

1 / Afghanistan in the Post–Cold War World

Although it is little noted today, one of the world's most famous border crossings lies between Afghanistan and Pakistan at a tiny town called Torkham. It is there that the fabled Khyber Pass cuts through Pushtun Afridi tribal territory to take the traveler out of the high mountains of Central Asia to the plains of India. These days there are a lot of people on the street in Torkham because under the Taliban, the most recent rulers in Kabul, long-haul buses no longer cross the border. Instead, passengers get out and walk the last few hundred meters and submit to a desultory inspection by a teenage Taliban soldier before passing into Pakistan's Khyber Agency. Actually, the little stroll out of Afghanistan is quite refreshing, for before it occurs the traveler will have bounced for hours (three if from Jalalabad, ten if from Kabul) over roads that no longer deserve that name and through country that is largely barren of life. To get out and walk at the end of such a journey brings an almost visceral sense of separation, of leaving it behind, that many travelers desperately need when departing Afghanistan today.

Not that many travelers find their way to Afghanistan at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since the rabidly puritanical Taliban movement swept into Kabul in September 1996, Afghanistan has been cut off from most of the rest of the world. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan; the rest of the world either recognizes the ousted government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, now clinging desperately for survival to a small northern stronghold, or ignores Afghanistan

altogether. Taliban policies that degrade and harm women have raised the ire of Western human rights and feminist organizations, while Taliban sanctuary for suspected terrorists and the blossoming of the opium-heroin trade under Taliban patronage has prompted Western nations, led by the United States, to adamantly withhold recognition for their regime, despite its de facto control of nearly 90 percent of the country by late 2000.

Prior to the Taliban, years of war and lawlessness had destroyed much of the country, driven millions of its people into exile, and brought its economy to a standstill. The “Hippie Trail” that brought thousands of travelers through Afghanistan to India in the 1960s and 1970s no longer exists, and virtually no business organizations have been willing to invest in such a troubled country. Only a handful of outsiders venture into Afghanistan today—aid workers, journalists, intelligence agents—not counting the thousands of Islamists who have come to join the Taliban on their holy crusade to conquer Afghanistan, establish an Islamic state and society there, and then . . . what? Poised between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, is Afghanistan the headquarters of a new global movement of Islamist militancy that blends anti-Western adherents from all over the Islamic world? Or is Afghanistan today merely the shattered remnant of a country destroyed by two decades of horrible war, whose society is now struggling to re-create itself?

Certainly Afghanistan today is one of the poorest and most troubled countries in the world. No longer isolated in the mountain fastnesses of central Asia, it finds itself a critical geographic crossroads once again—as it has been through the ages. It began the twentieth century as the buffer state that separated the British and Russian empires; it ends the century as the linchpin to trade and political development in Central Asia. Afghanistan will be the key to peace and stability, economic development and growth, and social change and human development in this region of the world. Thus it comes as no surprise that all of Afghanistan’s neighbors are deeply involved in manipulating its internal affairs. Pakistan and Iran, Russia and India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Saudi Arabia, even Turkey and China: all have significant interests in Afghanistan and most have supported at least one of the many parties contesting for power in that country’s interminable and devastating civil war.

Afghanistan is a country shaped and molded by its experience with more than two decades of war. The Afghan War has been one of the

deadliest and most persistent conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century. Nearly 2 million Afghans have been killed so far (as well as at least 15,000 Soviet soldiers during the 1980s), and 600,000 to 2 million wounded.¹ More than 6 million Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran, producing the world's largest single refugee population since 1981, while at least 2 million more Afghans were internally displaced.² Thus, more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's indigenous population (estimated at 15 to 17 million persons at the war's beginning, now estimated to be as many as 22 million) became casualties—killed, wounded, or made homeless by the war.

Every region of Afghanistan has been touched by the war. Even residents of the government-held urban centers in the 1980s were not safe. The countryside was ravaged, with widespread destruction of villages, fields, orchards, and irrigation systems. The Soviet army in Afghanistan and the Afghan communist government planted an estimated thirty million mines throughout the country, most of them completely unmarked and unmapped.³ Afghanistan's natural resources, particularly the natural gas reserves near Shiberghan, flowed north to the Soviet Union during the 1980s, and Afghanistan's economy collapsed. Today Afghanistan's chief export is opium, in which it surpassed Burma in 1998 to become the world's leading producer. Otherwise, its economy is still in complete disarray. The education system and other modernizing sectors of Afghan society were completely disrupted,⁴ and the struggle for control of the central government delays efforts to improve the situation. Afghanistan, a desperately underdeveloped country attempting to modernize throughout the twentieth century, finally caught up to the modern world—in high-technology warfare. The result has been the ruin of the country and society and very nearly the destruction of the people and their culture.

