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## Spooks, Tribes, and Holy Men: The Central Intelligence Agency and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

In September 1981, a French reporter, Bernard-Henri Levy, published an account of his recent visit to war-torn Afghanistan. There, he had interviewed one of the resistance fighters, or mujahidin, combating the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and Moscow's Afghan communist allies. Levy wanted to discuss the insurgency's motivations, asking, 'what about your clans, your tribes, your countless divisions?' The Afghan replied, 'That is our strength. Our soul. Those are the things in this world for which we are ready to die. [Sic] There is no Afghan nation. Apart from Babrak Karmal [head of the Afghan communist government], nobody here is ready to defend the Afghan nation'.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, US officials posed similar questions in their approach to the mujahidin, particularly as US funds increasingly flowed into Afghanistan to counter the Soviet intervention. United States' support for local resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is a point of increasing scholarly attention. This relates both to continuing interest in the rise of political Islam and recent work on the 1970s as a critical turning point in the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 'North East/North Africa Report (FOUO 37/81)', 21 October 1981, CIA-RDP82-00850R000400060037-1, CIA Records Search Tool (hereafter CREST), US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA).

<sup>2</sup> By 'political Islam', I draw on Peter Mandaville's definition, which 'refers to forms of political theory and practice that have as their goal the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive directly from the shari'ah'. Peter Mandaville, *Political Global Islam* (London 2007), 57. See also Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 'Political Islam, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and Pakistan's Role

terms of economic crises, ‘Third World’ interventions, and the rise of newer forms of political Islam, events of the 1970s seemed to foreshadow events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Studies of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, however, have been limited by giving a sense of inevitability to the rise of fundamentalist Islam, the Taliban, and ultimately the September 11 attacks. Charles Cogan has argued that ‘Islamism’ was the key motivation for Afghan elite actors and that ‘overestimation’ of Soviet involvement led to US support for the mujahidin – despite ‘the dominant fundamentalist strain in the movement’. In the preface to his book, Steve Coll almost immediately introduces Osama bin Laden as a critical actor, despite bin Laden’s limited role fighting alongside the mujahidin.<sup>3</sup> As such, understanding more recent dynamics in Afghanistan has overtaken understanding the region's history. But the question remains how contemporaneous actors actually understood the causality of the Soviet intervention and the Afghan resistance: was fundamentalism the key?

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in the Afghan-Soviet War, 1979-1988’, in Philip E. Muehlenbeck (ed.) *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* (Nashville, TN 2012), 275-95. On the 1970s, see Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel J. Sargent (eds.) *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA 2010). On the Cold War across the world, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden* (New York, NY 2004); Charles G. Cogan, ‘Partner in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979’, *World Policy Journal*, 10 (Summer 1993), 73-82, p. 81. See also George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times* (New York, NY 2003).

This article turns to one segment of the US government that played a crucial role in negotiating relations between the United States, Pakistan, and the Afghan mujahidin: the Central Intelligence Agency. The article complicates arguments made by H. Sidky and others that the CIA – which was largely responsible for determining US aid to the Afghan resistance – framed the Afghan resistance as a global ‘jihad’.<sup>4</sup> It further contradicts assessments that intelligence officers appreciated Islam as a potentially key force within Afghanistan (and Central Asia more broadly), despite using religious rhetoric. Analysts accepted Islam as a given element of Afghan society, but they largely did not foresee its rise as a driving political factor. This article thus questions whether we can argue that the CIA and US officials intentionally sponsored and created a global ‘jihad’ when they did not recognize changing Islamic identities and practices in Afghanistan during the course of the invasion.

US understandings of local dynamics, and reactions to local Islamic practices and usage in Afghanistan, largely have fallen beyond the purview of scholars studying the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This conflict has spawned wide-ranging literature composed by policy analysts, political scientists, anthropologists, and increasingly, historians.<sup>5</sup> Yet study of

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<sup>4</sup> H. Sidky, ‘War, Changing Patterns of Warfare, State Collapse, and Transnational Violence in Afghanistan: 1978-2001’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, 4 (July 2007), 849–88, especially 858-61.

<sup>5</sup> These cover topics ranging from the experience of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, to Soviet decision-making concerning the conflict, to the motivations of the mujahidin, or resistance fighters, to the broader impacts of the conflict on Afghan society. See Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, ‘State, National Awareness and Levels of Identity in Afghanistan from Monarchy to Islamic State’, *Central Asian Survey*, 19, 3-4 (2000), 416-25; *ibid.*, ‘The Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: A Nation in Exile’, *Current Sociology*, 36, 71 (1988), 71-92; Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*

US involvement in the region - which is widely recognized – largely has been commented on in passing, restricted by a limited range of available primary sources. Coll has provided one of the most extensive studies of US/CIA involvement in Afghanistan; others have reflected on the dearth of US oversight over the money and funds channelling into Afghanistan, which were far more regulated by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).<sup>6</sup> Some academics have focused on the ‘Islamic’ element of the insurgency – and the trajectory that led some of the same mujahidin supported by the CIA during the Soviet invasion, in turn, to morph into the terrorists responsible for the September 11 attacks.<sup>7</sup> Academics have done less, however, to consider how contemporaneous US actors comprehended Islam in the Afghan context. Yet this is critical to understanding the broader interplay of foreign intervention and Afghan social dynamics during the conflict.

This article looks at papers generated predominantly in the CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence, whose analysts were (and are) responsible for producing reports and studies

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(London 2005); David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley, CA 2002); Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge 1986); Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*; Cogan, ‘The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979’; Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Durham, NC 2008), especially 149-54.

<sup>7</sup> For one interesting study of this, see Mark Long, ‘“Ribat,” al-Qa’ida, and the Challenge for US Foreign Policy’, *Middle East Journal*, 63, 1 (Winter 2009), 31-47.

intended to underpin higher-level decision-making.<sup>8</sup> These perspectives are less familiar in the literature, but these everyday analyses importantly drove how high-level officials in the Carter and Reagan Administrations understood regional dynamics.<sup>9</sup> This article thus considers how knowledge was generated within the agency regarding Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and highlights the key concerns discussed by officials. Rather than retreading the story of CIA decision-making towards Afghanistan – or assuming that analysts presupposed an overarching ‘Islamic’ understanding of the region – it reflects on officials’ continued attachment to orientalist tropes concerning local social and political dynamics that frequently sidelined Islam as a political force. As such, it highlights US discourses’ heritage in colonial-era understandings of culture and political mobilization in South and Central Asia.

CIA analysts, contrary to much of the evidence on the ground, held a rigid view of the Afghan resistance that was tied to their understanding of Afghanistan as a ‘traditional’ society. Tradition referred to a certain reading of Afghan history that placed emphasis on the ‘tribal’ nature of Afghan society, the country's longstanding organization into political and social units defined by familial and ethnic ties and governed by local codes and laws. Afghan tribalism, in turn, was perceived as a static, backwards structure that prevented the country's development into a functioning, modern nation-state. Afghan society's primitive nature, in

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<sup>8</sup> The Directorate of Intelligence (now known as the Directorate of Analysis) includes a number of smaller groups, such as area studies centers like the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, which produced many of the papers used in this article.

