

# What Caused the Collapse of the State Infrastructure of Afghanistan?

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In his article “Speaking Out on War, Peace and Power” in the November AN, Roberto Gonzalez raises a number of important points regarding the contributions of anthropology and anthropologists to foreign policy discourse. I wish to address only his view that had the US government taken the advice of an Afghan anthropologist to “not abandon” Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the “Taliban’s rise might have been less likely” and, by implication, the Afghan state might not have collapsed.

## On the “Abandonment” Theory

This kind of oblique hypothesizing is typical of the thinking in Western media and academic tracts about the devastation of Afghanistan. However, a closer, on-the-ground, local examination reveals that the popular “abandonment” theory has neither ethnographic moorings nor historical validity. On the one hand, this widely used perspective misrepresents and oversimplifies the root causes of the destruction of the infrastructure of Afghanistan and the gravity of the implosion of a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-tribal (albeit soft) state structure. On the other, it whitewashes the enormous cost and complexity of the rehabilitation and reconstruction of an imploded state.

By 1989 the decline of the Afghan state was well underway and pleas for interruption of the flow of arms were not only late by almost ten years but were uninformed by the dramatic changes that had already taken place there. Moreover, the couching of such pleas in distortions like “Afghanistan can boast of nearly 300 years of recorded history of *self-rule*” (Ashraf Ghani, *Los Angeles Times*, 1989, pt II, p 7, emphasis added) could only have added confusion to the cynicism of neo-colonialists who made (and continue to make) fateful political decisions about Afghanistan.

In that same *LA Times* op-ed, the American-trained Afghan anthropologist (now Minister of Finance in the US-appointed interim Kabul government) had in 1989 suggested



An elderly man at an International Red Cross distribution camp in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan. The collapse of the state infrastructure of Afghanistan has resulted in massive displacement. (UN Photo #UN 211034C/Luke Powell)

the “delaying [of] any shipment of arms . . . [to the *mujahidin*] mercenaries” and to help bring about an “interim government truly representative of the Afghan people.” Neither Ghani nor Gonzalez mention (or perhaps realize) the profound disruptive impact of billions of dollars and massive quantities of means of destruction that were introduced by the USSR and the US (and its oil rich ally, Saudi Arabia), with the facilitation of Pakistan, into Afghanistan during 1979-1989.

## COMMENTARY

### Transformations in Afghanistan

The destabilization of Afghanistan over the last 25 years has resulted in four major overlapping transformations: 1) the center has collapsed causing the center-periphery relationship to evaporate; 2) the national market of Afghanistan has disappeared; 3) ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and regional contrasts have become robust and assertive; 4) fundamentalist Islamist ideologies have become powerful transparent forces in the construction of self and the structures of political and social life of Afghans. All these changes have been induced by the introduction of new material resources and radical ideological orientations of the left and right.

The introduction and competitive distribution of vast amounts of external resources (overwhelming by Afghan and regional standards)

by the US into the Afghan periphery, and by the USSR into the Afghan center during the 1980s, converted the quiescent traditional balance of sociocultural variations into competing and fiery ethno-linguistic, sectarian and regional cleavages. By pouring billions of dollars and massive quantities of weapons into the Afghan periphery through the recruitment, training, and arming of tens of thousands of local *mujahidin* mercenaries and by inventing the ideology of their assembly line *jihad*, the US radically altered the balance of center-periphery and intra-periphery relations in the country. As early as the summer of 1980, these changes and contrasts and tensions could easily be observed in the behavior of the Afghan opposition factions managed and subsidized by the US and its allies. As an adaptation to the weakened center, alternative social and political arrangements for local governance in the periphery emerged and assumed increasing autonomy and self-sufficiency. These arrangements characterize present day center-less Afghanistan.

The changes in the political economy of Afghanistan and Afghan Islam had begun long before the Soviets left the country in 1989 and shortly after the US assumed sponsorship of the *mujahidin* in the early 1980s, at the same time encouraging Wahabi fundamentalists and other Muslim extremists to have access to the country. The

withdrawal of the USSR and the corresponding reduction of the underwriting of the *mujahidin* by the US are events that, *ipso facto*, have little to do with the collapse of Afghanistan, the emergence of Taliban, or the infestation of the country by al-Qaeda. The seeds for these transformations were sown during the early 1980s. In fact, had the US stayed on in the region and continued funding its Afghan clients, the exacerbated political, ethnic, and sectarian contrasts would have assumed even sharper, bloodier, more articulate and organized forms, as they did from 1992 to 2001 when the Wahabis and Iran replaced the US as the source of weapons and cash. In fact, Russia picked up where the USSR had left off, only this time it concentrated on the non-Paxtun *mujahidin* factions. It is during this period that al-Qaeda drove deep and wide-reaching roots in Afghanistan.

Notable in the USSR’s role in the collapse of Afghanistan’s state infrastructure was its bolstering of the Afghan center’s destructive ability and radicalization of the thinking and behavior of the Kabuli leftists (more anti-Western than doctrinaire Marxists); in a way, the opposite of the role of the US. In comparative terms, the Soviet Union corrupted the Afghan center by encouraging its revolutionary and anti-Western rhetoric, socialist policies and behavior—thereby moving it to the extreme left of traditional Afghan relations of power and political discourse. The US corrupted the periphery by converting its tolerant and flexible folk Islam into inflexible anti-communist and, after 1989, anti-Western, radical fundamentalist rhetoric and behavior—thereby moving it to the extreme right of traditional Afghan relations of power and political discourse. Paralleling this alteration were rapidly increasing intra-periphery tensions and armed confrontations. The center-periphery and intra-periphery courses of armed conflict ultimately caused the disappearance of the Afghan center and the atomization of its periphery.