That such an impoverished and war-torn country should have such an important role to play in its neighbors' futures is not unusual, nor is the sad reality that there has been little effort to end its long war or rebuild its shattered infrastructure. The changed context of international affairs in the wake of the Cold War, which Afghanistan played a pivotal role in bringing to an end, now endows Afghanistan's role with greater importance while simultaneously making it harder to understand that role or predict its dynamics exactly. Nonetheless, in this book I attempt to forecast Afghanistan's future and how that future will affect the region in which Afghanistan is so centrally located. In a broader

context, I adopt the thesis that Afghanistan's situation is illustrative of a significant problem facing the post-Cold War world. It is useful to understand what is happening in Afghanistan not just because its continued turmoil has such a great influence on the region but also because of what it reveals about the transforming nature of the international system today.

THE STATE IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

For the past 350 years, the international system has been constructed of states, although most of the more than 190 states that exist at the beginning of the new millennium are less than 50 years old. A *state* is a political entity that has a recognized territory, a population that sees itself as belonging to the state, and institutions of government that are sovereign within that territory. Although the word *nation* is often used synonymously with state, *nation* refers more to the shared identity, often centered on a common language, religion, history, or other cultural trait, that a group of people sometimes feels. Psychological attachment to a nation, or *nationalism*, has often been central to state formation in the modern era. The relationship between state formation, which involves the creation of coercive, extractive, and regulatory institutions of governance, and nation building, which is often centered on the use of symbols and the selective interpretation of history to create the psychological bonding characteristic of nationalism, differs from one country to another. Indeed, not all states possess strong nationalism, for they may be multinational or have national groups that straddle their borders with other countries. Nor do all national groups possess states. Owing in part to the strength of its nation building, but also to other factors discussed in greater detail later, a state may be relatively weak or strong in relation to both its own society and other states in the international system.

The end of the Cold War has altered the environment in which the state exists, presenting different states with a range of both challenges and opportunities. How well a given state does in this altered environment depends on its position in the international and regional systems in which it exists, its internal stability and strength, and its regional conditions. So far, however, there have been some obvious winners and losers. The United States, the major Cold War victor, today finds itself the world's sole superpower, with the military power, robust economy, and political voice to lead the international order. Russia, the major

Cold War loser, has become but a weakened component of the now-dissolved Soviet Union, and despite possessing a large nuclear arsenal and substantial regional weight, its depressed economy and political instability make even its claim of great power status a tenuous one.

The impact of the end of the Cold War on other states has been just as mixed. On the one hand, it released the middle and regional powers in the international system from the constraints imposed by a bipolar world. In the 1990s regional powers found they could once again engage in foreign policy-making independent of Washington or Moscow, and geopolitical maneuvering began in numerous capitals throughout the world. Although the post-Cold War international order may well be unipolar on one level, the lack of clear hegemonic behavior by the United States has contributed to the development of a robust multipolarity.⁵ Not only China, Russia, and the European powers but also numerous Third World countries have engaged in power projection, arms acquisition, and other such activities vis-à-vis neighboring countries, especially as it has become increasingly obvious that neither the United States nor the United Nations has established clear standards for intervention in regional conflicts.⁶

On the other hand, the elimination of Cold War constraints has not only provided opportunities for second- and third-tier powers but also posed problems for weak states. No longer important to the major powers for strategic reasons, these states, predominantly found among the poorer developing countries, face challenges to their continued existence from a variety of threats. Indeed, for these states, the end of the Cold War era has revealed an international system that is flawed and troubled.

For the weaker states, the system itself and the concept of the state are under attack from below and above. Both the forces of "tribalism" (nationalism, religious fundamentalism, political dogmatism) and "globalism" (integration, transnational regimes, multinational corporations) threaten the existence of the weak state today, and even the continuation of a world system organized around states.⁷ To Europeans and North Americans, who live in healthy, mature states and for whom this international system feels natural on the basis of their long experience with both its founding and its domination, its potential collapse threatens to destabilize the foundations of their world. Most of the world's population, however (about 80 percent), lives in the developing world, and many of these people reside in states whose political structures, boundaries, and even very existence are highly artificial, often

mere legacies of a now-repudiated colonial history whose passing was never lamented. The surge of state building that accompanied the decolonization of the European empires in the twentieth century did not always produce strong, vibrant states with loyal, nationalistic populations.⁸ Thus, it is not uncommon in many Third World countries for national loyalty to be quite weak and for the institutions of the state (governmental, financial, social) to suffer from a crisis of legitimacy. Yet in some fashion or another, these states basically held together for most of the period following the decline of the colonial empires.⁹

That is, they held together until the glue holding the international system in place—the Cold War and the bipolar structure that characterized it—finally weakened with age. With the end of the Cold War, the weaker states in the international system began to fall apart, no longer buttressed by client-patron relationships with the major powers. The communist countries of the Second World began to unravel first, but they were followed quickly by weak Third World states such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and Zaire (now Congo). Although these countries had never developed into strong states, Cold War bipolarity in the international system had imposed on them a constraining rigidity that assured their continued existence. After the Cold War ended, these states began to change, to be transformed, and in some cases, ultimately to dissolve. It was always assumed in the West that with the end of the Cold War would come the fundamental alteration—even the end—of the Eastern European states. It was less well understood that the end of the Cold War could also sound the death knell for many weak Third World states.

