

# Socio-cultural Lessons from Eurasia and Afghanistan

by Mahir Ibrahimov, PhD

*What is culture? Soviet culture, Western culture, Iraqi culture, Afghan culture, military culture, corporate culture, generational culture... Becoming aware of cultural dynamics is a difficult task because culture is based on experiences, values, behaviors, beliefs and norms, as well as collective memories and history.*

## Cultural Shift in the USSR

Soviet culture was an ideologically driven, atheist based set of norms and behaviors. Despite all efforts at homogenization, the Soviet Union remained a deeply ethnic place. We were defined by our heritage; but according to the government, we were citizens of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). There was an unofficial hierarchy between the Russians and non-Russians. The Russians were treated with greater respect. In the former Soviet Army ethnic Russians created *zemliachestvo* or *gruppovshchina*, their own enclave within the unit that persecuted other ethnic groups. Critical thinking and independence were not only discouraged in the Soviet Union, it was dangerous and could be punished.

On 11 March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party and de facto ruler of the Soviet Union. The world changed. When he came to power the Soviet economy was failing, worsened by miners' strikes. Store shelves were empty; some of the Soviet republics continued to call for greater independence, and ethnic conflicts in Transcaucasia (which includes Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) were accelerating.

Gorbachev transformed the Soviet Union. His policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) gave the populace a sense of power and a taste of freedom that was the ultimate undoing of the seventy-year old union of republics. For the first time, representatives of foreign countries came to the Soviet Union to invest and exchange goods and ideas. The entire structure of Soviet society, as I had known, began to shift. At the time I was unsure how I felt about it. Fortunes were being made, but it seemed as though the people making them were the same people who had been in power under the old system.

Independent newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations popped up. The *Ploshad Nogina* (Nogin Square) where I worked was situated across from a quiet park. Before Gorbachev's reforms an el-

derly woman used to sweep the square every morning. Every morning I would say hello to her and she would reply, "Good morning, son." Then the character of the *Ploshad Nogina* changed. It became a gathering place for the new Russian businessmen complete with cell phones, laptop computers, and prostitutes. Clothing styles, and even the manner of talking to other people, changed. Life became louder and more frenetic. Restaurants popped up along the plaza like mushrooms.

Perestroika, in theory, should have led to greater debate and understanding among the different populations of the Soviet Union; instead it created an opportunity for many to express long held ethnic hatred with little fear of reprisal. People like me were jeered at on the street, and one time I was threatened while waiting in line to purchase food.

It's all in the language, in the definitions, in the types of words you use: comrade instead of friend; micro rayon (micro-district) instead of home or apartment; Azeri or Armenian or Georgian instead of citizen. The heat and fire from the mixing of races and ethnicities in the U.S. created a melting pot. In the Soviet Union those same elements only served to create greater friction and separation among its peoples. During perestroika things turned ugly and unpredictable. The children of communism had never been taught how to deal with freedom, and the State as a parent had been too restrictive during their youth.

The release of state control over all things created a vacuum. The population acted as ill behaved teenagers who no longer needed to heed rules of common civility. The disintegration and ultimate demise of a socialist society as a system was a good thing, but its unexpected and unintended consequences led to a proliferation of ethnic conflicts. It occurred first among the peoples of the former Soviet republics and later in the Middle East, which was no longer controlled through the balance of power between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Gorbachev intended to enter history as a great reformer, I doubt

he ever intended the country's demise, but his reforms contributed to the process that was inevitable. When he realized the consequences it was too late. As Gorbachev himself used to say *protsess poshel* Russian for "process began."

## The Soviet Experiment in Afghanistan

I met Nikolai at the Medvedkovo metro station in a suburb of Moscow in November 1988. Moscow still was the capital of an empire that was destined to collapse in just few years. Nikolai was telling me about his past experiences in Afghanistan as a former spetsnaz (Soviet Special Forces) member. Seven hundred members of this elite spetsnaz, under the commander named Ruslan, stormed President Hafizullah Amen's palace in winter 1979. That marked the beginning of the ten-year Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The reason for the invasion: The Soviets decided that the pro-Soviet Afghan president was not pro-Soviet enough.

Afghanistan once again became a battleground of empires. Many years later I would be fascinated to learn from the BBC that Ruslan, who now lives in Moscow, and a woman, who as a girl had survived the onslaught in the Afghan president's palace, would be connected through VTC. More than thirty years later she was asking Ruslan difficult moral questions. Almost everybody in the palace was murdered that night as part of the former Soviet military doctrine, which ultimately led to more than one million Afghan deaths, destruction of the country, and loss of hearts and minds of Afghans.