<sup>9</sup> This is obvious, for example, due to the plethora of CIA reports contained in the National Security Council folders and attached to policy recommendations by people like Zbigniew Brzezinski, particularly in the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta, Georgia.

this reading, was reinforced by its limited understanding of Islam, which was frequently described as a nebulous social force without political implications.

This article first provides some broader historical context for CIA analyses, outlining the basic trajectory of events in Afghanistan from 1978 and highlighting some of the key elements of US policy. After considering the broader policy concerns for CIA analysts, it turns to the factors identified by officials as the key political forces underpinning the Afghan resistance - tribal and ethnic organization - before turning to the issue of Islam. It then reflects on changing CIA interpretations as a result of the rise of the seven main Afghan political parties in Peshawar, Pakistan. Finally, it briefly reflects on potential reasons that analysts did not contemplate the potential trajectory of a post-invasion Afghanistan.

This article is only an introductory foray into US involvement in Afghanistan. Drawing on recently declassified CIA files, it addresses the quotidian but critical policy recommendations and analyses that undergirded the CIA's more well-known personalities. While it recognizes that CIA analysts alone certainly did not shape US foreign policy (and that Pakistan's ISI played a critical role in determining how US aid was used), their reporting nevertheless reveals some of the key tenets of US approaches to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as US responses to the growing Islamist movements in the region. Certainly, US, particularly CIA, observers did not perceive Islam as a major, active unifying factor for the mujahidin. In contemplating the future outlook of Afghanistan, CIA officers and analysts reflected time and again on the fragmented nature of the insurgency without suggesting any means of unification or predicting the outcome of the insurgence beyond an ultimate victory over the Soviets. This article highlights the limits of these intellectual tropes, positing as well that perhaps the CIA's restricted understanding of Afghan society left the agency bereft of the analytical tools to envision a post-invasion Afghanistan.

It is helpful to put CIA understandings into a broader historical context that extends beyond the information contained in the agency's own reporting. This section briefly describes the Afghan regime and its opponents, as well as the broad tenets of US policy towards Afghanistan. A vast, complicated array of actors confronted US officials in Afghanistan. The Afghan communists were split into two factions with conflicting visions for Afghanistan's Marxist trajectory, and accompanied, after December 1979, by their Soviet supporters (and frequently suspected puppet-masters). Nur Muhammad Taraki, a founder of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and a member of its Khalq faction, initially led the government that overthrew President Muhammad Daoud Khan in 1978, in what was called the 'Saur Revolution'. Despite his limited knowledge of Marxism, Taraki called for a social, political, and economic 'revolution' within Afghanistan. But his regime's poorly enacted reforms, many of which stirred resentment among religious leaders and rural populations alike, soon faltered. He was soon replaced (and likely murdered) by his one-time ally, Hafizullah Amin. Amin's regime was no more successful at quelling the increasingly widespread resistance than Taraki's, and the Soviets subsequently stepped in to replace Amin with their leader of choice, Babrak Karmal, a member of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, in December 1979. Karmal distanced himself from his Khalq predecessors and pledged new reforms; however, his claims to rule the country were undermined by his heavy reliance on Soviet military and economic advisers, who shored up Afghanistan's weak armed forces and pursued Soviet-style development programs.<sup>10</sup>

The communist regime's hold was strongest in Afghanistan's urban centres, particularly Kabul, but it struggled to exhibit any semblance of control in the countryside.

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<sup>10</sup> See Edwards, *Before Taliban*, chapter 2; Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, part two; Paul Robinson and Jay Dixon, *Aiding Afghanistan: A History of Soviet Assistance to a Developing Country* (New York, NY 2013).



Particularly as government leaders faced defections and desertions from the Afghan army, they struggled to exert their rule across the country. Yet Kabul was no safe haven for Afghan Marxists: insurgency attacks began to seep from the Afghan countryside into the cities. Rebellions had sprung up in Afghanistan's eastern, predominantly Pashtun, provinces almost as soon as Taraki came to power, and they spread from there.

Opposition to the Marxist regime, and the growing Soviet presence, took various forms. The mujahidin and Afghan refugees were divided by tribe and ethnicity (Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek), social background (urban, rural, 'tribal', 'settled'), and religion (Shi'ite, Sunni). Millions of Afghans simply left the country, crossing Afghanistan's porous international borders to take refuge in Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan, they united with politicized Afghans from political parties that had functioned in exile from Peshawar for years. In some cases, they formed their own political organizations. As the number of refugees grew, so did the sway of seven main parties based in Peshawar, which will be discussed in more detail below. These parties increasingly received international support. Worldwide condemnation of the Soviet intervention and widespread sympathy for the Afghan refugees increasingly manifested as financial aid, through the auspices of nongovernmental organizations and, more covertly, from regimes interested in destabilizing the Soviet presence, including the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Covert funding moved through (and frequently remained with) Pakistan's intelligence services, which used the main Afghan political parties to dole out aid (to both refugees and mujahidin) and govern and organize the refugee camps. A sizable portion of the mujahidin sprung from among the refugees, particularly those based in Pakistan. They sought and received external support to return to Afghanistan to conduct raids and organize armed opposition. Alongside these more mobile, transborder groups were insurgents who had not left Afghanistan. These relied on local organization and support, and familiarity with difficult

terrain, to combat the Soviet/Afghan forces.<sup>11</sup> This was the basic landscape facing CIA analysts throughout the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, though the strength, size, and organization of the various groups fluctuated over time.

US covert aid to the Afghan resistance and broader support to Pakistan as an ally and intermediary began during the Carter Administration. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser, successfully persuaded the president to authorize covert support to 'harass' Soviet forces – and ultimately to give 'the USSR their own Vietnam'.<sup>12</sup> He warned Carter on 26 December 1979 – a day after the Soviet intervention had begun – 'the Soviets might be able to assert themselves effectively, and in world politics nothing succeeds like success, whatever the moral aspects'. Consequently, he believed, 'It is essential that Afghanistani resistance continues. This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice'.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Carter's loss in the subsequent presidential elections, his administration's policies towards Afghanistan remained largely in place. The incoming president, Ronald

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<sup>11</sup> The mujahidin also likely included Pashtuns from Pakistan, though scholars have not necessarily differentiated between Afghan and Pakistan Pashtuns (in itself a longstanding historical problem for Afghan and Pakistani political leaders). See Amin Saikal, 'Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Question of Pashtun Nationalism?' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30, 1 (2010), 5–17.

<sup>12</sup> See Alan J. Kuperman, 'The Stinger Missile and U.S. intervention in Afghanistan', *Political Science Quarterly*, 114, 2 (1999), 219-63, p. 221; Sidky, 'War, Changing Patterns of Warfare, State Collapse'.