Afghanistan is such a state: a weak and fragmented country on the verge of collapse and perhaps even disintegration, brought to this condition by the Cold War struggle of the superpowers and their post-Cold War disinterest in its fate. Afghanistan's state structures persist largely because of neighboring countries' maneuvering for geopolitical and economic advantages in the post-Cold War power vacuum in the region. A distant and uninterested United States and a weakened Russia exert limited influence in Afghanistan's part of the world at the moment, allowing resurgent or newly emergent regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan to jockey for position.

Afghanistan sits astride three major regions—the Middle East with its Islamic civilization, South Asia with its Hindic civilization, and Central Asia with its Orthodox Christian and Confucian/Sinic civilizations—and it guards the southern access to the oil and mineral wealth of Central Asia.¹⁰ The geopolitical and economic stakes are high for

Afghanistan's neighbors, which leads them all to play proxy games in Afghanistan's seemingly endless civil war. Thus it is that Afghanistan, a country whose central government and formal economy have essentially ceased to exist, can influence several major regions of the international system. Indeed, the situation in Afghanistan today reveals many of the dynamics affecting the entire international system as it undergoes a great transition. It demonstrates what happens when weak states come under enormous internal and external pressures to survive, and it illustrates how regional powers compete for influence in the absence of superpower leadership.

THE PROCESS AND IMPACT OF STATE FAILURE

Both nation building and state consolidation in certain transitional (formerly Second and Third World) states have been delayed or even arrested by factors both domestic and international. Domestically, societal cleavages between competing ethnic, linguistic, religious, and economic groups frequently cause or exacerbate fragmentation, undercutting the concept of the nation. (By fragmentation, I mean the weakening of a central government's control over its periphery, which may or may not lead to state disintegration.) Economic underdevelopment, coupled with poor political institutionalization, further fractures society between modernizing and traditional elites, leaving peasants and the urban underclass alienated and largely outside the struggle for domestic power.¹¹ Even geographical and topographical factors, such as vestigial colonial boundaries, strategic location or isolation, and absence or possession of critical resources, may undermine the creation of strong states in the developing world.¹²

International factors also have delayed nation and state building in the Second and Third Worlds. The existence of the Cold War for most of the post-World War II period created an essentially bipolar international system that often affected developing states. Superpower competition quickly moved beyond the frozen frontiers imposed by the Iron Curtain in Europe to the more fluid developing areas and was frequently manifested in efforts to manipulate struggles for power within Third World countries.¹³ Regional conflicts of the 1980s in Afghanistan, Angola, Central America, Cambodia, and the Horn of Africa were the logical extension of a pattern of superpower involvement in Third World conflicts that had assumed even more blatant proportions a generation earlier, especially in Southeast Asia. Motivated by different

ideologies and worldviews, each superpower saw the other as engaged in dangerous expansion (US perception of the USSR) or unwarranted containment (USSR view of the US) and sought allies and clients in the developing world. The two superpowers were drawn into ideologically tinged anticolonial struggles, the USSR supporting fledgling leftist revolutionaries while the US sought to maintain pro-Western regimes through counterrevolutionary tactics. The development of an international economic framework that was biased structurally against the single-commodity-based economies of many developing states further limited their ability to mitigate internal unrest brought on by scarce resources that often were distributed inequitably.¹⁴

The combination of these factors frequently led to unrest, rebellion, revolution, and civil war in the developing countries. These forms of political violence can hasten or delay the process of nation building, serving either to eliminate cleavages and resolve power struggles or to deepen existing divisions and harden attitudes. Similarly, political violence may allow the coercive arm of the state, its military and security forces, to penetrate society more completely, thus advancing state building, or it may lead to the destruction of existing state institutions, undermining state building. There is no clear prescription for the role of violence in nation and state building. For example, whereas revolution may have some value for restoring a lost sense of nationhood and cultural heritage to colonial peoples, post-independence violence that continues as part of the internal struggle to shape national agendas is generally destructive of national unity and state political institutions. If the nation being destroyed, however, is replaced by a new nation or nations whose foundations run along more viable ethnic-linguistic-religious or economic lines (e.g., Eritrea), or if improved state institutions are created out of the rubble of those institutions that are destroyed, then the violence may have served a useful purpose after all.¹⁵

