Futures for Afghanistan

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This article attempts to review the nature of the problems facing Afghanistan, and also to make an estimate of how the international community is, could be or should be helping towards reconstruction and reaching a settlement and, hopefully, an end to the war. 'How to help Afghanistan' was the topic of an elegant Note in The World Today, 3 April, 1994, written by William MacKay. He argued that the desperate plight of the Afghan people should not be regarded with indifference in the Western world, but should be seen to matter, giving four basic grounds why there should be Western concern — moral, humanitarian, political and social.

On the cru of the argument — that Afghanistan matters and that Afghanistan should be politically and culturally re-established in a more democratic manner — was the author’s view that the future of Afghanistan is of vital importance to the future of the West and that the West should not be content to give aid to the Afghan people without asking how the aid is to be used. This is a crucial point, for the West has a responsibility to ensure that the aid is used for the benefit of the Afghan people and not for the benefit of the Afghan army or for the benefit of the Soviet forces who invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

The disintegration of Afghanistan has been a gradual process, helped by the ethnic weakness of the state apparatus. This process actually began in the late 1970s, well before the collapse of the Najibullah government in April 1992. The form of a dissolution of power to local political groups based on tribal or ethnic alliances or sectarian solidarity. This brought to local or regional prominence General Rashid Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif and the Jamalis in Peshawar, and many lesser figures in different provinces. As Barnett Rubin correctly predicted in January 1992, 'whatever happens in the capital, these groups will not easily surrender power to officials sent from Kabul'.

The weakness of the central power in Kabul is particularly seen in the case of Afghanistan’s eastern and southern provinces bordering on Pakistan. This was not so much a case of Kabul losing control of local warlords and accepting control by local militias but, rather, of Pakistan, through the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), forging new direct links with Afghan commanders and shrewdly manipulating Pashtun clan or tribal rivalries. This amounted to a reversal of power patterns in Afghanistan since the so-called Durand Line, which had favoured Kabul. For decades Afghanistan used tribal politics across disputed boundary to...
pressure. Pakistan: Pakistan has now fully developed a capability to do the same in the other direction.

Miseries of life in Kabul

For some 1.5m people living in Kabul, daily life has become terribly difficult and uncomfortable, as well as dangerous. The impact of the fighting varies greatly between different areas of the city. Some quarters—like Aisha—which were densely populated only a year ago now lie in ruins and are out of bounds because of the dangers from heavy fighting. The three military, newer areas of Soviet-built apartment blocks, have also suffered great damage. But Khairkhana and quite a few other areas are relatively unchanged, suffering only sporadic attacks rather than wholesale destruction.

Civilian suffering has been terrible this year, while hunger and disease are spreading fast. More than 600,000 Afghans have been forced to leave their homes or displaced persons, and must face a precarious existence without significant outside help. While some Kabulis have been forced into such conditions—and even proves resilient—sensitive foreign observers are shocked by the extent of the destruction and how brutal life has become in what used to be even rationally relatively peaceful place to live. Kabul is under permanent siege, and for that reason has been compared by many to Sarajevo. Its destruction has led Raymond Whitaker to compare it to post-War Berlin.

The current round of fighting began on 1 January 1994 between the forces of the so-called government of Professor Rabwani and Ahmed Shah Massoud. On the one hand, and the combined forces of Haji-Islami of Galiibakhan Hekmatyar and General Dostum. The civilian population has been spared only by air raids over Kabul, which in the past caused great indiscriminate damage and many casualties. It is not due to compassion. The most likely reason for this change in strategy, according to local observers, is that the losses of military aircraft and increasing risks of being hit with friendly fire unamendable.

Years of warfare have affected everyone. Sandbags are stacked high to protect houses from mortar or casual bullets. Whenever people live in Kabul, they have had to come to terms with the breakdown of services that are used to take for granted. Electricity, rarely functions, except for those installations with generators. Imported fuel for heating or cooking alike is very dear. Water is more or less drawn from many wells in the streets, and uncollected rubbish as well as rubble from burnt buildings has accumulated fast. The telephone system is not working either. Because of these problems and the poor state of nutrition and health in general, fears abound of outbreaks of food and waterborne epidemics. Some of the city’s water sources have been treated with chlorine to reduce the risk of waterborne diseases.

