

The CIA, the American oligarchy and the war in Afghanistan

A commentary on the Abdul Haq debacle

James Brookfield
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The collapse last week of the ill-fated incursion of Abdul Haq into eastern Afghanistan provides yet another indication of the corrupt and anti-democratic nature of the so-called “war against terrorism” being carried out by the Bush administration. Haq, 43, was pinned down by the Taliban military October 25, captured and executed, having crossed the border from Pakistan two days before, avowedly to overthrow the Kabul regime.

During the 1980s, Haq was a commander of a group of US-backed mujahedin guerillas in Afghanistan who sought to overthrow successive Soviet-backed governments. He became a favorite of right-wing circles in the American and British political and media establishments. He was lauded by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and enjoyed the support of Robert McFarlane, then-US national security adviser. He facilitated the work of right-wing activist and CBS-sponsored reporter Kurt Lohbeck in Afghanistan, figuring prominently in the latter’s 1993 book, *Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA’s Secret War in Afghanistan*. The book’s glowing foreword was written by CBS News anchor Dan Rather.

If Haq enjoyed support in these circles, he did not fare so well with the Pakistani military intelligence service, the ISI, to whom the US government had largely subcontracted its operations against Kabul. The ISI provided the bulk of its arms and supplies to Haq’s rival, Gulbaddin Hekmetyar.

Haq was described in the Western press as a daring military hero, but his operations during the 1980s consisted largely of low-cost sabotage missions, in which he sought to cause maximum damage at relatively low risk. One such operation was an attack on a key electricity grid in Kabul, creating untold civilian suffering.

The Reagan administration, of course, had no qualms about such methods. Rather, it hoped Haq would go further than even he was prepared to go at times. In *Holy War, Unholy Victory*, Lohbeck describes an exchange between Haq and McFarlane:

McFarlane asked who in the regime was the most troublesome to the Resistance. Abdul named a number of people from Najib on down.

[McFarlane:] “What are you doing about them?”

[Haq:] “We attack whenever and however we can. What should we do, shoot them on the streets?”

[McFarlane:] “You mean, urban terrorism?”

[Haq:] “Terrorism is what the Soviets are doing to me, to my country. If I start shooting these people in Kabul, which I can, they will shoot our leaders in Peshawar. Is that what you want me to do?”

Lohbeck comments: “The following scene has run through my mind a thousand times. McFarlane looked at Abdul Haq intently, and nodding his head up and down, said, ‘You have to do what you can do’” (p. 127).

After September 11 of this year, Haq returned to Peshawar, Pakistan from the United Arab Emirates, where he had run a trading business after leaving Afghanistan in the early ’90s. In an interview with ABC, published on October 5, he explained that he aimed to enter Afghanistan and “recruit” military commanders opposed to the Taliban government. ABC reporter Bob Woodruf wrote: “Haq’s plan is to capture Kabul first with just a few thousand troops. He says he and his fellow commanders have weapons buried in the mountains inside Afghanistan that they can access quickly.”

Having broadcast to the world his intention to carry out a coup, Haq left Peshawar not with thousands, but rather with a motley group of about 20 lightly armed men. He knew that he would face entrenched Taliban forces. But what he lacked in forces, he attempted to make up for in cash. Bankrolled by an American multimillionaire, Haq hoped to bribe enough Afghan warlords and Taliban commanders to join him or look the other way. He was not the first to come up with this idea.

During the two decades of civil war in Afghanistan, rival commanders in the mujahedin factions, as well as Taliban commanders, have repeatedly changed sides in the conflict in return for bribes, or for the purpose of joining the side that had gained a temporary military advantage, or in response to some combination of similar factors. In the '80s, the money was provided by the American, Saudi and other governments through various crooked setups. Bribes also helped the Taliban to power in the mid-'90s. Carrying on in this noble tradition, Haq reportedly brought with him tens of thousands in US currency during his last foray into Afghanistan.

This time around, it appears that he obtained funding from a retired Chicago options trader, James Ritchie, who had sold his business in 1993 for \$250 million and proceeded to set up a private operation to topple the Afghan government. Ritchie put together an office in Rome to promote the deposed Afghan king, Zahir Shah. Dabbling in the market for former US officials, Ritchie also managed to hire McFarlane, who had nearly disappeared from the political scene in the late '80s after an attempted suicide that followed revelations of his role in the illegal financing of the Nicaraguan contras while he was National Security Council chief.

Haq had, since the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, fallen from favor within most US government circles. For some, he had become an object of derision and scorn, tagged "Hollywood Haq" for his penchant for self-promotion and showmanship and his lack of significant support among the Afghan people.

Whether for this reason, or due to doubts about his mission's success, the CIA declined to supply him in recent weeks as it has been supplying other Pashtun commanders dispatched to combat the Taliban. It offered only satellite phones, which Haq rejected, suspecting that American officials wished merely to trace his movements. This was, however, not the end of his contact with US intelligence.

When his group was trapped by the Taliban, Haq attempted to make use of his connections. Via satellite phone, he called Ritchie in Peshawar, who relayed the SOS call to McFarlane, who in turn phoned the CIA. An unmanned drone helicopter was sent to fire on the Taliban, but failed to dislodge them. The military action launched in support of Haq was lamely denied by Pentagon spokesmen later in the week.

The entire episode exposes the platitudes that have been used to justify the war in Afghanistan. Far from seeking to establish a democratic government, the Bush administration is seeking to buy off various reactionary warlords in order to cobble together a regime more conducive to US corporate interests. Acting as the air force for decrepit remnants of the mujahedin movement, the Pentagon is further laying waste

to the country, already devastated by the policies of preceding US administrations. The present war is helped along by drug money in the north and, apparently, private financiers and adventurers operating secretly in the south.

Haq's capture and execution have exacerbated the crisis surrounding the US war in Afghanistan, one of whose aims has been to recruit his fellow anti-Taliban Pashtuns. Said McFarlane: "It is an appalling failure to engage the people who could help us."

The British *Independent* claimed that Haq was betrayed by the very forces he was hoping to "win over" (i.e., bribe). It quoted Musa Anfi, a representative of the Afghan Northern Alliance, as saying, "Peshawar is full of people working for the Taliban.... [Haq] was completely compromised from the time he left until his arrest. This has had a profound effect on the commanders in Peshawar, and they are locking themselves away from view. We can see that the Taliban still have power and anyone who goes into Afghanistan without a clear plan is going to meet the same fate."

Following Haq's demise, the Taliban were reported to have executed five more commanders in northern Afghanistan. Later last week, news organizations claimed that another prominent anti-Taliban figure, Hamid Qarzai, who like Haq is descended from the Pashtun nobility, had not been seen for a week, having likewise made an incursion into southern Afghanistan.

This episode also highlights the fractious state of the alliance of the US government with the Pakistani military regime headed by Pervez Musharraf, and the latter's precarious control over his own military and intelligence apparatus. News reports cited allegations that information about Haq's activities had been passed on to the Taliban by the Pakistani ISI.

Meanwhile, Pashtun outrage over US atrocities and the administration's blanket support for the Northern Alliance have bolstered support in Afghanistan for the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. An article in the November 1 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, headlined "Southern Afghans Rally Around Taliban," pointed to the obvious failure of US policy, reporting that Bush administration officials had hoped at the war's outset for a "brisk wave of defections among Pashtuns." The collapse of the Abdul Haq adventure has exposed the stupidity that underlies such expectations.



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