With the end of the Cold War, Third World states that have labored to develop politically and economically no longer face many of the constraints mentioned earlier. Especially critical is the sudden absence of an organized power system in international politics as the major powers turn inward to reorient resources once committed to the continuation of the Cold War and as the second-order powers of Europe concern themselves with further integration of the European Union. In this power vacuum the continued existence of states that have had only marginal success at political institutionalization and have been saddled with internal problems appears no longer significant to the

international power balance. Thus, in the face of challenges to their continued existence, many weak states are failing, either through the collapse of their governing institutions, through internal fragmentation, or even through political disintegration. Although this phenomenon has been most obvious so far in the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, and former Czechoslovakia, all of which have disintegrated, it is appearing in virulent form in Somalia, Sudan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, sub-Saharan Africa, and Afghanistan. More ominously, the collapse of one state may have profound implications for regional stability, as is the case in Afghanistan.

The post-Cold War world is on the verge of profound change, as Robert Kaplan suggested in his provocative article "The Coming Anarchy": "Most people believe that the political earth since 1989 has undergone immense change. But it is minor compared with what is yet to come. The breaking apart and remaking of the atlas is only now beginning. The crack-up of the Soviet empire and the coming end of Arab-Israeli military confrontation are merely prologues to the really big changes that lie ahead."¹⁶ Some of this "remaking of the atlas" will occur in the developed world, and some of it will involve the integration of economies, polities, and even societies (e.g., in the integrating states of the European Union, Germany, Yemen, and possibly Korea and China). But the bigger and more threatening changes will occur in the developing world and will involve state failure. Weak states will be especially prone to this malady and may well infect their surrounding regions with the violence and instability that generally accompany state failure.

Weak states have distinctive political, social, economic, demographic, and even geographic characteristics. Among these characteristics are limited political institutionalization and penetration in society, strong ethnic, linguistic, and/or religious divisions, and slow economic and social development. Some other characteristics may also be present, such as rapid population growth and/or resource problems, the interference of neighboring countries and/or big powers, and even geostrategic location. Weak states have poor capabilities "to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways (author's emphasis)."¹⁷ In the Cold War years, many weak states managed to maintain their territorial integrity because of the relative rigidity of the international system. In the more fluid post-Cold War era, an age of both globalist and localist pressures, weak states appear to be more likely to fail. That in itself is

a phenomenon worthy of our attention, but its importance is compounded when we consider the impact that weak state dysfunction, collapse, fragmentation, and ultimately disintegration can have on regional and even international stability.

Afghanistan provides us an excellent case with which to explore this *weak state syndrome* that is such a threat to the international order in the new millennium. Four specific features of the Afghan case make it especially worthy of analysis in relation to weak state syndrome. First, it is an extremely weak state, almost the archetype of one, made all the weaker by two full decades of highly destructive war. Second, Afghanistan is the axle on which several regions swivel, one of which, Central Asia, is composed of newly emergent states, relatively weak themselves, that regional powers wish to influence. Third, Afghanistan also borders on or is influenced by several regional powers, all of which have begun to attempt to project their power in the wake of the Cold War. These include Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran (the first four are nuclear powers), with Saudi Arabia and Turkey also having an interest. Finally, Afghanistan has been the on-again, off-again recipient of superpower and international attention and manipulation, which has contributed to its weakening yet holds out the greatest hope for shaping a viable future for the country.

UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN:

THE PULL OF CENTRIFUGAL FORCES ON THE STATE

In order to have a foundation for understanding Afghanistan's present collapse and problematic future, it is necessary to have a bit of background on some important contextual features that shape Afghan politics. Several relatively unchanging factors made the emergence of a strong state in Afghanistan quite difficult and challenge the existence and eventual rebuilding of the Afghan nation and state today. I look closely at four factors here. First, Afghanistan's population is characterized by deep and multifaceted cleavages. People are divided foremost along ethnic and linguistic lines, but sectarian, tribal, and racial divisions also exist, and all of these are reinforced by a spatial pattern of population distribution into different regions of the country. Second, Afghanistan's religious framework is based on a syncretic blend of various interpretations of Islamic doctrine with local customs, making the country simultaneously unified by one faith and divided by hundreds of variations on its practice. Third, in a country where tribal social

groupings still exist, the social system is based on communal loyalties and emphasizes the local over higher-order identity formations. Fourth, the rugged topographical features and geographical position of Afghanistan, coupled with its lack of economic development, isolate it internationally and magnify the distance of its people from the government (map 1.1).¹⁸ Often these factors combine to reinforce each other, and at other times they overlap each other, but collectively they create a rigid, if complex, foundation for modern Afghan politics. All of them hampered the emergence of a strong state in Afghanistan, and it is hardly surprising that after two decades of warfare they should be prominent once again.

