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Introduction

Afghanistan is a land of extremes. For nearly fifty years of the twentieth century – from 1929 until 1978 – it was one of the most *peaceful* countries in Asia. It maintained its neutrality during the Second World War, avoided war with its neighbours, and was internally free of mass killings and mayhem. All this fell apart with a Marxist coup in 1978. From that point, it saw out the century in an ocean of blood. Afghanistan's wars have come in three waves. First, from 1979 to 1989, following the USSR's December 1979 invasion of the country, an embattled communist regime and its Soviet backers were battered by popular resistance groups, known as *Mujahideen*, some of whom received significant external support. The Soviet–Afghan war was one of the seminal events of the late twentieth century, a struggle which cast into sharp relief the defects of the Soviet model of mono-organizational socialism, and contributed to the mood swing which ultimately led to the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. But more than this, it confirmed Clausewitz's depiction of war as a continuation of politics with the admixture of other means. Military force proved unable to provide a legitimate foundation for communist rule: no matter how impressive the military performance of elements of the Soviet armed forces, they were unable to deliver the *political* outcomes by which success was defined. Big Nations do indeed lose Small Wars (Mack, 1983).

Popular resistance continued following the completion of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, and in April 1992 the communist regime collapsed. A new wave of war then engulfed the country, of a transnational variety. Not content to allow the Afghans to choose their own political course, Afghanistan's neighbours, especially Pakistan, ruthlessly interfered in its internal affairs, prompting a struggle for control of the capital, Kabul, which left its southern suburbs devastated and any semblance of a working state in ruin. The short-term beneficiary was the so-called 'Taliban movement', a Pakistan-backed force of anti-modernist religious extremists from the Pushtun ethnic group which seized Kabul in September 1996 and sought to 'stabilize'

the country through a policy of ferocious repression. Unfortunately, the Taliban also provided hospitality to religious zealots from other parts of the world, a policy which boomeranged in September 2001 when followers of one of the most notorious of them, the Saudi extremist Osama Bin Laden, not only assassinated the military leader of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban forces, Ahmad Shah Massoud, but flew hijacked aircraft into the World Trade Center in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington DC, causing huge damage and vast casualties in the heartland of American power. The third wave of war then struck Afghanistan. The United States deployed air power on a scale beyond the Taliban's imagination and within two months the Taliban *regime* had been ground into dust. However, the Taliban *movement* managed to survive this onslaught, finding sanctuary in Pakistan for both its core leadership and some of its fighters; and with world attention shifting to Iraq following the US invasion of that country in 2003, the new Afghan government and its NATO backers have been confronted with a vicious insurgency that shows no sign of coming to an end.

Until its slide into war, Afghanistan was popularly regarded in Western circles as an obscure, if somewhat exotic, land in which tourists could enjoy warm hospitality and peer at a 'traditional' society in relative safety. The reality of Afghanistan was vastly more complicated than this, but its complexities were rarely captured outside the pages of scholarly works such as Louis Dupree's masterly book *Afghanistan* (Dupree, 1973). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 led to a burst of serious writing about the country, and this was sustained over the following two decades (see Maley, 1987b; Maley, 1997b). As a result, there is now an extensive body of literature dealing with Afghan politics and society, and about the travails through which the peoples of Afghanistan have passed (see, in particular, Roy, 1990; Gromov, 1994; Kakar, 1995; Rubin, 1995a; Rubin, 1995b; Akram, 1996; Bradsher 1999; Haqshenas, 1999; Rashid, 2000; Goodson, 2001; Ewens, 2002; Liakhovskii, 2004; Misra, 2004; Saikal, 2004; Coll, 2005; Dorransoro, 2005; Ewens, 2005; Hussain, 2005; Westad, 2005; Jones, 2006; Giustozzi, 2007; Crews and Tarzi, 2008; Gutman, 2008; Johnson and Leslie, 2008; Rais, 2008; Rashid, 2008; Sinno, 2008a). In addition, since the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in Kabul has produced a remarkable corpus of scholarly work on Afghanistan's politics, economy, and society. In this book, I set out to build on these works in two ways. First, each wave of war in modern Afghanistan is examined in detail, for only by examining all three waves can one properly grasp the context within which efforts to reconstruct

Afghanistan – politically, economically, and socially – are occurring. Second, the course of conflict in Afghanistan has depended upon decisions made in a range of venues, and it is important to shed as much light as possible on all, rather than concentrate on one at the expense of others. Until recently, this would have been an almost insurmountable problem, but the release of declassified Soviet documents dealing both with the invasion and with the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces has shed light on a number of processes which had long remained obscure, as has the unravelling of the Taliban regime.