<sup>13</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew, 'Memorandum for the President, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan', 26 December 1979, Folder Afghanistan, 4-12/79, Box 1, Brzezinski Country Files, NSA, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

Reagan, saw covert aid as equally (if not more) important to his national security vision. The Reagan Doctrine, which developed between 1980 and 1983, necessitated the ‘rolling back’ of Soviet influence. Support for anti-communist movements – falling under ‘security assistance’, as promoted in Reagan’s National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 32 of May 1982 – fitted this perfectly.<sup>14</sup> The centrality of foreign aid was reaffirmed by NSDD 75, which also declared, ‘The U.S. objective is to keep maximum pressure on Moscow for withdrawal and to ensure that the Soviets’ political, military, and other costs remain high while the occupation continues’.<sup>15</sup> This resulted, in 1986, in the sale of Stinger missiles (highly adaptable surface-to-air weaponry famously promoted by US Congressman Charlie Wilson), to the mujahidin, via Pakistan’s ISI.<sup>16</sup>

Within this context of invigorated foreign aid and the perceived need to restrict Soviet expansion, intelligence analysts focused first and foremost on the motivations of the Soviets in invading Afghanistan and then on predicting subsequent local and regional

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<sup>14</sup> NSDD 32, ‘U.S. National Security Strategy’, 20 May 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library,

<https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/Scanned%20NSDDDS/NSDD32.pdf>  
[accessed 18 April 2016].

<sup>15</sup> NSDD 75, ‘U.S. Relations with the USSR’, 17 January 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library,

<https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/Scanned%20NSDDDS/NSDD75.pdf>  
[accessed 18 April 2016].

<sup>16</sup> For more on the negotiations leading to this sale, see Kuperman, ‘The Stinger Missile’; for more on the Reagan Doctrine, see James M. Scott, ‘Reagan’s Doctrine? The Formulation of an American Foreign Policy Strategy’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26, 4 (1996), 1047-61.

developments.<sup>17</sup> Analysts had suggested that Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was increasingly likely, as they reported on the internal conflicts and weaknesses undermining first Taraki's, then Amin's rule.<sup>18</sup> As intelligence officers not only in the CIA but also based in the Departments of State and Defense stressed in anticipation of a Soviet intervention, 'The prospect of a successful Communist government in Afghanistan is important to Moscow for ideological reasons: such a government would provide substance to determinist claims that world "socialism" will eventually emerge victorious'.<sup>19</sup> Security assistance in the Afghan context, US policymakers believed, had the potential to curb future Soviet expansion into the greater Gulf region. The local resistance movements were important in this consideration: they had the power to tie down Soviet military units and prevent the spread of Soviet influence beyond Afghanistan south and southwest.

The question then became whether Soviet aggression in Afghanistan indicated Soviet intentions for further expansion. Officials in the CIA's International Issues Division's Office of Political Analysis already recognized that Soviet action had been 'sufficient to make the global political climate significantly more inclement during the next several years than it was

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<sup>17</sup> For more on Soviet decision-making, see Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA 2011).

<sup>18</sup> See 'A Review of Intelligence Performance in Afghanistan', 9 April 1984, CIA-RDP86B00269R001100100003-5, CREST, NARA.

<sup>19</sup> 'Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, Soviet Options in Afghanistan', September 1979, Folder Afghanistan, 4-12/79, Box 1, Brzezinski Country Files, NSA, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

during the latter years of the 1970s'.<sup>20</sup> A memorandum circulated in the agency in April 1980 subsequently predicted, 'A generally assertive Soviet policy will almost certainly continue, but whether it is more constrained in use of military force or not will depend importantly on the "lessons of Afghanistan": the outcome of the situation in that country, its impact on the region, and on US allies, but, above all, on Soviet perceptions of US reactions'.<sup>21</sup> The 'lessons of Afghanistan' directly involved the widespread resistance to the Soviets and Afghanistan's communist regime. As analysts noted immediately after the invasion in a series of notes for the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, 'A prolonged politically costly Soviet experience in Afghanistan could make the environment for expansion of Soviet influence in Third World less promising and constrain future Soviet options'.<sup>22</sup>

Thus providing covert support for the insurgents was a critical means of restricting further Soviet expansion. By 1984, some national intelligence officers, like Fritz W. Ermath, were confident that 'Because Soviet power is so heavily engaged, the war in Afghanistan is today the keystone of future Soviet power in the region. Failing some dramatic and easily exploited new opportunity elsewhere, such as a pro-Soviet regime emerging "naturally" in

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<sup>20</sup> International Issues Division, Office of Political Analysis, 'Effects of the Southwest Asian Crises on Key Global Issues (An Intelligence Assessment)', May 1980, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600200004-3, CREST, NARA.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Aberration or Symptom?' 10 April 1980, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600230001-3, CREST, NARA.

<sup>22</sup> DDCI Notes, 1 January 1980, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600230018-5, CREST, NARA.

Iran following Khomeini, the Soviets must win, rapidly or slowly, but steadily, in Afghanistan to progress elsewhere'.<sup>23</sup>

However, the effectiveness of this policy was limited by the fragmented nature of the resistance. Throughout the conflict, analysts reflected time and again on the restricted efficacy of the mujahidin. While the patchy resistance succeeded in absorbing Soviet attention, this resulted in a longstanding, costly impasse (for Soviets and Afghans alike) rather than resolving the conflict. (At least in public declarations made by Reagan and his Secretary of State, George P. Shultz, the United States' position was that the Soviets must withdraw from Afghanistan, leading to 'the restoration of its independent status'.<sup>24</sup> However, the nuances of US policy remain largely classified.) The Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh Branch at the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center noted in October 1981, 'The Afghan resistance movement consists of hundreds of independent groups, many of which have no goal beyond that of driving out the Soviet occupation force and ending Communist rule in Afghanistan. Those with longer term political goals range from Maoists to Islamic fundamentalists, and the number of organizations espousing regional and ethnic interests is growing'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Fritz W. Ermath, National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE, to Director of Central Intelligence, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, 'Soviet Strategy in the Southern Theater', 1 August 1984, CIA-RDP86M00886R001000010025-6, CREST, NARA.

<sup>24</sup> NSDD 166, 'U.S. Policy, Programs and Strategy in Afghanistan', 27 March 1985, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library,

<https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/Scanned%20NSDDS/NSDD166.pdf>

[accessed 18 April 2016].

<sup>25</sup> Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh Branch, South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, 'Afghanistan: The Politics of the Resistance Movement. An

Despite the varying motivations of the resistance, and its disorganization into a farrago of warring parties, analysts had some hopes that it could ultimately serve as an effective fighting force against the Soviets. (This was particularly true after new weapons began trickling in, particularly anti-aircraft technology, rocket launchers, and newer machine guns.) In October 1983, the Directorate of Intelligence reflected, 'Three and a half years after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the resistance has become an effective force that controls much of the country [sic .] Barring a drastic change in Soviet policy, we judge the fighting will continue over the next few years because existing Soviet forces will be unable to destroy the resistance'. However, officials also were forced to conclude, 'Despite improvements in weapons and training, however, we believe the insurgents will lack the firepower and organization to defeat major Soviet units'.<sup>26</sup> Analysts thus sought various ways to understand the organization and motivations of the insurgency, seeking explanations in Afghanistan's longer history.