A fifth factor of great importance is modern Afghan history, for the process of Afghan state building has also provided a framework within which current politics must occur. Afghanistan's location between and history of meddlesome neighbors have been especially significant among the historical factors that I explore in the next chapter. The rest of this chapter offers a look at the first four contextual factors.

Although Afghanistan became formally independent from British control after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, it had been a largely



MAP 1.1 Afghanistan and its immediate neighbors in 1997. Source: ReliefWeb.

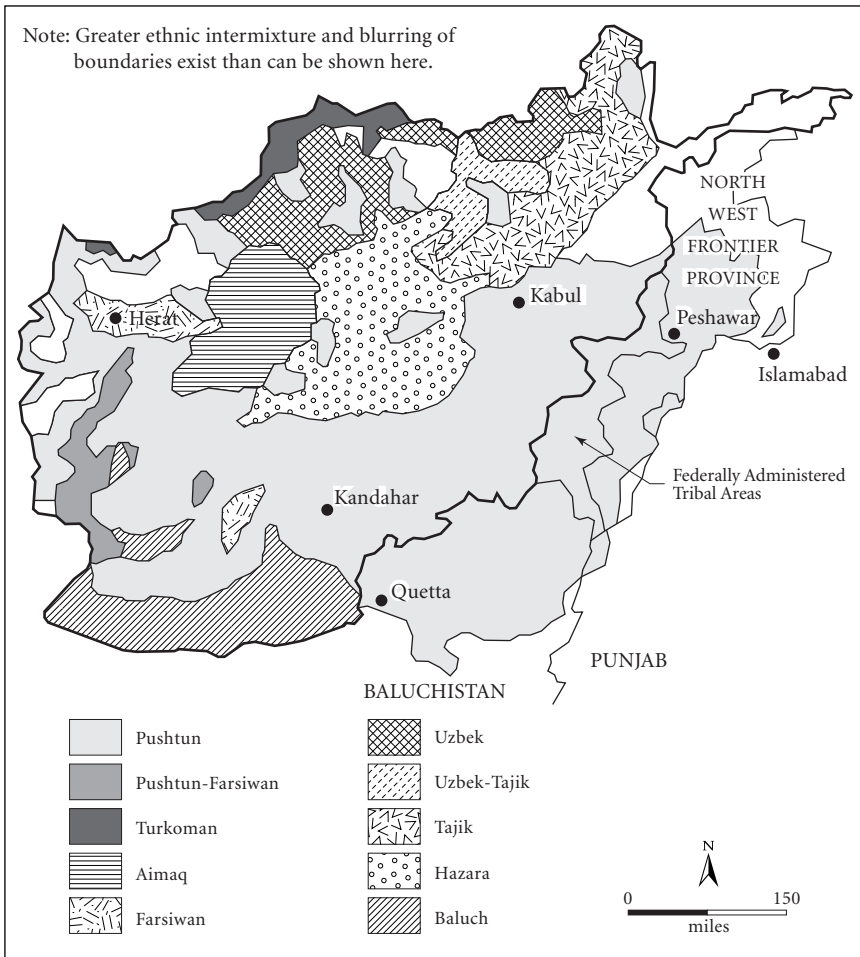
independent entity, albeit rarely unified or occupying its present borders, since the mid-eighteenth century. With the rise of the Durrani Pushtun tribe in western Afghanistan in 1747, nation building began, but such unity as did come about was always fragile, and a wide gulf existed between state and society.¹⁹

Afghanistan has never been a homogeneous nation but rather a collection of disparate groups divided along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and racial lines and forced together by the vagaries of geopolitics. Ethnicity is the most important contextual factor shaping Afghanistan today, as it has been throughout Afghanistan's history. Based on language and self-identity, there are around twenty-five distinct groups in Afghanistan, but perhaps only half as many of any size and really only five that concern us here. These are the Pushtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Aimaq (also known as Chahar Aimaq) people (see map 1.2).

