

Afghan president blames “the West” for Islamic extremism

US policy and Al Qaeda terrorism

James Cogan
8 September 2008

The propaganda used to justify the US-led occupation in Afghanistan typically leaves out any explanation of the origins of tendencies such as Al Qaeda, the Taliban movement and other Islamist groups resisting American and NATO troops. The spin merchants of the so-called “war on terror” would have people believe that the US and its allies are fighting religious fanatics who have no support in the country and are motivated by an inexplicable and irrational hatred of Western civilisation.

On rare occasions, however, someone deviates from the script and draws attention to historical facts regarding present-day Islamic extremism that Washington and its allies prefer to leave unmentioned. One occasion was an interview on August 19 with *Time* magazine with a very close American ally—Hamid Karzai, the man who was installed by the Bush administration as President of Afghanistan in 2002.

Challenged by *Time* to answer how an enemy could be fought that “only has annihilation as its goal”, Karzai felt compelled to note the current situation was a by-product of US support in the 1980s for the creation of an Islamic fundamentalist army to wage a jihad or holy war against a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan and embroil the Soviet military itself in a decade-long guerilla conflict.

Karzai told *Time*: “In order to fix terrorism at large, we need to remedy the wrongs of the past 30 years. Remedy means to undo. The world pushed us [Afghan jihadists] to fight the Soviets. And those who did walked away and left all the mess spread around. September 11 is a consequence of this ...

“In the years of fighting against the Soviets, radicalism was the main thing. Someone like me would be called half a Muslim because we were not radical. The more radical you were the more money you were given. Radicalism became not only an ideological tool against the Soviets but a way forward economically. The more radical you presented yourself, the more money the West gave you.”

When *Time* protested that “it wasn’t just the West; it was Saudi Arabia, Pakistan”, who fomented Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, Karzai answered: “[T]hey were led by the West. The moderates were undermined. Afghan history and nationalism were called atheism. The more you spoke of radicalism, the better you were treated. That’s what we are paying for now.”

Karzai is intimately familiar with the US backing for Afghan jihadists in the 1980s. He ran the office of Sebghatullah Mojadeddi, the leader of one of the Mujahedin groups, and undoubtedly liaised with CIA and other US officials. His bitterness over US policy stems from the fact that the Mojadeddi faction was regarded as “moderate” as compared to the “radicals” who received the lion’s share of financial support.

From 1979 on, the US urged its allies such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to give military and financial aid to the Islamist-based Afghan insurgents as a means of undermining the Soviet Union. Combined with direct

American funds, as much as \$2 billion poured in each year—the CIA’s Afghan project was by far the largest covert operation of the entire Cold War.

The largest beneficiary of US aid during the 1980s was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami, which is believed to have received as much as \$600 million in US weapons and cash. Another figure the CIA worked with closely was Jalaluddin Haqqani, a guerilla commander who built a large military force in the ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan.

At the same time, large sums of Saudi money were used to finance the camps to which thousands of Islamic militants came from every corner of the world between 1985 and 1992. One of the main figures involved in creating what came to be called “The Base”, or Al Qaeda in Arabic, was Osama bin Laden, the son of a Saudi Arabian billionaire. While the CIA denies ever working with the foreign fighters or so-called “Afghan Arabs”, its claims are not credible. Al Qaeda was an integral part of the overall anti-Soviet jihad in which the CIA collaborated closely with Pakistani and Saudi intelligence agencies.

Rise of the Taliban

The proxy war that the Islamists fought for the United States from 1979 on was a contributing factor in the economic and political crisis that gripped the Soviet Union in the 1980s and led the Stalinist regime to restore capitalist relations and ultimately, dissolve the USSR itself.

Afghanistan, however, was virtually destroyed in the process. Before the Soviet forces withdrew in 1988, their brutal counter-insurgency tactics had killed over one million Afghans, wounded as many as 1.5 million and forced five million people to flee to Pakistan.

The US continued to back the Islamists in their campaign to overthrow the weak pro-Soviet government of Mohammad Najibullah, but increasingly relied on the Pakistani military to oversee the financing and arming of the Mujahedin. Washington’s focus had shifted. The crisis of the Soviet Union had led the US ruling elite to conclude that an opportunity existed to realise their long-held ambitions to dominate the oil-rich Middle East. The Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein was provoked into invading Kuwait, creating the pretext for the deployment of more than half-a-million American troops into Saudi Arabia and, in March 1991, the first Gulf war against Iraq.

In Afghanistan, the Pakistani-backed forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar conducted a murderous civil war for control of the country against other Mujahedin factions, whose warlord commanders were receiving support

from rival regional powers such as India, Iran and Russia. Hekmatyar troops, still well-equipped with American-supplied weapons, carried out several wholesale bombardments of the capital Kabul, in which much of it was destroyed and thousands of people killed. In June 1993, he was installed as the prime minister, supplanting a government in which Karzai had briefly served as deputy foreign minister.

The brutality of the civil war, the desperate social conditions facing the population and the plight of millions of refugees in Pakistan created the breeding ground for the Taliban—or “religious students”. Radical Islamic clerics led by Mullah Omar won support among embittered youth with promises that harsh Islamic law would suppress the criminal warlords and give a long-suffering people respite from war. Assembling a military force in the Pakistani refugee camps in 1994, the Taliban seized control of much of Afghanistan and finally took Kabul in 1996. When it first emerged, Karzai, like many Pashtuns, backed the Taliban as the means for undermining the power of their ethnic rivals.