While early CIA analyses of the Soviet invasion grappled with the complexities of Afghan identities and allegiances and sought to identify their key motivations, officials offered a surprisingly simple analysis of the resistance to the Afghan and Soviet communists. The key theme of CIA reporting was traditionalism, whether the Soviet and communist threat to local 'tradition' or the subsequent opposition's intention to uphold it. Notably, this perspective prevailed within agency reporting during the late Carter, as well as Reagan, years,

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Intelligence Assessment', October 1981, CIA-RDP06T00412R000200520001-1, CREST, NARA. The National Foreign Assessment Center was also part of the Directorate of Intelligence.

<sup>26</sup> Directorate of Intelligence, 'Afghanistan: Status and Prospects of the Insurgency', 14 September 1983, CIA-RDP85M00364R002404760066-0, CREST, NARA.

indicating an enduring institutional approach. This focus shaped analysts' approach to 'tribal' dynamics within Afghanistan, as well as ethnic and religious (specifically Muslim) identities and motivations. Tradition, analysts believed, shaped local reactions to the governing changes taking place within Afghanistan, and particularly the ways that local tribes confronted the Soviet threat. Analysts linked traditionalism to Afghanistan's tribal society, the fractured nature of the resistance, particularly ethnic and political tensions within the movement (if it was even unified enough to be called a movement), and ultimately the resistance's relationship with Islam.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after the Soviet invasion in December 1979, the Office of Scientific Intelligence published an intelligence estimate predicting a prolonged, widespread resistance to the communist regime. Officials contrasted local Afghan political and social expectations with the actions of the communist regime. They noted, 'Communist revolutionaries have tried to overturn tradition rather than adapt to it, to eliminate local autonomy, to destroy the elite class by confiscating its land, and to undermine the authority of the Muslim religious establishment'. Officials saw this as anathema for most of Afghanistan's population, which was largely organized into socio-political units defined by outside observers (from the colonial era through the present day) as 'tribes'. Analysts concluded, '[sic] tribal society is responding to a modern, well-organized threat in traditional terms. The tribes are fighting as they have fought for centuries: independently, locally, and with a minimum of leadership.

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<sup>27</sup> Dorrnsoro identifies the insurgency in similar terms, addressing three 'reference points' for understanding the Afghan war as a tribal revolt, an ethnic war, or a 'blend of religion and politics'. His perspective is both historical and academic – and he ultimately argues against any categories as wholly explanatory - but it is perhaps telling that contemporary CIA agents used similar categories in their understanding of the war. Dorrnsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 8-18.



Prominent oldtime leaders have sought refuge in Peshawar in Pakistan, where they remain poorly organized and disunited'. These analysts turned to Afghan history as they interpreted it. They emphasized that 'For thousands of years, the topography and Afghan cultural mores mitigated against the formation of a strong central government and even against a strong union of the tribes themselves'.<sup>28</sup> In officials' understanding, the new communist regime(s) represented an unapologetic rupture with the past and an attempt to upset longstanding social and political hierarchies within Afghanistan that locals were loathe to give up. In effect, the battle was between destroying and maintaining tradition.

Tradition, in this sense, was inseparable from Afghanistan's historically tribal political, social, and ethnic organization. Tribality, in turn, was portrayed as backward, static, and primitive. US officials undoubtedly inherited British colonial perspectives on the tribes of Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan as romantically heroic and brave yet wily and untrustworthy. The 'traditional' Pashtun population that dominated southwest Afghanistan was particularly described as 'aggressive, fractious, and martial', reflecting generations of British colonialists who had used identical terminology in their own dealings with colonial India's and Afghanistan's Pashtuns.<sup>29</sup>

This view of tribal primitiveness had been further obvious throughout the history of US interactions with Central and South Asia (as well as in US interactions with non-state

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<sup>28</sup> Office of Scientific Intelligence, 'Tribalism versus Communism in Afghanistan: The Cultural Roots of Instability (An Intelligence Assessment)', January 1980, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600170006-5, CREST, NARA.

<sup>29</sup> 'Afghanistan Situation Report', 9 July 1985, CIA-RDP85T01058R000406580001-3, CREST, NARA. For a comparison between British and US approaches to Afghanistan's and Pakistan's Pashtuns, see Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-65* (New York, NY forthcoming).

actors elsewhere in the decolonizing world).<sup>30</sup> US officials had evinced interest in the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands soon after Pakistan's independence in 1947; they, like the British before them, valued the region for its proximity to the Soviet Union. Equally, they remained dismissive of the local population. 'The Pathan tribesman, a fighter and raider by nature, is always ready to descend into the plains for fighting and loot and the glory of his religion', according to an officer in the US Embassy in Karachi in 1950.<sup>31</sup> Phillips Talbot, a journalist who later served as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs under John F. Kennedy, reported after a tour of the region in 1950 that 'Living as they [tribal Pashtuns] do in the social age of the mountain rifle and the blood feud[, sic] One gets the impression that for a long time to come, who would rule the Frontier must rule it with rupees and guns'.<sup>32</sup> Officials in the Department of State admitted they did not understand tribal 'psychology', as they wrestled with the idea of an autonomous 'Pashtunistan' straddling Afghanistan and Pakistan, a topic that soured Afghan-Pakistan relationships time and again throughout the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> James W. Spain, a US diplomat who served in Afghanistan in the 1960s, similarly recollected in his 1990s memoir, 'To me, the most

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<sup>30</sup> See John Borneman, 'American Anthropology as Foreign Policy', *American Anthropologist*, 97, 4 (December 1995), 663-72.

<sup>31</sup> US Embassy, Karachi, to Department of State, Despatch 579, 'Opinions of Pathan tribesmen on subject of Kashmir hostilities', 10 October 1950, Record Group (hereafter RG) 84, UD 3064A, Box 25, NARA. Like their British counterparts, US officials also drew on different iterations of 'Pashtun', referring to the population as 'Pathans' (as they were predominantly known by the British), but also 'Pakhtuns', 'Pakhtuns', and 'Pushtuns'.

<sup>32</sup> P. Talbot to W.S. Rogers, 15 January 1950, RG 84, UD 3063, Box 2, NARA.

<sup>33</sup> See Elisabeth Leake, 'The Great Game Anew: US Cold War Policy and Pakistan's North-West Frontier, 1947-65', *International History Review*, 35, 4 (2013), 783-806.

important fact is that the Pathans are basically the same now as when I first met them. They live in the same places and share the same values. They remain concerned above all with religion, land, lineage and honour'.<sup>34</sup> (Perhaps unsurprisingly, given longstanding US interest in the Pashtunistan dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Afghanistan's Pashtun majority also dominated CIA analyses during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, some discussion of ethnic tensions persisted, as is detailed below.)