The Pushtuns are the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan today (indeed, they have dominated Afghan society since the mid-eighteenth century) and the largest remaining tribal society in the world.²⁰ Approximately seventeen million Pushtuns straddle the Afghan-Pakistani border, living primarily in the south, southwest, center, and east of Afghanistan and in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (or Areas), North-West Frontier Province, and northern districts of Baluchistan Province of Pakistan. Pushtuns comprise about 45 percent of Afghanistan's population (now estimated at around 22 million), speak Pushtu, and are overwhelmingly Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Caucasoid in racial type, Pushtuns have been the source of the traditional leaders of the country. They are divided into three major groups. The Durrani tribe, which ruled Afghanistan from 1749 to 1978 (through the Barakzai clan of the Mohammadzai subtribe), is primarily from north and west of Kandahar. The Ghilzai tribe, which the Durrans defeated in their quest for power, is located more in the east and in pockets in the north, especially in the Zabul and Ghazni provinces of Afghanistan. And a catch-all group of the remaining tribes, the "true" Pukhtuns, lives to the north and east of the Durrans and Ghilzai in both Pakistan and Afghanistan and include prominent tribes such as the Afridi, Wazir, Mohmand, Mahsud, Jaji, Mangal, Zadran, Kakar, Khatak, Orakzai, and Shinwari. These tribes are the largest permanent political and social units in Afghanistan, but they are further divided into lineages or subtribes, known as *khels*, and still further subdivided into extended family groups or clans, called *khol* or *kor*.²¹ The allegiance of the individual almost never goes beyond the tribal unit. These relationships were

outlined more clearly after the Durrani Pushtuns acquired power in Afghanistan.

With the rise of the Pushtuns to prominence, their tribal code (known as the Pushtunwali) took the place of a legal system in the settling of disputes. Although the Pushtunwali is a conglomerate of local tribal codes, certain primary themes have emerged. These include *melmastia* and *mehrmopalineh* (both concerning hospitality to guests), *nanawati* (the right of asylum), *badal* (blood revenge), *tureh* (bravery),



MAP 1.2 Afghanistan's ethnic groups. Reproduced by permission from Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, 1995.

the Uzbeks (with Uzbekistan), and the Turkomans (with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Moreover, the Hazara, Aimaq, and Farsiwan are thought to be ethnic cousins of the eastern Iranian Berberi.²⁷ Because all of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups either straddle the border with neighboring countries or have ethnolinguistic-religious ties to groups in neighboring countries, all of those countries have built-in incentives for meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

Afghanistan's ethnic mixture has traditionally known a high propensity for violence, often between ethnic groups, subtribes, and even cousins. Only outside threats seem to unite the Afghans, and those alliances are temporary and limited. When the threat is eliminated or sufficiently reduced, people return to regular patterns of traditional warfare.

The second major factor that serves both to support the separation of Afghan society from the state and to foster divisions within society is religion, although the state successfully co-opted the religious hierarchy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to aid its rise over society.²⁸ Afghanistan is a Muslim country, with about 85 percent of the population Hanafi Sunni and the remainder Jafari (Twelver) Shia or Ismaili (Sevener) Shia. Prior to 1978, there were tiny populations of Hindus, Jews, and Sikhs in Afghanistan as well. The Hazara are Shia, as are some Tajiks, Farsiwan, Qizilbash, and Pushtuns. Afghanistan's Islam is basically a nonliterate, village Islam—a syncretic blending of basic Islamic beliefs with local practices such as those found in the Pushtunwali.²⁹ Several Sufi *tariqas* (brotherhoods) are still vibrant in Afghanistan, especially the Chishtiyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Qadiriyya orders.³⁰

Islam has played different roles and is understood on different levels in Afghanistan, and Afghans have a complex and often contradictory attitude toward their sources of religious authority. Afghanistan hosts a *mélange* of Islam, perhaps influenced by the eclectic blend of religions found in nearby South Asia. In addition to the *‘ulama* (religious scholars), co-opted as elsewhere by the state in the twentieth century, there are the *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed), Sufi *pirs* (holy men), and ordinary *mullahs* (preachers). And although the Prophet's cloak may be venerated in Kandahar, *‘ulama* may counsel kings, and the heads of Sufi orders may be patrons to thousands of devoted followers, for the average Afghan the religious authority figure is the village mullah, whose ignorance and low status are best symbolized in jokes about the greedy Mullah Nasruddin. Throughout Afghanistan local authority has traditionally been exercised by the landowning

khans (landed elites) and village/tribal *maliks* (headmen), not by the lowly mullahs.³¹

Despite the development of a violent and unremitting *jihad* (religious or holy war) and the rise of political Islam during the 1980s in Afghanistan, and despite legends concerning the early and widespread conversion of the Afghan people to Islam, religion has only recently been of great importance there.³² The conversion process was not nearly as rapid or complete as it has traditionally been portrayed, and even now there is a blending of early animist beliefs with mainstream Islamic thought in more remote areas of Afghanistan (among the Pamiri and Wakhi people of the rugged northeast, for example, or among the Nuristanis who were forcibly converted in the 1890s). Basic Islamic beliefs are widely understood, but as Louis Dupree noted, “the Islam practiced in Afghan villages, nomad camps, and most urban areas (the ninety to ninety-five percent non-literates) would be almost unrecognizable to a sophisticated Muslim scholar. Aside from faith in Allah and in Mohammad as the Messenger of Allah, most beliefs relate to localized, pre-Muslim customs.”³³ The vast majority of the people believe but are not particularly religious. Islam and the Pushtunwali in concert do govern daily life, but they are so pervasive that they are generally taken for granted, a luxury found only in societies with a homogeneous religion. That is how the Taliban can simultaneously emerge from traditional elements of Afghan society and yet be so alien to many parts of that society.