Nikolai is a huge, athletically built guy in a primitive wheelchair that he moves with his hands. He returned from Afghanistan after being ambushed by Afghan *Mujahedeen* (holy warriors) and lost legs. Despite his youth he seemed to be completely lost and morally devastated. He blamed the West and China for the support of mujahedeen and Afghans for the betrayal. He was telling me that many Afghans were calling them friends and brothers but then turned against them and joined the insurgency. He was repeatedly asking what went wrong and why the "internationalist duty" of the Soviets was not appreciated and welcomed. He said that the country was making huge sacrifices: militarily, politically, and economically. Yet he still believed in the popular notion in the country that Afghanistan was going to become the sixteenth Soviet Republic of the USSR and he still considered himself a proud

Soviet citizen. "Nobody can defeat our country, our country is the greatest!" he proudly declared.

He showed me the brochure (below) given to him and his comrades as a part of the Soviet counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics in Afghanistan. More than twenty years later I see the equivalent of those materials with "do's" and "don'ts" disseminated to U.S. troops being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. The brochure, published in 1987, contains prohibitions for Soviet troops serving in Afghanistan:

*Do not enter into unsanctioned contacts; do not visit private stores or individuals to buy goods, alcoholic beverages or drugs; do not take your clothes off for sunbathing in front of locals; do not try to talk to local women; do not accept any gifts from local officials or individuals; keep the secrecy while discussing military topics, be aware that many Afghans are fluent in Russian.*



The country of which I was then a citizen no longer exists. The Army, in which I served, luckily before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, is also gone.



The author in the Soviet Army, 1974-1976, and in Iraq, 2004-2005, where he served as a cultural advisor and interpreter for several U.S. military units.

The Accords of 14 April 1988 included the principles of non-interference and non-intervention, the voluntary return of Afghan refugees, and interrelationships for the settlement of the situation. The phased withdrawal of foreign troops was supposed to begin on 15 May. The U.S. and the USSR also signed a declaration



on international guarantees, stating they would both refrain from any form of interference and intervention. In the first three months, it was reported that some 50,183 foreign troops had withdrawn, another 50,100 left between 15 August 1988 and 15 February 1989. During the withdrawal, troop convoys came under attack by Afghan fighters, 72 Soviets were killed.

The total withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Afghanistan was completed on 15 February 1989. In a symbolic move, Lieutenant General Boris Gromov, commander of the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan (equivalent to U.S. Commander in Afghanistan, General Petraeus) was the last to leave the country. I remember the TV images when he turned the last time towards the Afghan territory and walked away. He was the last Soviet Soldier to walk from Afghanistan back into Soviet territory.<sup>1</sup> These images of the Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan over the bridge to the former Soviet Central Asian Republic still live in my memory.

### **Cultural Challenges for U.S. Missions in Afghanistan**

Operational experiences in Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq have highlighted critical gaps in the Army's capability to influence and operate effectively within different cultures for extended periods of time. Battlefield lessons learned have demonstrated that language proficiency and understanding of foreign culture are vital enablers for full spectrum operations.<sup>2</sup>

Globalization, Internet networking, and instant access to worldwide news media have encouraged the merging or partnering of ideological groups that oppose the U.S. and/or U.S. policies. These groups operate in pan-regional and multi-regional battle spaces comprised of numerous cultures, both friendly and hostile. It appears likely that during the next decades the operational environment of our troops will be characterized by persistent and unpredictable conflicts in battle spaces teeming with multiple foreign cultures. The Army must be prepared to effectively operate along with our multinational and host nation partners against sophisticated and adaptive adversaries in order to achieve U.S. objectives. This dictates that Soldiers of every rank must become 'culturally astute' about the areas in which they operate.<sup>3</sup>

The new U.S. strategy advocates a military strike and further increasing civil development while mak-

ing the protection of civilians a higher priority, an endeavor to attain more popular support in order not to repeat the mistakes of the unsuccessful Soviet experience in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in a survey of Afghan cities, a report released by Pentagon in April 2010 classified 21 Afghan cities as being in support of the government, while 48 other cities were cited as inclining to back the Taliban forces. The report also highlighted the current state of the insurgency, its strengths and weaknesses.

**Strengths.** The speed and decisiveness of insurgent information operations (IO) and media campaigns remain not only the insurgents' main effort, but also their most significant strength.

Organizational capabilities and operational reach are qualitatively and geographically expanding.