CIA analyses during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reflected this same belief in the largely static nature of tribal political and social organization. The CIA's Southwest Asia Analytic Center's Office of Political Analysis wrote in September 1980, 'Those who cling most closely to the traditional tribal ways are the least likely to be influenced by Communism. To the extent that the tribesmen have an ideology it is a belief that a combination of Islam and even older tribal traditions is the proper guide for action'. They further explained, 'Tradition also tends to sanctify everything from rules governing property ownership to ways of treating illness. Any change in the traditional way of life is considered wrong, and modern ideas - whether Communist or Western - are seen as a threat'.<sup>35</sup>

In this view, tradition was obviously seen as backwards and limiting. Throughout the 1980s, CIA analysts concluded that the (usually Pashtun) tribe-based resistance could not defeat the Soviets because their political and social traditions limited their ability to unify and

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<sup>34</sup> James W. Spain, *Pathans of the Latter Day* (Karachi 1995), 24.

<sup>35</sup> Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Office of Political Analysis, 'The Soviets and the Tribes of Southwest Asia', 23 September 1980, CIA-RDP85T00287R000102180001-1, CREST, NARA. Nick Cullather has demonstrated that at least among Afghan elites in the twentieth century, development was perceived as a mode for breaking down nomadic tribal society and replacing it with settled, modernizing agriculturalists. Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA 2010), chapter 4.

cooperate, and prevented them from seeking an alternate government to the Afghan communists. (This contrasts with admittedly retrospective scholarship that has identified various ways that tribal dynamics and interactions with state actors changed both before and as a consequence of the invasion.)<sup>36</sup> Members of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis also cited ‘the Afghans’ history of resistance to foreign domination and to control by any central government, as well as distrust of government schools and of attempts to change traditional ways’ as a reason that resistance would continue past 1984. They concluded, rather critically, ‘A measure of the rural Afghans’ resistance to outside views is that, [redacted] the most openminded of them consider highly conservative Iran an advanced society’.<sup>37</sup>

In one of the CIA’s regular ‘Afghanistan Situation Reports’ from late November 1986, analysts concluded, ‘Pashtun tribal groups under traditional leaders have fought against the regime and the Soviets in many areas for several years, but their capacity to increase pressure on the regime is limited. They usually participate in the fighting only if it suits their own tribal objectives and tend not to fight in areas outside their tribal region. They resist being organized into units led by nontribal members and generally resist military training from nontribal people’.<sup>38</sup> These reports implied that creating a means for uniting or coordinating resistance to the Soviets would be difficult. Insurgent tribesmen largely sought

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<sup>36</sup> See Conrad Schetter, ‘Ethnoscapes, National Territorialisation, and the Afghan War’, *Geopolitics*, 10, 1 (2005), 50–75; Sidky, ‘War, Changing Patterns of Warfare, State Collapse’.

<sup>37</sup> Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, ‘Afghanistan: Resisting Sovietization (A Research Paper)’, December 1984, CIA-RDP85T00314R00020005-2, CREST, NARA.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Afghanistan Situation Report’, 25 November 1986, CIA-RDP86T01017R000303240001-8, CREST, NARA.

to preserve their own interests - 'tribal objectives' - rather than a greater Afghan polity. These reports focused on the tribe as the dominant mode of political (and thereby resistance) organization within Afghanistan. Equally, they emphasized a fairly unvarying understanding of tribal organization and membership that did not allow for shifts in identities or relationships that could have other effects on the direction of the resistance.

CIA analysts equally believed that tradition shaped ethnic relationships within Afghanistan and the subsequent cleavages within the resistance. (Notably tribe and ethnicity were frequently used interchangeably by officials, largely to distinguish Afghanistan's Pashtun majority from the country's minorities.) Analysts and scholars alike pointed to earlier official attempts to 'Pashtunize' Afghanistan as a clear cause of tensions and fractures within the resistance. Mohammad Daoud Khan, president of Afghanistan from 1973 until his overthrow and death in 1978, and himself a Durrani Pashtun, had pursued various policies to improve the lot of Afghanistan's majority Pashtun population, frequently discriminating against Afghanistan's ethnic minorities. In the 1970s, he had banned ethnic surnames and ethnonyms and restricted national radio broadcasts to Dari and Pashto.<sup>39</sup> CIA analysts reported in June 1979, little more than a year after the Saur Revolution, that 'It is the opinion of most of the major ethnic groups that Afghanistan is run by Pashtuns for Pashtuns, and that what prevails is internal colonialism. Pashtuns govern most provinces, even those in which another ethnic group is in the majority, and hold most administrative posts'.<sup>40</sup>

Ethnic (and partnering religious) divides were apparent in the flight paths of Afghanistan's refugees and in the locale of various resistance groups, as alluded to above.

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<sup>39</sup> Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 'State, National Awareness', 421-2.

<sup>40</sup> Geography Division, Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research, 'Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence. A Research Paper', June 1979, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600110004-3, CREST, NARA.

The Pashtun resistance - the most widespread in the country - overtook Afghanistan's eastern provinces - the historical homeland of the Pashtuns - and seeped into bordering Pakistan. Unsurprisingly, Pashtun mujahidin received substantial aid - financial, military, and, to a limited extent, organizational - from Peshawar. This occurred via the large Pashtun refugee community there, Pakistan's own extensive Pashtun population, with which they shared familial and ethnic ties, and Pakistan's ISI. Afghanistan's Hazara minority, in contrast, found support in the country's other neighbour, Iran, particularly as they shared adherence to Shi'a Islam, in contrast to the predominantly Sunni Pashtuns.

While Afghanistan's Pashtuns, in CIA reporting, were largely defined by their allegiance to tribe and family, analysts suspected that Afghanistan's minority ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks, saw an opportunity for increased autonomy by waging their own, independent resistance. For US observers, the potential for ethnic tension was particularly important. In a study of the so-called 'Southwest Asia crisis' – including events in both Iran and Afghanistan – one of the potential highlighted risks was 'separatist unrest' among ethnic minorities.<sup>41</sup> The attempts of Ahmad Shah Masood, a Tajik leader in the Panjsher Valley in northern Afghanistan, highlighted the fragmented nature of the Afghan resistance. While Masood worked to create an alliance amongst the non-Pashtun minorities in Kapisa Province, his success was limited, according to CIA analysts, because of his Tajik, and specifically Panjsheri heritage, which was 'only slightly above that of the Hazaras, who serve in the most menial occupations and are discriminated against because of their Mongoloid features and Shiite religion'.<sup>42</sup> He also was in heavy competition with leaders in Peshawar who controlled the purse strings for much of the Afghan resistance. Masood's

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<sup>41</sup> International Issues Division, 'Effects of the Southwest Asian Crises'.