The major way in which Islam has traditionally acquired a more active role in Afghan society is by providing the ideology and driving force behind a *jihad*—then it can weld the tribes together into an intractable force against alien infidels. The Afghan-Soviet War of 1979–1989 is only the latest in a number of jihads in which Afghans have risen during the last 250 years; the next most recent was the Kashmir *lashkar* (war party) of 1947–1948.³⁴ Although the post-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan is a war among factions, all of whom are composed of Muslims, the Taliban have consistently presented their fight against fellow Afghans as a *jihad* in order to unify and embolden their followers.

Thus, both the Pushtunwali and Islam as understood in Afghanistan provide substantial normative justification for the existence of violence. The recent emergence of political Islam, or Islamism, in Afghanistan deviates from tradition and is at least in part a reflection of twentieth-century forces sweeping through the Islamic world.³⁵ As Olivier Roy noted, these forces affected Afghanistan by producing “a new brand

of fundamentalism, which was mainly a blend of traditional Sunni fundamentalism with strong anti-Western cultural and political bias, inherited from the Islamist movements.³⁶ This neo-fundamentalism is exemplified by the Taliban movement and some of the mujahideen organizations that were its predecessors, and it is considered in more detail in chapter 4.

A third major factor that fosters divisions within Afghanistan is its traditional social system. Afghanistan's ethnic groups emphasize loyalty to the local social group, which may be defined in several ways, rather than to the state. The core of the social system is the *qawm*, which may be any communal group, including village, extended family, tribe, or ethnic group.³⁷ In rural Afghan society virtually all meaningful social relations occur within the *qawm*, which is typically governed by the *jirga* or *shura* (which also means a council or assembly of elder males).³⁸ If the government attempts to impose laws alien to the social codes of the *qawm*, especially if the religious hierarchy also objects, then there is a strong likelihood of violence in response.³⁹

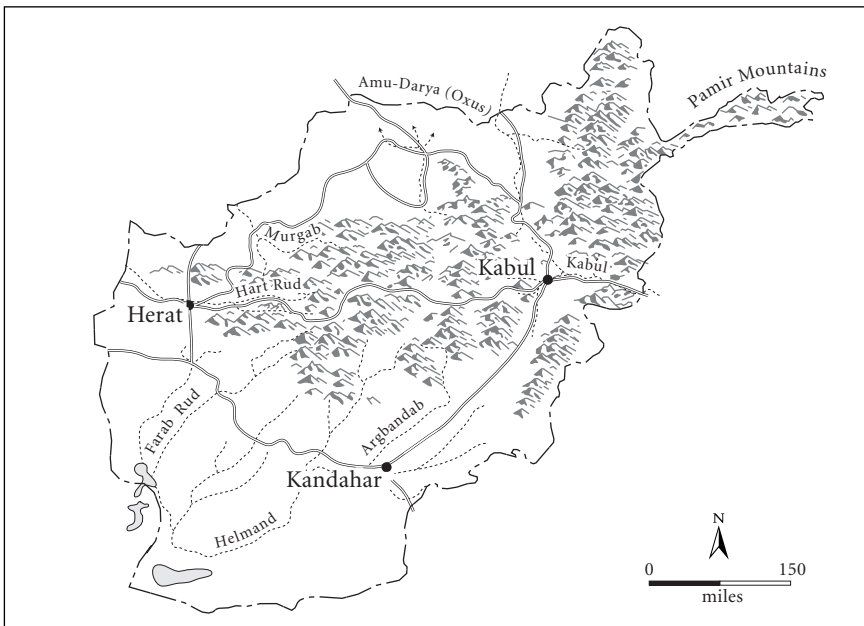
To mediate with the state, *qawm* elders select from among their ranks *maliks* or *arbabs* (local leaders) to serve as intermediaries.⁴⁰ Other significant local actors are the *khans*, who are large landowners with local or regional power aside from their relationship to the state. In traditional Afghanistan the larger *khans* were often the most powerful people in society. Their power was tenuous, however, because it was tied directly to their ongoing patronage efforts.⁴¹ The government established strong relations with the *khans*, whose power grew with the growth of the state. Nonetheless, the *khan's* position ultimately depended on the support of the *qawm jirga*.⁴²

The resulting socioeconomic structure, exacerbated by deep ethnolinguistic and tribal cleavages, clearly divided state from society.⁴³ Loyalty of the individual was to or within the *qawm*, which was governed by the *jirga*. The only force that could bring together people from different *qawms* was an outside threat, and the unity produced was always short-lived.