These violent confrontations continued, and together with the debris of the fall of Kabul in April 1992, frame the 1992-to-present political dynamics in the country. The various extreme elements are currently scattered all over Afghanistan and are nested in virtually all organized political groups in the country. They dictate the content, pace and tone of Afghan political discourse. Unless these extremes negotiate their differences without arms and violence, Afghanistan will continue on its current course of decline into further instability. And unless this process is so carefully managed as to make it gradual, peaceful, and successful, there is a good chance that the country will disintegrate into smaller units. On no other level is the task of rebuilding the infrastructure of Afghanistan more daunting than in integrating its vast and complex socio-cultural diversity in the framework of a nation-state.

#### Discussion of "Afghan" Identity

There has never been a frank, critical, and open discussion about who or what is an "Afghan" and how an "Afghan" has been conceptualized by various ethno-linguistic groups and governmental elites in Afghanistan, nor by academics inside and outside the country, notably Western anthropologists with experience there. This taboo was part of a policy crafted by the non-Paxtun, Persian-speaking elite that dominated the state bureaucracy over the last 250 years—especially since the 1890s when the country's current borders were colonially constructed. Leaving this question unattended enabled the central governments to manipulate one group against another, Paxtuns versus non-Paxtuns, Sunni against Shi'a, region against region. Any serious attempt at the re-integration and rebuilding of Afghanistan requires open and free discussion of this crucial issue. Avoiding or postponing it will, sooner or later, turn the country into entities in which the categories "Afghan" and "Afghanistan" will have no applicability. ■

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## Proposed Changes to Title VI Funding for Area Studies

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For nearly four decades, American universities have benefited from US Department of Education programs funded under Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Title VI provides grants to nurture comprehensive area and international studies centers. It creates national resources for teaching modern foreign languages, enhances instruction about foreign areas and countries, and supports research and training in international studies and world affairs.

Given that anthropologists seek to increase understanding between peoples through the systematic and holistic study of human societies and cultures, and considering the trend towards national, transnational, and global studies within anthropology, Title VI funding is key to supporting researchers in our own and allied fields. Most of us, and many of our students, have benefited from such Title VI funds as the South Asia Language Resource Center or the Fulbright and Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship programs.

#### Concerns

Previous legislation authorizing funding under Title VI is due to expire. HR 3077, the International Studies in Higher Education Act, is the House version of legislation that will continue funding these programs for five more years. Conditions attached to this reauthorization by Representatives influenced by neoconservative scholars and policymakers is thus of profound concern to anthropologists.

HR 3077 unanimously passed the House of Representatives October 21, 2003. Some of its more alarming provisions include:

Section 5, which establishes an independent International Education Advisory Board appointed by Congress and the Secretary of Education to advise them on Title VI programs in relation to national needs relating to homeland security, international education, international affairs, and foreign language training; and

Section 8, which requires reporting to Congress on foreign language heritage communities of US residents or citizens, particularly those that include speakers of languages critical to US national security.

The US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Select Education hearing on "International Programs in Higher Education and Questions about Bias" held on June 19, 2003, (<http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/108th/sed/titlevi61903/wl61903.htm>) opened with a statement by Rep Phil Gringrey: "[W]ith mounting global tensions, some programs under the Higher Education Act that support foreign language and area studies centers have recently attracted national attention and concern due to the perception of their teachings and policies."

#### COMMENTARY

Although all Area Studies are under scrutiny, Middle East Studies programs have received the harshest critiques from neoconservatives. Given the US "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan and its surveillance of Arab and Muslim communities, this is not surprising. Yet the neoconservative assault on Title VI is based on some logical fallacies. Most notable among these is that any critique of US foreign policy constitutes an attack on US national interests. Reference to the interests of non-Western populations is taken as an index of scholarly anti-Americanism, and as evidence that Area Studies programs are ideologically blinded by a monolithic doctrine of "post-colonial studies," turning young minds to unpatriotic thoughts and resistance to national service. One of the most vociferous critics of Area Studies Programs is Stanley Kurtz, an anthropologist at the Hoover Institute, who is himself a beneficiary of Title VI-funded programs at Harvard and Berkeley. Clearly, his mind has not been reprogrammed by the tenets of post-colonialism. (See <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/108th/sed/titlevi61903/kurtz.htm> and this month's Middle East Section column.)

Congressional testimony, references to Homeland Security in HR 3077, and the fact that this legisla-

tion was first introduced on the second anniversary of 9/11, all contribute to concerns that support for area studies could be tied to defense interests. Furthermore, the revised bill implies that the ultimate purpose of research on the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America is to meet narrowly defined military and intelligence objectives. As with the National Security Education Program administered by the Pentagon, many scholars are concerned that future researchers studying abroad may be perceived as intelligence agents and military advisors rather than scholars. There are also concerns that the House's new vision of Title VI would threaten the open discussion, debate, and inquiry that has made the US a beacon of democracy throughout the world.

#### Status of Legislation

Reauthorization of Title VI will soon be considered by the Senate. The Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee ([www.senate.gov/~labor/committee\\_members.html](http://www.senate.gov/~labor/committee_members.html)), chaired by Judd Gregg (R-NH), will likely begin drafting a version of this legislation after Congress reconvenes this month. When a final version is approved in committee, it will be referred to the full Senate. Once reauthorization legislation passes the Senate, members of the Senate and House will convene a conference committee to reconcile the two bills. Alarming, conference committee meetings are not open to the public.

The Middle East Section of the AAA encourages anthropologists and others disturbed by these developments to contact their senators and congressional representatives as soon as possible, and to write letters to the editor decrying political interference in academic research and inquiry. ■

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*The AAA continues to monitor this situation and anticipates working in coalition with the National Humanities Alliance, of which the Middle East Studies Association is a member, and other relevant groups on these issues.*  
—Ed.