<sup>42</sup> 'Afghanistan Situation Report', 12 March 1985, CIA-RDP85T01058R000405940001-4, CREST, NARA.

successes in combat against the Soviets nevertheless set him up as a potential post-invasion leader and, increasingly, a competitor to the Pashtun-majority Afghan political parties in Peshawar.

Analysts in the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis speculated that the ongoing resistance would change ethnic balances across the region, whether or not the Soviets were victorious. They reported in September 1983 that ‘In the case of an insurgent victory, the [Afghan] Pashtuns probably would be pressed to make political accommodations in recognition of the role of other tribes in the resistance and of their increased numerical strength. [redacted] the Soviets are attempting to weaken Pashtun power especially by bolstering their chief rivals, the Tajiks, and encouraging tribal rivalries’.<sup>43</sup> This was one of the few contexts in which CIA analysts recognized that the Soviet intervention could affect social and political order in Afghanistan and introduce new dynamics into the resistance.

The same focus on tradition that moulded CIA approaches to Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal composition shaped analysts' approaches to Islam in Afghan society. Officials noted that following the Saur Revolution in 1978, resistance to the communist regime really accelerated after Taraki began jailing mullahs and other religious leaders for resisting government policies.<sup>44</sup> After coming to power, Karmal tried to reaffirm his government's Islamic credentials, but with little success. Analysts in the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis reported in 1984:

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<sup>43</sup> Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, ‘Afghanistan: The Impact of Social and Demographic Instability on the Communist Regime: A Research Paper’, September 1983, CIA-RDP84S00927R000100020005-7, CREST, NARA.

<sup>44</sup> ‘National Intelligence Daily (cable)’, 23 March 1979, CIA-RDP79T00975A031200200001-2, CREST, NARA.

The Babrak regime has been unsuccessful in gaining legitimacy by portraying itself as Islamic and egalitarian. [Redacted] Afghans easily see through such measures as changing the flag to include Islamic green, forming a Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, publicizing regime support for mosques and Islamic shrines and institutions, and invoking the name of Allah at all official functions. According to US Embassy reports, insurgents still consider the regime anti-Islamic and frequently attempt to assassinate regime-backed mullahs. With considerable success, guerrillas call on Afghan soldiers to desert and join in the ‘holy war’ against the Soviets.<sup>45</sup>

Soviet attempts to enact reforms to land ownership, education, and social structures were decried by local mullahs, who deemed many of these activities anti-Islamic.

CIA analysts had recognized the importance of Islam to Afghan society and as a source of resistance to the atheist Soviet regime. However, they differentiated Afghan approaches to Islam from those in other countries, and further emphasized the diversity of religious interpretations in Afghan society. One report from the Office of Scientific Intelligence pointed out that Afghanistan had not produced any ‘profound religious philosophers’, and dismissed local mullahs’ religious training as ‘haphazard’ and approaching Islam ‘in simple ways’.<sup>46</sup> Officials emphasized time and again that locals’ devotion to Islam was partnered with, and potentially even subordinate to, ‘even older tribal traditions’.<sup>47</sup> The resistance, according to the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, was ‘fighting

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<sup>45</sup> Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, ‘Afghanistan: Resisting Sovietization’.

<sup>46</sup> Office of Scientific Intelligence, ‘Tribalism versus Communism’.

<sup>47</sup> Southwest Asia Analytic Center, ‘The Soviets and the Tribes’.



to preserve Islam and tradition from outside interference, just as Afghan rebels have done for centuries'.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the insurgency, Islam was undeniably intertwined with tribal identity. During the early years of the invasion, it was rarely spoken of as a source of motivation independent of tribal and social traditions. As one report noted, 'In many talks with newsmen [redacted] in Afghanistan, insurgents in the field have usually said they are fighting to defend Islam, but their definition of Islam appears to include all traditional ways including the Pashtun code of revenge and other customs that are not Islamic'.<sup>49</sup> The implication was that Islam was intrinsic to most Afghans' daily lives but had less of an impact on individuals' political or social choices than tribal law.

Analysts equally believed that while the vast majority of insurgents claimed to be fighting in the name of Islam, their religious interpretations varied widely. Some of the mujahidin were driven by the fundamentalist and moderate parties based in Peshawar (discussed further in the next section) or inspired by the increasing number of foreign (frequently Arab) fighters joining the fray. Others were under the influence of local mullahs and religious leaders.<sup>50</sup> Five years into the resistance, analysts predicted, 'Islam will dictate the language but not the content of the conflict between the Soviet-controlled Babrak regime

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<sup>48</sup> Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh Branch, 'Afghanistan: The Politics of the Resistance Movement. An Intelligence Assessment'.

<sup>49</sup> 'Afghanistan: Goals and Prospects for the Insurgents', May 1983, CIA-RDP84S00556R000200080004-3, CREST, NARA.

<sup>50</sup> On this, see Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and Department of State (Intelligence organization of), 'Afghanistan: Prospects for the Resistance (NIE 37-83)', 26 September 1983, CIA-RDP86T00302R000400570001-8, CREST, NARA.

and the resistance. The fratricidal discord among the resistance groups may decrease over time, but, even if the Soviet occupiers should decide to withdraw from Afghanistan, fundamentalists, moderates, and secular rivals would continue to compete for a role in any future government'.<sup>51</sup>

Effectively, while the mujahidin would unite to fight in the name of Allah, they could not agree on what this actually meant. Officials even decried the resistance's relationship with Islam as a limiting factor; one report complained, 'Although strong belief in a just cause and the ultimate trust in God helps sustain morale, in a guerrilla war this fatalism also works against developing strategy and tactics and against the acceptance of proper training. Many Afghans believe that faith is enough to drive out the Soviets, and they need only to put themselves in God's hands to win the war'.<sup>52</sup> In these readings, Islam did not serve as an adequate guiding factor and, if anything, weakened and fragmented the resistance rather than strengthening it.

CIA analyses did not reflect matters on the ground. An interesting instance of this can be found in CIA treatments of the refugees based in Pakistan. While giving some detail regarding the size, scope, and location of refugee camps, analysts predominantly focused on the effects the Afghan (largely Pashtun) refugee community based in Pakistan could have on the insurgency across the border, on Pakistani infrastructures, and on Pakistan-Afghan/Soviet relations. However, officials gave little notice to changing identities and relationships within

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<sup>51</sup> Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, 'Islam and Politics: A Compendium', April 1984, CIA-RDP84S00927R000300110003-7, CREST, NARA.