The ability to intimidate through targeted killings and threats in order to force acquiescence to their will.

The strength and ability of shadow governance to discredit the authority and legitimacy of the Afghan Government is increasing.

Improvised explosive devices (IED) use is increasing in numbers and complexity. IEDs are as much a tactic and process as they are a weapon. Insurgents' tactics, techniques, and procedures for conducting complex attacks are increasing in sophistication and strategic effect.

According to the report insurgent **weaknesses and vulnerabilities** are as follows:

The insurgency includes multiple locally-based tribal networks, as well as layered command structures, which at times can make coordinated execution difficult.

Persistent fissures among insurgent leadership persist at the local levels.

The insurgency is dependent on many marginalized/threatened segments of the Pashto population.

The insurgency is over reliant on external support. Insurgent violence against civilians and respected figures can be counterproductive.<sup>5</sup>

When I talked to Nikolai some 20 years ago I realized that he was still missing the main point about why the Soviets, with a powerful military establishment, were losing the war, even though they were winning the battle to some degree. The main reason was that they did not manage to "win hearts and minds" of the local populace although they made

extensive use of Soviet ethnicities similar in cultural heritage to Afghanistan's. Yet, these Soviets were predominantly associated with ethnic Russian "infidels" by the locals and Mujahedeen.

Nikolai told me that when insurgents ambushed and captured ethnic Russian troops they would behead them. When Soviets of Tajik, Uzbek, Kirgiz or other Central Asian origin were captured, the insurgents would sometimes give them copies of the Holy Book and let them go if they acknowledged their allegiance to Islam and Koran. The degree of alienation towards Soviets was very significant. They could never overcome it despite their active COIN activities, conducted mainly by culturally and linguistically well trained KGB and elite Special Forces units operating inside Afghanistan. The Pentagon report acknowledges that we are also having problems in the same area but we are making efforts to overcome them.

### Taliban "Hearts and Minds" Campaign

Published July 2009 by the self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, *Bylaws for the Mujahedeen*, outlines a Taliban code of conduct. This is the Taliban leader Mullah Omar's COIN guidance, a population centric strategy that is exactly geared towards "winning hearts and minds" of the local population and maintaining their loyalty. It says:

- ◆ Keep people and their property safe. Do not let those who love money take our local people's property and cause them problems.
- ◆ Keep good relations with your friends and the local people, and do not let the enemy divide/separate you.

The Taliban leadership also clearly defines its tactics towards the coalition forces:

- ◆ We do not have to beat ISAF militarily; outlast international will to remain in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Continue population outreach and protection programs.
- ◆ Continue successful asymmetric operations.
- ◆ Expand lethal IED and high-profile attacks to deny ISAF freedom of movement.
- ◆ Make the main enemy the U.S.

Afghan Taliban directives also include prohibitions on:

- ◆ Mistreating the population.
- ◆ Forcibly taking personal weapons.
- ◆ Taking children to conduct jihad.

- ◆ Forcing people to pay donations.
- ◆ Searching homes.
- ◆ Kidnapping people for money.

This book is given to each Taliban fighter as guidance. It has thirteen chapters, 67 articles and lays out what one can and cannot do. Following are some key quotes that outline the new code of conduct:



*On asylum:* "Every Muslim can invite anyone working for the slave government in Kabul to leave their job, and cut their relationship with this corrupt administration. If the person accepts, then with the permission of the provincial and district leadership, a guarantee of safety can be given."

*On prisoners:* "Whenever any official, soldier, contractor or worker of the slave government is captured, these prisoners cannot be attacked or harmed."

"The decision on whether to seek a prisoner exchange, or to release the prisoner, with a strong guarantee, will be made by the provincial leader. Releasing prisoners in exchange for money is strictly prohibited."

"If the prisoner is a director, commander or district chief or higher, the decision on whether to harm, kill, release or forgive them is only made by the Imam or deputy Imam."

"If a military infidel is captured, the decision on whether to kill, release or exchange the hostage is only to be made by the Imam or deputy Imam."

*On civilian casualties:* "Governors, district chiefs and line commanders and every member of the Mujahedeen must do their best to avoid civilian deaths, civilian injuries and damage to civilian property. Great care must be taken."

*On suicide attacks:* "Suicide attacks should only be used on high and important targets. A brave son of Islam should not be used for lower and useless targets. The utmost effort should be made to avoid civilian casualties."