The city’s essential services are being kept going by a small number of trained expatriates, as well as Afghanists. In Kabul, as in other Afghan cities, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stands out. Its well-organised operation gives humanitarian help in scores of thousands of victims of war. Kabul’s largest hospitals are functioning well through the dedication of teams of Afghan doctors and nurses. Supplies of vital medicines, bandages and medical equipment are all provided by the ICRC, along with nothing salaries for the staff. Many hospital beds are filled with wounded fighters from opposing sides, though doctors never ask to which parties the patients are affiliated. They accept anyone in need of treatment. Kabul’s doctors and hospitals are managing to keep strictly neutral in this seemingly-power struggle which is steadily destroying what remains of Kabul.

Other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are at work, including Medecins sans Frontieres, Care International, Oxfam and the International Assistance Mission (IAM) of Christian volunteers; the oldest NGO in Afghanistan and represented continuously since 1966. IAM will maintain the NIMROD Eye Institute, assisting eye hospitals and clinics in Kabul, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif and training Afghan ophthalmologists. What is lacking is a UN presence in Kabul—and something of a surprise in view of the long-standing UN efforts to help peace in Afghanistan. Last January, the UN’s expatriate staff were ordered to leave Kabul just when they were arguably most needed. Some of them left unwillingly for safer places like Islamabad, but it has not prevented great concern about the UN personnel among the expatriates still working in Kabul amid its dangers.

The poppies of Afghanistan

Wars and drugs go together, as in Burma as in Afghanistan. Freedom from central government control combined with open borders serves to encourage both production and international trading in narcotics. Cultivation of opium in Afghanistan has risen steadily over the past decade, and narcotics production in the form of heroin is almost entirely exported. Estimates vary widely about the scale of opium production. According to UN experts, the volume of opium produced in 1993 amounted to some 2,200 metric tons from both countries, of which 90 per cent originates from provinces in Afghanistan, close to the borders with Pakistan.

In Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier and Baluchistan provinces, the poppy crop is down. Yet the heroin trade is thriving. Even when opium is not processed on Pakistani territory, most is brought in for sale or to mainly Western markets, anonymously.

One basic problem comes from the ease and relative cheapness with which 'drugs heroin' can set up and operate small laboratories in the semi-independent tribal areas. In 1993, for example, in the Amrani area of Northeast Agency, one such heroin laboratory was raided and destroyed. But in May 1994 resident of Asah appeared to guide the government to intervene again and destroy two new laboratories scattered up. Another problem is that many powerful men in Pakistan gain by drugs smuggling. Though drug seizures in Pakistan reportedly compare quite well with Iran, Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries where drugs are a problem, the follow-up of persecuting cases through Pakistan’s judiciary system is very weak, not to say often nominal.

In Pakistan many key figures in the drugs world are left free to operate as heroin smuggling was legalized. Often using a legal front as a cover for their flourishing narcotics interests, these not-so-respectable businessmen have come to cry financial arrangements with the police and law-enforcement officers which effectively prevent interference in their narcotics trading. The fortunes of many of Pakistan’s dollar millionaires who have emerged over the past decade are said to be based on heroin trafficking. They include numerous members of provincial assemblies, influential politicians and even ministers. They constitute a pro-drugs lobbying which has clout in Pakistan.

Inside Afghanistan, local cooperation with drugs-control programmes cannot be taken for granted. Opium is by far the most profitable cash crop. The low risks of opium cultivation and the ease of selling it make many farmers eager to take on the heavy
Labour is involved. Though Afghanistan produces most of the opium converted into heroin, as yet relatively few Afghans are consumers of heroin. This may now be changing. In addition to the traditional opium-takers in Baluchistan and other remote northern regions, many more cases of addiction in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan are being reported.