<sup>52</sup> 'Afghanistan Situation Report', 25 November 1986, CIA-RDP86T01017R000303240001-8, CREST, NARA.

the refugee community.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, based on fieldwork conducted during the winter of 1986-7, the anthropologist, Pierre Centlivres, detailed the changing identities emerging among the Afghan refugee community as a consequence of its exile. One of the most interesting self-identifiers used by members of the refugee community was that of ‘mohajir’, an Arabic term used to identify a person who had voluntarily left one land to live in an Islamic community (‘terre d’Islam’).<sup>54</sup> (Notably, this same identifier was used by migrants during the 1947 partition of South Asia by communities that moved from India into newly independent Pakistan, particularly around Karachi. Equally notably, it does not appear in CIA reporting.) In the context of this article, the idea of the mohajir is particularly interesting. It reveals the importance of Islam as a source of religious, political, and social meaning to the refugee experience, and demonstrates that those communities the CIA otherwise described in ethnic or tribal terms had acquired other additional identifiers as a consequence of their experiences during the Soviet invasion.

Regardless, as in their discussions of tribality and ethnic conflict within Afghanistan, CIA officials pointed to Islam as a backwards, largely static influence. The ‘resurgence of Islam’ briefly had been a point of discussion for CIA analysts before the Soviet intervention occurred. This was largely a result of the overthrow of the Shah in Iran by Ayatollah

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<sup>53</sup> See Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis, and USSR-EE Division, Office of Political Analysis, ‘The Afghan Insurgents and Pakistan: Problems for Islamabad and Moscow. An Intelligence Memorandum’, January 1980, CIA-RDP81B00401R000600140008-6, CREST, NARA; Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, ‘Pakistan: Coping with Afghan Refugees (An Intelligence Assessment)’, July 1987, CIA-RDP88T00096R000600770001-2, CREST, NARA.

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Centlivres, ‘Les Trois Poles de l’Identite Afghane au Pakistan’, *L’Homme*, 28, 108 (October-December 1988), 134-46.

Khomeini. Analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence's Office of Regional and Political Analysis expressed concern in February 1979 that Islam might be a 'militant and potentially destabilizing political force'; but they maintained that 'The vitality of Islam has been a cyclical thing'. Throughout the text, the 'destabilizing impact' of Islam remained the key focus, rather than its potential for initiating social change.<sup>55</sup> A second analysis in March 1981 reflecting on the Afghan resistance, as well as the revolution of Iran and other instances of increasing Islamic nationalism in the Middle East – and related outbreaks of anti-United States sentiment – further argued, 'The root cause for the intense expressions of anti-US feelings is the dissatisfaction and humiliation the Muslim peoples are experiencing in their collective lives. As the traditional social order breaks down, the answers drawn from the past are insufficient for coping with the complexity of the modern world; the structure provided by Islam cannot contain the anger and frustration of the Muslim people uprooted from their traditional milieu'.<sup>56</sup> Just as officials effectively defined tribal organization as primitive, they described Islam as pre-modern and linked it directly to a 'traditional social order'. They argued that Islam appealed to populations in Southwest Asia (including Iran, Afghanistan, and, to an extent, Pakistan) because it provided an alternative to both the 'Christian West' and 'atheist Soviet Marxism' and could serve as a 'vehicle to spread separatist unrest to other regions'.<sup>57</sup> This rhetoric – much like the idea of Islam as a 'language' – gave a sense of limited importance and agency to Islam. According to analysts' readings, Islam effectively

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<sup>55</sup> National Foreign Assessment Center, 'The Resurgence of Islam,' March 1979. NLC-6-52-1-2-5, CREST, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

<sup>56</sup> Office of Political Analysis, 'Resurgent Islamic Nationalism in the Middle East. An Intelligence Assessment', March 1981, CIA-RDP06T00412R000200170001-0, CREST, NARA.

<sup>57</sup> International Issues Division, 'Effects of the Southwest Asian Crises'.

served as a conduit for other regional interests and movements rather than serving as a motivational force in itself. This belied the very real changes taking place across the region, whether in terms of General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq's developing Islamist policies within Pakistan, the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, or the rise of militant Wahabbi groups in Saudi Arabia. Islam appeared to matter little to analysts as a potentially transformational force across the region. This indifference appeared to continue even as the resistance began to change shape and the political parties in Peshawar became increasingly responsible for the ultimate direction of the insurgency.

Commentary regarding Islam's importance to the Afghan resistance shifted somewhat with the emergence of two dominant factions among the exiled political parties based in Peshawar. As the war progressed, these political parties increasingly featured in intelligence reporting. Particularly as funds were channelled via Pakistan's intelligence services to the main Afghan political parties in Peshawar, the transborder mujahidin grew increasingly reliant on these parties for financial and military support. In Peshawar, seven main political parties had emerged since 1978. These could be roughly divided between the fundamentalists (also referred to, at times, as 'Islamists') and moderates (sometimes called 'traditionalists').<sup>58</sup> Notably, as Barnett Rubin has shown, Pakistan's ISI actively encouraged the parties to develop religious, rather than ethnic, platforms, for fear of otherwise encouraging the rise of a new Pashtun nationalist movement that could threaten Pakistan's rule over its own Pashtun

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<sup>58</sup> Dorronsoro differentiates the various Afghan interest groups and political parties into different categories: the Islamists, the clerical, and the patrimonial. Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 149.

population.<sup>59</sup> CIA analysts noted increasing polarization between the fundamentalist and moderate factions from the beginning of 1981. However, they did little to seek further differentiations within each group. CIA reporting described the fundamentalists as opposing a return of the Afghan monarchy (King Zahir Shah, who had been overthrown by his cousin, Daoud, in 1973 and subsequently lived in exile in Europe) and desiring a ‘revolutionary Islamic state’. The moderates, in contrast, sought a return to the pre-communist days with a moderately secular democratic state.<sup>60</sup> An increasing difference between the two was the moderates' willingness to negotiate with the Soviets, while the fundamentalists largely refused to accept anything but a total Soviet withdrawal. Analysts spent little time detailing the governments that either faction would institute should a Soviet withdrawal occur, nor did they seek to delineate the differences between the various political parties and their leaders. Four years after first discussing the fundamentalist-moderate divide, analysts still wrote that the fundamentalists, without differentiating between different parties or leaders, wanted a

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<sup>59</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 199. The seven parties were the Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan (National Islamic Front of Afghanistan), Jabha-yi Nijat-i Milli-yi Afghanistan (Afghanistan National Liberation Front), Harakat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan (Movement of the Islamic Revolution), Hizb-i Islami-yi Afghanistan, Himatyar (Islamic Party of Afghanistan, Hikmatyar faction), Hizb-i Islami-yi Afghanistan, Khalis (Islamic Party of Afghanistan, Khalis faction), Jamiat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), and Ittihad-i Islami Bara-yi Azad-yi Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan). The first three of these fell into the moderate group, while the latter four were more readily identified as fundamentalists.

<sup>60</sup> Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh Branch, ‘Afghanistan: The Politics of the Resistance Movement’.

