors are warriors. Women might help form such a constituency.

Even before the Taliban capture of Kabul, an Afghan Women’s Network had formed in Pakistan and had begun to forge links with women in Kabul. One of their contacts there, archaeology professor Dr Siddiqi Siddiq, wrote an open letter to the Taliban authorities in Kabul denouncing their practices. Reports emerged of isolated acts of resistance by unarmed women to Taliban coercion, as when a group of unveiled nomads chased off some Taliban who attacked them.

The international response to the Taliban capture of Kabul

The Taliban capture of Kabul did not so much change the orientation of major states towards the conflict as consolidate it. Pakistan clearly emerged as a sponsor of the Taliban. Throughout the region, there was a persistent belief that the United States was in fact behind the movement. Certainly, the Taliban appeared to serve the US policy of isolating Iran by creating a firmly Sunni buffer on Iran’s border and potentially providing security for trade routes and pipelines that would break Iran’s monopoly on Central Asia’s southern trade routes. Indeed, officials of the Unocal oil company publicly evaluated the Taliban victory as a “positive development.” The US government reinforced these impressions after the Taliban victory with an announcement, later retracted, that it would send an official to Kabul to study the possibility of reopening the embassy. Nonetheless, no clear evidence indicates US material support, and all officials deny it emphatically, both publicly and privately.

Some in Russia and the Central Asian states originally seem to have panicked excessively. General Alexander Lebed, in particular, issued an alarmist statement claiming that the Taliban intended to sweep north and annex portions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but other Russian leaders disagreed with this assessment. The CIS called a meeting of Russia and the Central Asian states in

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Almaty on 4 October to consider the threat posed by the Taliban. Turkmenistan, in line with its policy of neutrality and its potential to benefit from the Taliban victory, declined to attend. The meeting discussed whether the CIS should take measures to support General Dostum. It ended with a call for unspecified measures to prevent the Afghan conflict spilling over into contiguous states. Russia ceased supplying newly printed banknotes to the Afghanistan Central Bank, depriving the Taliban of an important source of revenue that previous Afghan governments had enjoyed.

Iran perceived the Taliban victories as part of a US policy of encirclement and acted accordingly. Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati toured Central Asia in an attempt to gain support for an initiative to convene all the states involved in Afghanistan—except, of course, the United States. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia declined to attend the meeting, which took place in Tehran on 30 October and condemned foreign interference in Afghanistan.

At the global level, spurred on by the Iranian initiative, the UN was finally able to begin a serious approach to the regional problem posed by Afghanistan. On 18 November it convened in New York a meeting on Afghanistan at the deputy minister level of representatives of major concerned states, including the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany, Japan, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, Italy, Turkey and the five Central Asian states. The meeting agreed on the need for a framework to end external interference in Afghanistan and decided to reconvene, perhaps at a higher level of representation. It disagreed, however, on the question of whether to engage or isolate the Taliban. The Taliban challenged the Rabbani government's control of Afghanistan's seat at the UN, but the Credentials Committee deferred a decision, as called for by the United States.

Shortly before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, the UN had tried to signal a higher level of commitment to its political efforts in Afghanistan. Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Marrack Goulding spent 10–13 September in Afghanistan meeting all leaders and discussing the UN role. The UN mission in the field, led by Dr. Norbert Hegg and now augmented by seconded officers from the United States, Japan, Britain, and Russia, report-

53 "Turkmenistan backs Taliban", UPI (Moscow), 8 Oct. 1996.
58 "Preliminary briefing by Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, United Nations (New York), 16 Sept. 1996."
ed progress towards agreement on a ceasefire and demilitarization of Kabul. If the Taliban were showing new flexibility it might have been because they had lost their patron: on 5 November President Farouq Leghari of Pakistan dismissed Prime Minister Bhutto and her government, including General Babar. The humanitarian agencies also had to struggle with the new situation. Soon after the Taliban victory, the UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, issued a statement reiterating the UN’s commitment to the rights of women. Agencies that had become accustomed to working through quiet, slow progress now had to confront the challenge to their principles head-on. The Taliban’s harsh regulations forced the closure of many programmes, including even, in one area, classes for women in mine awareness. Amid attacks on and even arrests of their staff and the impossibility of continuing many programmes involving mothers and children or girls’ education, many agencies had to consider whether they could continue to work in Afghanistan. UNHCR suspended its programmes in Kabul on 20 November when the Taliban arrested four members of its Afghan staff. The programmes resumed when the staff were released without explanation three weeks later.