Pakistan has its own alarming drugs problem, with at least 3m addicts providing a large and lucrative domestic market. Heroin and other drugs are easily and openly available in all Pakistan's cities. In Peshawar, for example, a fix can cost under $1 (120 rupees). The economies of heroin are such that profit margins are far higher for the dealers. It has been calculated that opium farmers receive just 0.5 per cent of the retail value of heroin sold. Even so, for individual farmers with an average 50-kilogrammes of opium to sell, the proceeds (at $20 per kilogramme worth some $2,500) are a very important part of household income. It should be contrasted with the customary monthly $700 ($350) paid by government employees in Afghanistan, at some $15 (90,000 Afghanis). Estimates by UNODC of the annual value of drugs exports for Pakistan's economy are placed at some $1.5bn, mostly in the form of heroin. This amounts to 20 per cent of Pakistan's total legitimate commodity exports. Other independent estimates are considerably higher.

Justifications for farmers cultivating opium usually emphasise that opium is a traditional crop as well as giving the best return. Poppies provide not only opium but also highly regarded by-products of animal fodder, soap and cooking oil. Farmers tend to switch to poppies when the winter fallow is a wasteland, which is labour-intensive and often involves the entire family. Some provinces of Afghanistan are highly specialised in opium or hashish production. This concentration is increasing: the south-central province of Nangarhar, for example, has some districts almost entirely given over to poppies, with as much as 80 or even 90 per cent of arable land underfod. Ironically, the poppy fields stretching in full view alongside the Jalalabad highway often stand adjacent to the anti-drug posters put up by the UNODC as part of its propaganda. When I visited Jalalabad in April 1994 and toured the poppy fields, the main point stressed by the small farmers quite bravely and patriotically displaying their flourishing poppy crops was that opium pays very well as a cash crop. One farmer actually advanced the skewed view that 'now we have won freedom from the Communists. Freedom means we can grow opium without any restriction.'

Yet poppies are never cultivated in a pacific variety. If a commander wants to stop the growing of poppies, then he always can,' claims Andrew Price of UNODC. This seems to bear out one pattern of farming elsewhere in Afghanistan, and it also provides one slender hope that eventually poppy cultivation could be reduced by a combination of carrot and stick. In future, incentives may be offered, directly linked to a statute on opium cultivation, in the form of foreign-funded projects for building roads and maintaining schools, or even for de-mining. As yet, though, there is no policy being followed of crop substitution. Efforts at educating people about the harmful aspects of the drug trade will be intensified, but the fact remains that it is an uphill struggle. Apart from the obvious cash benefits, many - perhaps most - farmers on both sides of the frontier - regard cannabis, opium or its derivatives as a legitimate crop to grow, which has nothing immoral about it.

As with Afghani politics, the narcotics trade is intimately connected with Pakistan. Any realistic attempts to reduce or eliminate the opiate industry of Afghanistan must take into full account the international ramifications of the heroin trade, not only with Pakistan but also with Iran, Turkey, China's Xinjiang regin, the Central Asian republics, Russia and so to Western Europe and North America. Indeed, this is recognised in a recent UNODC paper which bluntly states: 'These linkages imply that drug control programmes have to be coordinated and implemented throughout the region if they are to be effective.'

Refugees and education

The savage destruction of Kabul has resulted in hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking safer places, like Jalalabad to the south, where at least there is no fighting. But large numbers of homeless people still remain, often because they have no money to pay for places in tracks to get away. This has led to some unforeseen social consequences.

Many public buildings of Kabul, schools and mosques alike, have been appropriated by large homeless families from denounced or threatened city areas: in the north of the city alone there are 50,000 refugees sheltering in this way. They are living in terribly overcrowded conditions, often three families to one room. This provides temporary shelter, but it also means that education at all levels has come to a standstill in the capital, with all underused school buildings occupied by refugees, and teachers completely idle.

Higher education courses, already under great strain, collapsed two years ago, with the fall of the Najibullah regime. The campus of Kabul University itself was under occupation by fighters from Hafizullah Amin, the powerlul Sibai Modern party which controlled a considerable stretch of the capital. Much of the campus infrastructure has been looted or wrecked. Though the government appointed a new Vice-Chancellor for Kabul University, that is as far as its commitment goes towards rebuilding higher education. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Hassanjak, remarks hopefully about the chances of starting up again in rented premises somewhere in Kabul, even though many of the best-qualified teachers left after 1979, and more in the last 15 years.