*On unity:* "Creating a new mujahedeen group or battalion is forbidden. If unofficial groups or irregular battalions refuse to join the formal structure they should be disbanded. If a governor or leader has in the past had a unit or active group in another province, they should bring it to the attention of

the leader of that province. That leader should then take over command of the group.”

*On relations with the Afghan people:* “The Mujahedeen have to behave well and show proper treatment to the nation, in order to bring the hearts of civilian Muslims closer to them. The Mujahedeen must avoid discrimination based on tribal roots, language or their geographic background.”<sup>6</sup>

Below is an English translation of some quotes from the speeches of Mullah Omar. These quotes are also part of the Bylaws:

Dear Mujahedeen Brothers:

All your intentions and deeds should be according to God’s edicts and the Prophet’s guidelines. Stand like steel when confronting the enemy. Incidents (failures) and propaganda should not shake your will. Be sincere to your friends (fellow fighters) and civilian populace; sustain the strong bonds of loyalty and brotherhood, so that the enemy must not succeed in achieving his evil goals of splitting our ranks. In your work and operations take good precautions and consultations, and use wisdom and intelligence. Do not let your personal beliefs, emotions, haste, and carelessness interfere (in your judgment), when punishing someone. Protecting people’s lives and property is a major goal of Jihad. Governors should not harass people for their own personal and material gains.

Below is the a translation of a ‘night letter’ (threat letter) which was addressed to the people of Laghman Province.

### **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Announcement**

Greetings to the Muslim and Mujahedeen residents of Laghman Province

Respected Friends

God has said “oh Muslims, do not associate and become friends with Jews and Christians (Americans, British, and other infidels) because their friends are those who support them (as we see them). And whoever became friend with them will therefore be considered one of them. And their end result and death will be like them (Jews and Christians)”. So we announce that:

1. Those people who live in Laghman Province and work with them (Americans, British, and others), should stop working there and cooperate

with Taliban and Mujahedeen. Otherwise, they should leave Laghman and go and live with their American overlords. If not, they do not have the right to complain later (they will take the consequences).

2. It is being announced to all those people who cooperate with the infidels, aggressors, and traitors, to stop their shameful acts and instead work for and support their beloved country and preach on behalf of the true children of the land. They are responsible for the dire consequences if they do not obey these commands.
3. It should be said to the informants that they have been exposed and they do not have any place to run and hide. And we warn them not to side with the Americans in persecuting and martyring ordinary civilians, children, elders, and women. Otherwise, God willing, they will not be able to run from the Mujahidin.
4. Muslims in general, (religious) scholars, Mullahs, and Imams should understand that according to the above quote from the Quran, they cannot perform at the funeral ceremony of an informant and traitor because such people belong to them (infidels). So our Muslim brothers should understand this issue (in a religious sense) and should not participate in the funerals of people who are traitors of their nation and faith. (Religious) Scholars, Mullahs, and Imams should seriously consider their own safety as the results may not be pleasant.

It is the duty of Mullahs and Imams to announce this message to their followers.

Translator: Farooq Babrakzai, PhD  
FOB–Mehtar Lam (Laghman) (2009)

These examples indicate major efforts by Taliban leadership to “win hearts and minds,” while endeavoring to intimidate the local populace to prevent it from cooperating with Afghan government and coalition forces. Coalition forces are facing tremendous security and IO challenges from a sophisticated and adaptive enemy well versed in the local psychology, culture, and traditions.

But the insurgency in Afghanistan is not monolithic and unified. Many leaders of different groups are allied with the Taliban and Al Qaida at this time, the main reason is that their tactical and strategic interests presently coincide. They are supported by



the same elements of Pakistan's ISID (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate) and other Pakistani and regional forces as was the case during the anti-Soviet jihad. But this time support is mainly focused on a strategic counterbalance to India and other countries. Compared to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, however, when mujahedeen were supported at least by two major powers such as the U.S. and China, the current Afghan insurgency does not seem to enjoy the kind of consistent state-level support from major powers such as China or Russia.

There were some unconfirmed reports of the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran supporting a Sunni Taliban insurgency. But if the foreign forces withdraw it's believed that different insurgency groups would turn their guns against each other vying for power as happened after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. The confusion on which "strategic side" the U.S led coalition forces are on also fuels the Afghan and Iraqi insurgency. The removal of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq created a vacuum in the regional strategic counter balance towards its archenemy, the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran.

The map below shows the diversity of the enemy and insurgency network and operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The new U.S. strategy justifiably focuses on both Afghanistan and Pakistan, because of their historical and strategic ties.