The fourth factor limiting national unity is Afghanistan's rugged topography, including some of the world's most forbidding terrain. The Hindu Kush mountains descend from the Wakhan Corridor and the high Pamirs to bisect Afghanistan. These mountains average 4,500 to 6,000 meters in height (14,769–19,692 feet) in the zone around Kabul, with some peaks as high as 7,500 meters (24,615 feet) farther northeast.⁴⁴ In the center of the country the Hindu Kush broadens out

into the high Hazarajat plateau, which descends and disappears into the western deserts on the Iranian border (Registan, Dasht-i-Margo, Dasht-i-Lut). Although passes through the Hindu Kush and Hazarajat make movement between different regions possible, harsh winters and high altitudes have made interregional mobility difficult (only the completion of the Salang Tunnel in 1964 made overland traffic between Kabul and northern Afghanistan possible during winter months). Many remote valleys exist that are virtually inaccessible to the outside world (map 1.3).

Despite the development of railroads in the bordering countries, Afghanistan itself has no railroad, except for a few miles of track laid by the Soviets after the 1979 invasion to expedite the transfer of gas from the fields in Shiberghan near the Uzbekistan border. Afghanistan also has only one major road, the “Ring Road” that begins in the northwest at Torghundi and runs south through Herat to Kandahar. Skirting the impenetrable Hazarajat, the road turns northeast to Kabul and then cuts the Hindu Kush at the Salang Pass and continues to Mazar-i-Sharif and the Uzbekistan border at Termez. Supposedly, the road also links



MAP 1.3 Afghanistan's physical characteristics. Reproduced by permission from Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War*, 1995.

Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, but this section was never much more than unfinished jeep track. The road from Kabul to Peshawar, Pakistan, that runs through Jalalabad and the Khyber Pass is also part of this system. After many years of war and virtually no funding for reconstruction, most of this road now consists of broken pavement or merely dirt and gravel, and travel is arduous and uncomfortable. I traveled it most recently in July 1997, taking twelve hours to go from Kabul to Peshawar. My bus suffered two tire punctures en route. There was no evidence of any serious reconstruction effort under way.

The four factors just described have all undermined state building throughout Afghanistan's history, and they are resurgent today. Nonetheless, despite the obstacles to building a strong central government, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Kabul was able to extend its control over much of the territory that is present-day Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Through the creation of a bureaucracy and national army, economic modernization and urbanization, construction of a transportation network, forced internal migration, the rise of the 'ulama, co-optation of the khans, and various other developments, Afghanistan witnessed the rise of state over traditional society. These subjects are explored in greater detail in chapter 2.

The Afghan War has erased the position of the Afghan state by eliminating or severely damaging most of these institutions. As traditional elites such as the 'ulama and khans were destroyed and state structures collapsed, Afghanistan saw the rise of an unstable mixture of resurgent traditional society and nascent political elites that have contributed to the national political fragmentation. The emergence and empowerment of the Taliban could not have occurred but for the failure of the Afghan state, and the persistence of the movement despite some unsavory elements of its dogma, such as ethnic cleansing of northern minority groups and a harsh social policy toward females (dubbed "gender apartheid" by its opponents), illustrate the dangers state failure poses for a society. An analysis of how the war introduced or made unnaturally strong the factors that weakened the Afghan state and ruptured its ties to Afghan society will command our attention in chapters 3 and 4.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan finds its geostrategic position still important, but for different reasons. No longer merely a buffer state, Afghanistan is now a crossroads between states that want and need trade, as both Iran and Pakistan engage in a struggle for access to Central Asia's mineral wealth and markets. Thus, as in the days of the "Great Game" in the previous

century—the competition between the Russian and British empires for control over Central Asia—Afghanistan finds itself once again a strategically significant country. Moreover, the growing “Talibanization” of Pakistan (that is, the application of Taliban social policies and interpretations of Islamic law) and the increasing Islamization of Central Asia highlight the way in which state failure in one country can infect its neighbors.⁴⁶ Afghanistan’s transformed regional position and its interactions with neighboring states are explored in greater depth in chapter 5.

But before analyzing the changes wrought by war and national destruction on Afghanistan, I want to consider the last important contextual factor shaping the framework in which those changes occurred—Afghanistan’s history. Some themes from Afghanistan’s pre-1978 history are particularly relevant to our understanding of Afghanistan today, especially those that constrained the construction of the Afghan state and shaped the development of its national political culture. It is to that history that I now turn.