The Taliban relented in a number of small ways—allowing women to come out in public to receive food assistance, so long as they waited in lines separate from men, and permitting a small number of female medical staff to work. In early December their leader, Mawlawi Muhammad Umar, called on the Taliban to treat the people of Kabul less harshly, but the next day Taliban radio announced the punishment of 225 women for violating the dress code.

The humanitarian consequences of the Taliban takeover of Kabul

The Taliban takeover of Kabul had one positive humanitarian consequence in the city: it ended their blockade of Kabul, with the result that both food and other items of trade could reach it more easily. Food supplies increased, but as a result of constant devaluation of the currency, prices continued to rise.

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10 UN says new Afghan ceasefire plan is on track. Reuters (Islamabad), 13 Nov. 1996.
11 Pakistani President dissolves assembly. Reuters (Islamabad), 4 Nov. 1996. The deadline is before the event, because the deadline is 1730 PST, corresponding to 0730 Pakistan time the next day.
12 The president took the decision in the early hours of 4 Nov. Pakistan time. Michael Banger, ‘Blatto’s dismissal could affect Afghan Taliban’. Reuters (Kabul), 5 Nov. 1996.
15 Interviews with officials of humanitarian organisations working in Afghanistan, Geneva, Switzerland, 4-5 Oct. 1996.
18 UNHCR suspends programs in Kabul. UPI (Islamabad), 23 Nov. 1996.
19 Tim Johnston. ‘Red Cross hands out food to disabled Afghan veterans’. Reuters (Kabul), 17 Nov. 1996.
20 Tim Johnston. ‘Despite Taliban, women are back working’. Reuters (Kabul), 26 Oct. 1996.
22 M. Hansa Utley. ‘Afghanistan: Taliban takeover brings benefit as well as criticism’. IPI (Rome), 12 Nov. 1996.
The new regulations imposed by the Taliban are likely to cause additional harm to the already precarious health status of the population of Kabul. Women have been banned from the capital's 32 public bath-houses, the only places where many women could wash in hot water. Health care workers expect an increase in gynaecological infections and scabies as a result. The greatest risk is of uterine infection after childbirth, a major cause of maternal mortality. Young children who formerly accompanied their mothers to the bath-houses are also now at greater risk of respiratory diseases.47

The suspension of UNHCR programmes in Kabul as a result of the arrest of staff threatened to hinder the winter feeding of the population. The Taliban also ordered a halt to landmine awareness classes for women, which is particularly dangerous in view of the rising incidence of mine injuries in Kabul. According to Save the Children (USA), the increase in these injuries is mainly due to the closure of schools, including boys' schools, since many of their teachers were women who were no longer permitted to work; as a result more children were playing outside, where they were at risk from mines. Ironically, the increase in security is also responsible, as people feel freer to travel to previously inaccessible areas, often strewn with mines and unexploded ordnance.48

The suspension of employment of women, of course, places their families at risk. This is particularly so for the estimated 25,000-40,000 widows in Kabul, who often provided their families with their only support.49

Future prospects

Afghanistan has once again gained a degree of strategic importance. The combination of renewed international tension in a tumultuous region, with the pervasive violence and social disintegration of the country, has served to polarize the country and the region and bring about a new round of fighting. The hegemony of the Taliban, a group exhibiting a curious combination of ideological rigidity and political naivete, poses ill for a negotiated solution.

The situation does contain a few new positive developments, however. The convening by the UN of the regional states together with the major global political and economic powers creates a framework within which the underlying problems of regional instability and competition can be addressed. The interest of oil companies in the region, while it has spurred a new level of regional competition, also means that a new source of money for reconstruction may be available. Thus far there has been little indication that the international community is prepared to offer any alternative to the fighters and opium

47 'Kabul women face health risks', UPI (Islamabad), 27 Nov. 1996.
49 Michael Boyle, 'Landmine victims face in Afghan capital', Reuters (Islamabad), 4 Nov. 1996.
Barnett R. Rubin.

Growing of Afghanistan. Indeed, in a world beset by donor fatigue it is difficult to envisage yet another massive programme of aid. In this context, the oil companies' interest in Afghanistan could be used creatively to support peace rather than aggravate conflict. The UN and major states could work through multilateral financial institutions to design a public-private partnership for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Key to any such programme would be the creation of institutions to manage funds generated, including rents from pipelines, that would provide for some accountability to the Afghan people at large and avoid the corruption and decay that oil wealth has brought to states such as Iran and Nigeria. Such a programme of reconstruction, conditional on a UN-mediated agreement, would provide the international diplomatic effort with significantly more leverage than it now enjoys.