## Iraq and Afghanistan Insurgencies Compared

As the map above shows, Al Qaida (from Arabic "base") is an organization with global aims. It could operate, if the opportunity arises, in any corner of the world. It is seen as a decentralized franchise network with multiple branches mainly active in the

Middle East, Central and South Asia, and Africa. Their leaders, Osama bin Laden and his deputy Dr. Aiman Al Zawahiri, are believed to be closer in their ideology to the concept of the conflict of civilizations, actively using the "Islamic factor" as the banner for mobilizing new recruits. Their weakness was clearly reflected in Iraq when the declared Umma (Islamic brotherhood), mostly of foreign fighters belonging to Al Qaida, did not get their desired support within the local population. The factor of alienation also played a role when around 100,000 former Iraqi insurgents, formerly allied with Al Qaida, turned against them. Why did it happen?

Although former insurgents in the predominantly western Iraqi province of Anbar are Sunni Muslims, similar to the members of Al Qaida, the majority of homegrown Iraqi insurgents were not attracted by the Islamic political slogans of Al Qaida. They were mostly former Baath party members with an ideology based on Pan-Arab nationalism rather than Islamism. Saddam Hussein himself was considered a secular politician who was trying to explore the "Islamic factor" at some point for political reasons.

Second, compared to Afghanistan, the more educated and urbanized population of Iraq had already enjoyed close political, military, economic and cultural ties with the West in the past. These factors made Iraq relatively more prepared for co-operation with Western governments and coalition forces. The growth of other insurgency groups in Iraq and the growing influence of Iran make the future of Iraq very uncertain.

The third factor is the terrain and difference in histories of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghanistan mostly consists of rugged mountains; plains in north and southwest. It's landlocked. Geography and history played a significant role in the socio-political, economic, and cultural formation of the country. It also affected the Afghan psyche, its social differentiation. Today one can say that

Afghanistan is mostly at the medieval socio-economic level of development with very diversified tribal and ethnic societal systems. The above factors significantly explain why many experts and policy makers expect that the task of stabilizing of Afghanistan is going to present more challenges than in Iraq.

## Main Personalities within Insurgent Groups in Afghanistan

Along with Taliban, the majority of the insurgency groups in Afghanistan are homegrown, united under the same Islamic banner and against the predominantly Western coalition forces. This is their strength, because it is very easy to justify their actions against the “foreign invading factor.” Their knowledge of the local indigenous cultures and psychologies are additional advantages for the very diverse insurgency network. Among them are:

◆ *Warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.* Established *Hizb-i-Islami* to counter growing Soviet influence and occupation in the Eighties. Allied to the Taliban. Studied engineering at Kabul University in the 1970s. His goal is the independent Islamic state and restoring Afghan sovereignty. Fighters have a reputation for being more educated than the Taliban. “Hizb-i-Islami will fight our jihad until foreign troops are gone from Afghanistan and Afghans have set up an Islamic Government.”



◆ *Jalaluddin Haqqani.* Anti-Soviet war veteran. Early advocate of the “Afghan Arabs” to join the Jihad against the Soviet Union. Elements of the Haqqani network work closely with al Qaida. Reportedly based in Waziristan. Supported by Pakistan’s ISID. He is now an old man and day to day operations of the network are conducted by his son Sirajuddin or Siraj Haqqani.



The map of the enemy and insurgency groups shows the Pakistan focused Taliban, Tehrik-e Taliban-e. Tehrik-e-Taliban-e does not pose a direct threat to the coalition forces because their main goal is the struggle against the Pakistani state and its establishment. In 2007, Baitullah Mehsud (reportedly killed by U.S. air strike) had formed Pakistani Taliban groups into a single organization. He was replaced by Hakimullah Mehsud (from the same Mehsud tribe). The group, also referred to as the “Pakistani Taliban,” have strong links to al Qaida. The reason for the organization’s Pakistani focus is the perception that the Pakistani government be-

trayed the Pakistani national interests collaborating with the West and coalition forces.

Strategically their goal in the fight is the West and its ideological concepts. But one should remember that Taliban as the movement was created by Pakistani politicians at the time of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was allied with the West. It was created as a strategic tool and counterbalance vying for influence in the region mainly against India. Ironically the Pakistani Taliban was believed to be behind the assassination of Bhutto, the main architect of the movement. Former ISID Chief General Hamid Gul was directly involved in creation and support of Taliban and other Islamist groups, according to Ahmed Rashid, the author of *The Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*.<sup>7</sup>

Hamid Gul considers that if the West has to negotiate with the Afghan insurgents they have to deal only with Mullah Omar, because he is the only principal leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But one can argue against this for two reasons. Although Mullah Omar is still the primary spiritual leader, he is not the primary political day-to-day operations leader of the insurgency. Secondly, he is the creation and a tool of mostly Pakistani intelligence services and likely continues to exist due to their support.