He recently visited the United States and reported receiving welcome promises of backing by three American universities which had been linked to faculties of Kabul University before 1978.

Meanwhile, new miniature-scale universities are going forward in provinces where there is peace and some semblance of government. In Herat, for example, help has been pledged from Germany, from Bocmoh University, Geneva, Germany and for Afghan development, higher education and training continued up to the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Other mini-university centres are Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad.

Apart from the 50,000 refugees occupying public buildings in Kabul, an estimated 200,000 more Kabulis have managed to take shelter in their relatives elsewhere in the city. According to Peter Stocker of the ICRC delegation in Kabul, these are probably not in danger of starvation, but if the blockade continues, the situation risks becoming unmanageable. Bread is the staple food for most Kabulis. One of the essential considerations is the price of flour, which has been rising rapidly since 1 January, when the latest round of fighting erupted. Food has become a weapon in the struggle, with Hafizullah Amin fighters cynically preventing flour or other supplies reaching Kabulis living in areas of the capital outside its control. Indeed, it has already been cut off for three months.

But, since April a steady flow of flour brought in by food conveyes sent out from Pakistan has made a significant difference. Leveling up the imbalance around the blockade. It is paid for by the World Food Programme of the UN, but
On behalf of the UN it can be argued that its specialized agencies are already responsible for providing much of the food, fuel, and other supplies needed to cope with the refugee emergency and civilian needs in Kabul, and staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have helped with the return of more than one million Afghan refugees to the country and Iran in recent years. The fact that this is not enough is hardly the fault of the UN. Earlier projections of reconstruction aid for Afghanistan, often made by or for UNHCR in 1989-90 under the direction of Sartor, have not been large-scale, despite hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Now, though, pledges by big donor states are hard to find, and apathy abounds.

**Options for Afghanistan**

Some tragedies come about through natural causes, like earthquakes or floods. The Afghan tragedy is almost entirely man-made, the result of a series of mistakes and misjudgements compounded by the world's cavalier or cynical neglect of Afghanistan since the withdrawal of the last Soviet troops back in February 1989.

The war which began back in 1979 is now so old that the fresher troubles and tragedies of Bosnia, Somalia or Rwanda seem to many people much more relevant and pressing. Afghan war-brokers are not fighting a plural holy war, nor for any principles, but simply over who is to have power. As the Persian proverb says: "Two longs do not fit into one kingdom." We can judge the lack of moral scruples in this warfare by Gulbahad Hakimyar, who in one and a half years justified his rocket attacks on Kabul by demanding that the troops of the "Communist traitors" General Dostum should leave the city. Since January, Hakimyar is allied in the same Dostum. It is only power hungry leaders and ambitious local warlords who can benefit from continued civil strife. For almost a decade, the Russians ruthlessly attacked Afghan villages, destroying much of the country, killing more than one million men, women and children and deliberately driving out millions of ordinary people as refugees. Now it is the real Afghan party leaders themselves who are completing the cycle of destruction in Kabul.

Even if it is now Afghans who are fighting between themselves, with no direct involvement of foreign forces, it is foreign weapons, bombs, mines and military aircraft manufactured in foreign countries which are causing the destruction inside Afghanistan. The Cold War may be dead, but the legacy of superpower rivalries lives on in unfortunate Afghanistan. The country's immediate neighbours, especially Pakistan, but also Iran and the three Central Asian republics could play far more constructive roles than they are. Saudi Arabia still remains important as a major contributor of money fuelling the fighting, channelled via private Saudi donors for the most part.

Many Afghans from the dispersed intelligentsia are angry and in despair at what they see as the failure of the international community over Afghanistan. One of these is Professor A. Rashid Amiri, former head of the political science department of Kabul University and Director of the Writers' Union of Free Afghanistan, based in Peshawar. Professor Amiri complains that it was the United States and other Western countries which armed the present warlords in Afghanistan, and that "the Russians and Westerners ought to clean up the mess they created in war-torn Afghanistan". It is, maintains Amiri, their moral responsibility at least to work harder for peace there, instead of shrugging shoulders and saying it is an internal quarrel for the Afghans themselves to resolve."