Pakistan, which had come to view Hekmatyar as an unreliable proxy, played a crucial role in organising the Taliban’s armed forces. Units of the Pakistani military are believed to have actively fought alongside them. Another factor in the Taliban successes was the decision by Jalaluddin Haqqani in 1995 to align his large ethnic Pashtun militia with them. Haqqani served as the Minister for Borders and Tribal Affairs in the Taliban government from 1996 until the US invasion in October 2001.

The Taliban never controlled the entire country and was engaged in virtually constant warfare against the warlords who received backing from India, Russia and, to some extent, Iran. In large areas of southern Afghanistan, however, the population, while resenting the Taliban’s enforcement of harsh sharia law and bans on female education, enjoyed their first years of relative peace in over 17 years. The legacy is a degree of sympathy and even nostalgia for the Taliban, particularly when their rule is compared with the violence of the US occupation and the corruption of the drug barons and strongmen who dominate Karzai’s puppet government.

The US government and major American oil conglomerates initially welcomed the advances by the Taliban. Rich new oil and gas fields were being developed in former Soviet Central Asian republics such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and the potential existed for pipelines to be constructed through Afghanistan to refineries and ports in Pakistan and India. None were ever constructed, however, due to the Taliban’s inability to completely end the civil war. Relations between Washington and the Taliban began to break down in 1998, ostensibly over their protection of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

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The terrorist acts directed by Islamic extremists against the United States in the late 1990s were a consequence of the 1991 Gulf War. Islamist radicals who believed they had fought to liberate Afghanistan from non-Muslim infidels were outraged that the Saudi monarchy had allowed American troops—as much as infidels as the Soviets—to set foot in the country that is supposed to protect the holiest shrines of Islam at Mecca and Medina. This sense of betrayal intensified when, after the shattering of Iraq, the US military maintained bases not only in Saudi Arabia, but also in Kuwait and other Gulf states.

Osama bin Laden, who had returned to Saudi Arabia, publicly denounced the monarchy and was forced into exile in the Sudan. In 1996, he moved back to Afghanistan, where he reformed his ties with figures such as Haqqani, who had used many Afghan Arabs in his guerilla forces.

Al Qaeda’s outlook reflected the resentment felt by a disgruntled

section of the ruling class in the Middle East over the domination of the region by the United States. Its reactionary perspective of committing terrorist atrocities against American targets had only one aim: to pressure Washington into removing its troops from Muslim countries as the basis for establishing a new relationship with imperialism.

In February 1998, bin Laden called for a jihad against the United States from his new base in Afghanistan, appealing for his supporters to kill Americans until the US government agreed to “liberate” the Israeli-held al-Asqa mosque in Jerusalem and the al-Haram mosque in Mecca. The character of the so-called “holy war” was revealed when Al Qaeda attacked the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, murdering more than 200 innocent people and wounding over 4,000. In retaliation, the Clinton administration ordered cruise missile strikes on alleged Al Qaeda bases near Khost in Afghanistan and a “terrorist factory” in Sudan.

By 2000, the US military had developed its plans for an invasion of Afghanistan. The objective was the installation of a pro-US government. Pipeline projects could then proceed and the US would be able to construct military bases in the very heart of Central Asia, projecting force against Iran to the west, Russia to the north and China to the east. All that was lacking was a justification.

September 11, 2001 provided it. In a still unexplained security stand-down, 19 Islamists—mostly Saudis—were able to hijack aircraft and fly them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon despite several of them being on CIA or FBI “watch lists”. The ability of Al Qaeda to carry out such an attack is all the more suspicious given the long relationship between American intelligence agencies and Islamic extremists. While bin Laden turned on his erstwhile US ally in 1991, it is unlikely that the CIA lost all its informants and agents in his network.

Within a month of 9/11, the US invasion of Afghanistan had begun. Nearly seven years later, the war has no end in sight. The Taliban have proven able to recruit guerilla forces on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, feeding off the poverty and despair of a largely rural population and anger at the US invasion that has brought nothing but more death and hardship.

Since the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his sons are believed to have regrouped their military forces in the country’s south, capitalising on safe havens in the ethnic Pashtun Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies (FATA) of Pakistan. At the same time, Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami has re-established itself in parts of eastern Afghanistan by joining with the Taliban in calling for resistance to the US and NATO.

While the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden and what remains of his Afghanistan-based network is not definitively known, they are most likely operating from bases inside the FATA where Al Qaeda operated with US, Saudi and Pakistani backing during the Soviet-Afghan war.

Inside Pakistan, Taliban-linked movements now control most of the FATA and are spreading their influence into the North West Frontier Province, Balochistan and even into the economic hub of the country, Karachi. Last month, Asif Al Zardari, now president of Pakistan, declared that the “world is losing the war” and “at the moment they [the Taliban] definitely have the upper hand”.

Stemming the resurgence of Islamic extremism—which the US fomented in the 1980s—is the primary pretext for an escalation of the Afghan conflict. In the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties are in agreement that thousands more troops must be sent. Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for president, has declared that any administration he heads will have “no greater priority” than defeating the Taliban.

Obama has stated he would order US military operations into Pakistan without the permission of the Pakistani government, if it proves unwilling or incapable of preventing Islamist guerillas using the FATA as a sanctuary from which to attack US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The

real objective of this shift in US policy is to advance Washington's strategic and economic ambitions in Central Asia.

Obama's policy is already being adopted by the Bush administration. This month, US ground troops carried out the first acknowledged attack on alleged Taliban targets inside Pakistan. The action provoked an outpouring of anger and a unanimous vote in the Pakistani parliament that the country's military should use force to prevent any future American incursions.

The result of 30 years of US meddling in the affairs of Afghanistan is a tinder box of instability and hatred of American imperialism that threatens to ignite war throughout the region.



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