But for many ordinary Afghans, especially of the Pashto tribes of the East and South, as well as for Taliban fighters and other homegrown insurgents of Afghanistan, the symbolic charismatic image of Mullah Omar fits perfectly in the Afghan ethno-cultural psychology in the same way as the charismatic “Mad Mullah,” Fakir of Ipi (Mirza Ali Khan) who battled the British during the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842.<sup>8</sup> This period marked the “Great Game,” a power struggle between Russia and Britain for dominance in the region. Britain occupied Afghanistan and used it as a buffer to protect British India from Russian influence. Ultimately this power struggle resulted in the 1893 Durand Line Agreement between the Government of colonial British India (now Pakistan) signed by Henry Mortimer Durand and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan to delineate their respective



Source: RAND Corporation



spheres of influence. About 1,610 miles long, this line continues to be an area of tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan but very few across both borders, especially among Pashto tribes, recognize it.<sup>9</sup>

The Afghan Taliban is presently intensifying its IO among the locals based on its knowledge of the local customs and culture, and nuances of the local psyche. The outcome of the coalition forces efforts will depend on their ability to gain the trust of the ordinary Afghans. It will require a skill set of knowledge and abilities to prepare Soldiers for living and working in a new country, preventing culture shock, easing the transition, and creating awareness of different cultural and individual styles to maximize operations. Operating in indigenous cultures rather than in a bipolar strategic environment of Cold War era (traditional war fighting) adds new dimensions to military's missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Operating in joint interagency, intergovernmental, multinational (JIIM) environments requires a new more sophisticated set of knowledge and skills that are very different.

## The Pashto Influence

As was the case during anti-British and then anti-Soviet Jihad, the insurgency in Afghanistan is comprised of Pashto tribes. Between the two main Pashto tribal confederations Durrani and Ghilzai, the home-grown insurgency mostly consists of Ghilzai tribes. There has been animosity between the two throughout the history of the country; the Durranis mostly in power including late Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan and current President Hamid Karzai. Mullah Omar, who was born in 1961 in Kandahar, the leader of the Taliban movement is a Ghilzai, of the Hotak tribe.

That's is why the Sun Tzu's maxim, "Know your enemy," is very important in the current fight in Afghanistan. Understanding cultural factors such as *Pashtunwali* (way of the Pashto) is very important in understanding the Pashto dominated Afghan society and in ultimately succeeding.

What is Pashtunwali? It's an unwritten or informal set of religious, ethnic, tribal and moral norms which were formed over the centuries among the Pashto tribes. This way of life to a greater extent is preserved among the so called "Hill Pashtuns" or "Highlanders" who live in the mountains and are naturally isolated and historically more independent than the so called

"Lowlanders." These are Pashtuns who live on the cultivated and irrigated plains and tend to be more integrated into the Afghan governance and society as a whole, and more subjected to external influences.

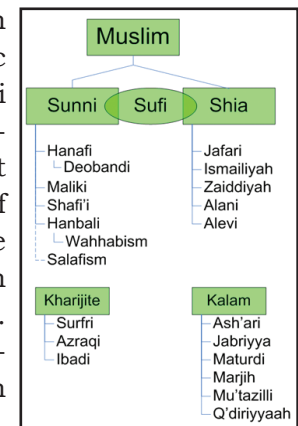
The main elements of Pashtunwali include:

- ◆ Badal–Right of blood feuds or revenge.
- ◆ Nunawati–Right of a fugitive to seek refuge and acceptance of his bona fide offer of peace.
- ◆ Melmastya–Hospitality and protection to every guest.
- ◆ Isteqamat–Persistence.
- ◆ Ghayrat–Defense of property and honor.
- ◆ Namus–Defense of one's female relatives.

Another feature of Afghan and specifically Pashto character: Do not show you emotions, impatience, anger etc. because it's considered a sign of weakness. Personal relationships, trust and most importantly deeds are crucial elements of "winning the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people. Knowledge of the local culture and customs would be the ultimate factors in winning the local populace.