In tracing the course of Afghanistan's wars, I am guided by two broad considerations. First, Afghanistan is an extremely complex country, and the challenge for researchers is to find ways of conveying the complexities of Afghan culture, society, and politics in ways which readers nevertheless find accessible and easy to understand. Second, armed conflict in Afghanistan takes place in a sociopolitical context, and any history of war in modern Afghanistan needs to provide a rich account of that context if the successes and failures of military operations and strategies are to be properly appreciated. My account of the conflict falls into three parts. The first deals in detail with the Soviet–Afghan War. Chapter 1 plots the road to war, and Chapter 2 discusses Soviet strategy, tactics, and dilemmas. Chapter 3 traces the development of Afghan resistance. At this point, I move to a more detailed discussion of the course of the Soviet–Afghan War: Chapter 4 deals with the period in which Babrak Karmal headed the Communist regime in Kabul (1979–1986), while Chapter 5 deals with the 'Najibullah–Gorbachev' period (1986–1989), marked by personnel and policy changes in both Kabul and Moscow. The analysis of this wave of war concludes with an examination in Chapter 6 of the road to Soviet withdrawal, and in Chapter 7 of the consequences of the Soviet–Afghan War. The second part of the book deals with the Afghan transnational war. I first discuss the struggle of old forces. Chapter 8 explores the Najibullah interregnum (1989–1992) and the factors which led to the collapse of the communist regime, while Chapter 9 deals with the rise and fall of the Rabbani Government (1992–1996). I then turn to the rise of new forces, and in Chapter 10 supply an analysis of the rise and rule of the Taliban movement. The third part of the book deals with Afghanistan in the context of the Bush Administration's War on Terrorism: Chapter 11 offers a detailed account of the overthrow of the Taliban, and Chapter 12 examines the roots of ongoing strife in Post-Taliban Afghanistan. 'Every War Must End', Fred C. Iklé once wrote (Iklé, 1991), but some wars end more easily than others.

The consequences of the wars of modern Afghanistan will continue to be felt, not only through the fractured regional politics of Southwest and Central Asia, but also through their wider historical ramifications. In tracing these ramifications, it is important to avoid the sin of reductionism, which tempts one to attribute complex historical processes and developments to a single causal factor. But equally, it is important that the contribution of conflicts such as those in Afghanistan to wider global political changes be properly recognized. That is what I aim to do in this volume.

Drawing lessons from complex historical processes is always a perilous undertaking: the philosopher Karl Popper used to say that history has no meaning but that we can give it a meaning (Popper, 1977: Vol. II: 278). With that cautionary observation in mind, there are three significant lessons which can be derived from the wars of modern Afghanistan, and which Afghans would do well to ponder, although very many will have absorbed them already.

The first relates to the relationship between religion and politics. The two can be uneasy partners. The great religions, Islam included, have been powerful sources of moral inspiration for individuals, but as road-maps for politics they have been much less useful. 'The fundamentalist goal of transforming society into a simpler one based on religious ideals', writes Jonathan Fox, 'is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with some of the basic ideals of western democracies, including religious freedom and individual liberty' (Fox, 1998: 59). Indeed, the concept of state sovereignty which crystallized in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was in part an attempt to put an end to the struggles over religious authority which had torn Europe apart during the Thirty Years' War. There has never been any credible evidence of mass popular demand for fundamentalist rule in Afghanistan. On the other hand, there is compelling evidence that the *individual* Muslims who make up the overwhelming majority of the Afghan population want to be able to practise their religion in their own ways, free of interference from atheists, or Arab extremists, or others with a barrow to push.

The second is that revolution is a dangerous process. The perils of the revolutionary-utopian impulse have been made clear in Afghanistan by 'revolutionary' actors that brought untold sorrow to the lives of ordinary people. The true revolutionary mindset is conducive to the practice of terror: to save a revolution from its enemies, to give effect to the dictates of an ideology, or to satisfy the perverse psychology of the revolutionary leader (Mayer, 2000: 96–7). It sees no place for caution, for scepticism, for incremental change. For their own good, societies are to be reshaped,

whether they like it or not. Revolutionaries, and those who support them, tend to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. If there is a word that deserves to be banished from all of the languages of Afghanistan, it is revolution.

The third relates to the character of the state. A state which turns on its own people is a terrible thing. Yet on the other hand, the complete disintegration of the state can work massively to the detriment of ordinary people, exposing civil society to the predations of forces which are deeply destructive of order and justice. Civil society flourishes when the state is invested with the capacity to discharge the functions which are appropriate to it, but constrained from interfering in the lives of individuals and communities in any other ways.

Here, the peoples of the wider world, who have witnessed agonizing waves of war sweep over the people of Afghanistan, bear a special responsibility. An old Kabul proverb – *Kuh har qadar boland bashad, baz ham sar-e khud rah darad* – states that there is a path to the top of even the highest mountain. With characteristic determination, the Afghans are now striving to reach that summit. They should not be left to climb alone.

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