## Islam in Afghanistan

Afghans predominantly follow the Sunni Hanafi school of Islam. The Taliban movement belongs to Hanafi School with a strict interpretation of Islam, known as Deobandi, which does not recognize any innovation or modification within Islam since the time of Prophet Mohamed, including Shiism, which emerged later. That explains to a certain extent the tense relationships between the Shiite dominated Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sunni Taliban government that existed during the second part of 1990s until the beginning of 2000s. Right is the structure of the religion of Islam with its main branches and sects. Sufism, a mystic interpretation of Islam, is also common in Afghanistan.



My recent contacts with Afghan expatriates included one originally from the Pashto area of north west Afghanistan and another one from Nuristan. As always, I enjoyed their first hand experiences and assessments of different Afghan socio-cultural and political situations. One of them told me the story about al Qaida members, mostly of Arab origin, who



moved to the Southern province of Kandahar, the spiritual home of Taliban, and settled there. In early 2000s, during the U.S. bombings of the area many of them were killed. The locals buried them and over the years residents have been visiting the burial sites regarding them as sacred. The perception is that that the foreign Muslim mujahedeen came to Afghanistan and died for the Afghan cause fighting the infidels.

Also according to the expatriates, Taliban and Al Qaida are not really formalized organizations anymore by traditional definition, but rather ideologies which influence the military doctrines and foreign policies of Western countries. These ideologies continue to attract those who oppose the Western culture and way of life for different reasons. Al Qaida is a global terror network and Taliban is homegrown, mostly an Afghan/Pakistan Pashto tribal based movement. It seems that it easier to justify the fight against Al Qaida than Taliban, because Taliban and affiliated groups say that they fight against the foreign invasion trying to restore Afghanistan's sovereignty.

## The "Taliban Factor" as Viewed in Arab Media

The Arab media widely covers the socio-cultural, political, and strategic aspects of the Taliban phenomenon which has become a source of encouragement for many Islamic and jihadist organizations around the world. The outcome of the fight is of special importance for the future strategic balances not only in the region, but globally as well.

*Psychological features of the movement.* This includes obstinacy and the ability to stand up to and face very tough circumstances and hardships. These are applicable to the Afghan people in general and the people of Kandahar in particular, the Southern province of the country where the movement was born. There is a very popular game in Kandahar where two competitors place burning coals in their hands. The winner is the one who is able to continue holding the coal until it burns out.

*Internal and external factors that led to the prominence of Taliban.* The internal factors include: the civil wars, the chaos that took place after the defeat of the Soviet Union, corruption, lack of security, and the rapidly attained wealth of the war lords.

The external factors are:

- ◆ **Pakistan.** Pakistan was seeking to exert and maintain an influence on the government of Afghanistan to facilitate economic and trade relations with central Asian republics because the post-Soviet Mujahedeen government of Rabbani and Masoud was not cooperating with Pakistan from Pakistan's perspective actively enough. That was one of the primary reasons why Pakistan unsuccessfully gave aid to Gulbuddin Hekmetyar, his Hizb-i-Islami group and Afghan Uzbek leader General Dustam. When the Taliban movement became prominent, Pakistan lost the opportunity to support it.
- ◆ **The U.S.** In the beginning, the U.S. selectively fought some radical Afghan war lords, while at the same time relying on those groups which would be easier to control and influence. Another goal has been to prevent the spread of the Iranian influence in the central Asian republics which have the second biggest oil reserves in the world after the Arab gulf.

According to the Arab media the movement had several goals, which have since gradually undergone changes and adjustments. They were declared by the movement's spokesman Mullah Abdul Mannan Niyazi on 3 November 1994 after capturing the town of Spin Buldak. The main goal then was to restore security, collect weapons from other groups, and eliminate check points that extorted people.

After the spread of Taliban control to other Afghan provinces, the movement declared its new goals. On 4 April 1996, Mullah Muhammad Omar declared that the movement's goals were:

- ◆ Establishment of an Islamic government that follows the examples and teachings of the four rightly guided Caliphs, rulers of the Islamic Caliphate.
- ◆ Islam would become the religion of both the people and the government.
- ◆ The constitution should be based on Islamic Shari'a.
- ◆ Choosing Muslim scholars for important government positions.
- ◆ Destroying the roots of fanaticism and tribal nationalism.
- ◆ Protecting the people of the Book (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) and their properties.

Preserving their rights which are given by the Islamic Shari'a.

- ◆ Improving the political ties with all the Islamic countries and organizations according to the rules of Shari'a.
- ◆ Women should wear hijab (headscarf) in all sectors of Muslim society.
- ◆ Fighting crime as defined by the Taliban such as using drugs, and viewing forbidden pictures and films.
- ◆ Introduce the independent Islamic Courts which should oversee government institutions.
- ◆ Establishing a trained Army to protect the Islamic state against external aggression.
- ◆ Political and international activities should be based on Quran and Sunna.
- ◆ Development of the state economy based on Islamic principles.
- ◆ Appeal to Islamic countries to help rebuild Afghanistan.
- ◆ Collecting Zakat (Islamic taxes) and spending it on the projects and public services.<sup>10</sup>

### Pipeline Politics and its Regional Implications for Afghanistan

The strategic pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), was inaugurated in 2005. It was the first major pipeline bypassing Russian territory, beginning in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, transiting through the territory of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia towards the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. From there oil is taken by tankers to the world markets. Having up to one million barrels per day capacity, the pipeline has an even more important strategic implication. It will strengthen the political and economic independence of the countries of the region from possible resurgent Russian ambitions. But even before the completion, it had also marked the beginning of the new "Great Game" with global and regional powers such as the U.S., China, and Russia vying for influence in the area. Once again the region became very attractive for global geopolitics, enhanced by the discoveries of natural resources in Afghanistan such as natural gas, oil, marble, gold, copper, chromites, etc.

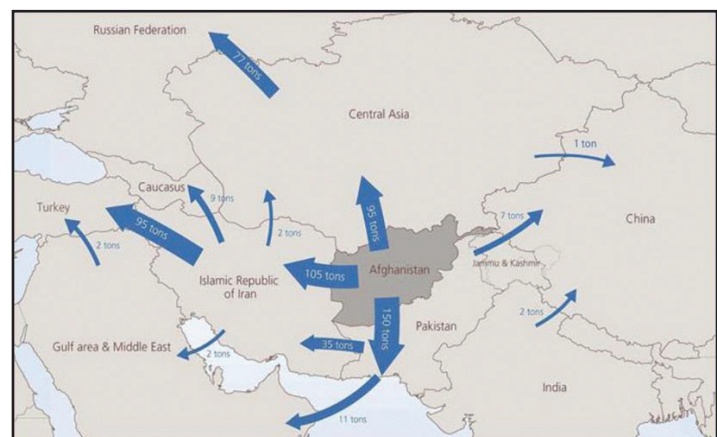
But Afghanistan's significance stems from its geopolitical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. This potential includes the possible

construction of oil and natural gas export pipelines through Afghanistan, which was under serious consideration in the mid-1990s. The idea has since been undermined by Afghanistan's instability. Since 1996, most of Afghanistan has been controlled by the Taliban movement, which the U.S. did not officially recognize.

John J. Maresca, Vice President for International Relations of the Unocal Oil Corporation (USA), in testimony to the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific on 12 February 1998, concluded his Congressional testimony with the following statement: "Developing cost-effective, profitable and efficient export routes for Central Asia resources is a formidable, but not impossible, task. It has been accomplished before. A commercial corridor, a "new" Silk Road, can link the Central Asia supply with the demand—once again making Central Asia the crossroads between Europe and Asia.<sup>11</sup> While the hope is that export pipelines could provide an economic boost to the region, thereby bringing peace and prosperity to the troubled South and Central Asia, Caucasus and Caspian regions in the long run, the fear in the short-term, is that the fierce competition over pipeline routes and export options will lead to greater instability. During my diplomatic service in Washington D.C. and Ambassador Maresca's tenure at the Department of State, we had numerous discussions on the issues of pipeline politics and U.S. policy in the region.

### Other Challenges

Among other major challenges within Afghanistan are corruption, criminal activity, and a huge illicit opium trade. The map depicted below shows the extent of heroin flow from this relatively small country, making it a regional and global challenge. There are two main problems. The Afghan economy is heavily



reliant on opium cultivation, which does not allow other sectors of economy to normally develop, and it feeds the insurgency and contributes to instability of the country and region.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The operational challenges in Afghanistan are extreme; the strategic implications for all of Eurasia are profound. U.S. fighting forces must understand and use the socio-cultural lessons learned from Soviet history in Afghanistan; and, at the same time understand the strategic effects operations may have in the region in order to achieve success. This calls for military leaders and Soldiers to acquire a sophisticated set of skills that are different from the Cold War era. Leaders and Soldiers must understand the context of the factors influencing the JIIM operational environment.

They must act within the contexts they find themselves, always assessing and adapting their actions based on the interactions and circumstances of the enemy and environment. The military must be able to fluidly transition from one type of operation to another based upon the assessed circumstances while consolidating operational opportunities with the strategic enterprise.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

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