‘theocratic state, modeled on Iran’; moderates desired ‘a secular government vaguely based on Islamic tenets’.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps more notably, though not surprisingly, CIA reporting largely focused on identifying which of these factions would better support US interests in the regions. Rather than delving into each faction's religious interpretations, officials focused on which was more ‘pro-Western’. Officials believed fundamentalists were ‘suspicious of the West’ and, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, felt ‘strong opposition to [sic] Eastern or Western imperialism’.<sup>62</sup> The moderates appeared more sympathetic to the West, particularly because of their support from Afghan exile communities in Europe; their stated preference for a democratic system also likely appealed to US officials. However, CIA observers bemoaned the moderates' general disorganization. According to one report, ‘They have overlapping command structures that seem to frustrate rather than facilitate decisionmaking. They favor friends and relatives for leadership positions rather than effective leaders. They make no effort to coordinate their fighting in Afghanistan, and the leaders themselves seem more concerned with their religious standing than with running effective guerrilla operations. Many potential followers undoubtedly become exasperated with the chaos’.<sup>63</sup> If analysts considered the future of Afghanistan, neither group seemed to offer a favourable outcome: the fundamentalists appeared unlikely to support US interests in the regions ideologically, while tactically, the moderates were even weaker. Instead, analysts' major conclusion was

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<sup>61</sup> Insurgency Branch, Office of Global Issues, ‘Insurgency: 1985 in Review (An Intelligence Assessment)’, April 1986, CIA-RDP97R00694R000600020001-2, CREST, NARA.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Afghanistan: Goals and Prospects for the Insurgents’; ‘Near East and South Asia Review’, 29 March 1985, CIA-RDP85T01184R000301390002-9, CREST, NARA.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Afghanistan Situation Report’, 27 November 1984, CIA-RDP85T00287R00130235001-9, CREST, NARA.

that the 'majority' of insurgents wanted 'considerable autonomy for their region or ethnic group and favor[ed] a minimum of interference in local affairs from Kabul'.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, analysts paid increasing attention to the Peshawar-based political parties as a negotiated Soviet withdrawal began to seem increasingly possible. Yet even then, officials' focus was not on the trajectory of a post-Soviet Afghan state, but on the potential local reactions to a Soviet retreat. An alliance between the major fundamentalist and moderate political parties in 1985, called the Ittihad Islami, seemed to signal that the resistance (or at least that represented by the parties) might unite to confront the Soviets. A delegate from the alliance even attended the United Nations General Assembly in October 1985, leading the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis to speculate that 'If the delegation can operate effectively at the UN [sic], it will mark an important step in improving the political cohesion of the Afghan resistance, [and] enhance resistance representation at other international organizations'.<sup>65</sup>

However, ideological, ethnic, and tribal divisions continued to fragment the resistance, and were further aggravated by the independent negotiations taking place at Geneva involving official representatives from the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, and the United States (what would ultimately result in the 1988 Geneva Accords and the Soviet withdrawal). During the course of negotiations - in which mujahidin representatives did not take part - analysts in the Afghanistan Branch of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis predicted that 'Differences among the resistance leaders will likely prevent them from achieving a unified position on the negotiations. The

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<sup>64</sup> Insurgency Branch, 'Insurgency: 1985 in Review'.

<sup>65</sup> Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, Directorate of Intelligence, 'Afghanistan-US: The Alliance at the UN', 24 October 1985, CIA-RDP85T01058R000507030001-1, CREST, NARA.



fundamentalists and traditionalists do not share the same vision of a post-Soviet Afghanistan; attempting to define a new regime would risk splitting the alliance and forcing its collapse'.<sup>66</sup> Despite hopes that the Ittihad Islami might be able to direct the resistance through a change of government in Afghanistan, its influence was undermined by conflicts among the parties.

Moreover, the fact remained that the parties did not overwhelmingly represent the still-splintered Afghan resistance. (For one, they represented predominantly Pashtun/Peshawar-based interests.) Officials reported in October 1987 of a conference in Ghowr Province between the Jamiat-i-Islami commander Ismail Khan and several hundred insurgent commanders based across Afghanistan, during which the commanders rejected 'a face-saving Soviet withdrawal, an interim role for Zahir Shah, and the survival of the PDPA - all of which the moderate resistance party leaders, the Pakistanis, and most Western observers believe are essential'. Analysts attributed this stance to recent insurgent military successes, which had hardened local attitudes against the Soviets, as well as 'growing dissatisfaction with the endless bickering and disunity of the seven party leaders'. They noted that insurgents also had managed to stockpile weapons within Afghanistan, leaving them less dependent on Pakistani supplies (and their Afghan party conduits).<sup>67</sup> This instance demonstrated that despite attempts and claims to represent the resistance to the international community, the Ittihad Islami and its member parties could not actually speak for the resistance. It even struggled to direct mujahidin action within Afghanistan from its base across the border. Even if Afghan leaders in Peshawar had banded together and chosen to participate in the Geneva

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<sup>66</sup> Afghanistan Branch, South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, 'Afghanistan: Resistance Views of Peace Negotiations', 18 April 1986, CIA-RDP86T01017R000202240001-0, CREST, NARA.

<sup>67</sup> Near East and South Asia Review, 23 October 1987, CIA-RDP05S02029R000300970001-7, CREST, NARA.

negotiations, the fact remained that they could not represent the entire insurgency. Instead they remained fragmented even as the Soviet withdrawal began.

When talk of a Soviet withdrawal began to circulate in 1986, CIA analysts predicted that the Soviet-supported regime would quickly crumble. Yet the agency gave little indication of how they envisioned the mujahidin taking power. While arguing that Islam could serve as a ‘rallying point’ that could alleviate the insurgency's factionalism, CIA officials made no effort to predict whether the alliance would hold, whether the fundamentalists or moderates would emerge supreme, or whether the country might fragment under local groups' preferences for autonomy.<sup>68</sup> As invasion turned into withdrawal, CIA officers offered few predictions of what might occur within the insurgency and its leadership, nor did they suggest what regime would best serve the United States' regional and global interests. US officials acquiesced as Pakistan's ISI forced the alliance into creating an interim government, comprised of various members of the political parties. Pakistani officials, too, were responsible for sponsoring and helping the Taliban to develop. By the time George H.W. Bush entered the White House, ‘self-determination’ governed the United States' policy for Afghanistan.<sup>69</sup>

At first glance, the Afghan political parties based in Peshawar seemed best placed to lead Afghanistan's rebuilding. Nevertheless, during the Afghan war, CIA analysts never even pretended that the political parties based in Peshawar predominantly represented the Afghan resistance, and time and again, they recognized the diversity of the insurgents. Despite the earlier discussions of ‘traditional’ Afghan society – and criticism of how tribal ‘traditions’

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<sup>68</sup> Directorate of Intelligence. ‘Can the Afghan Regime Survive an 18-Month Withdrawal Timetable?’ 11 July 1986, CIA-RDP86T01017R000302700001-8, CREST, NARA.

<sup>69</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 191, 195.

prevented a united resistance - there was little indication that US officials wanted to make it 'modern', or encourage a viable Afghan nation-state that no longer relied on tribal alliances and cooperation to function. In fact, there is almost nothing to indicate any vision of development and modernization for a post-invasion Afghanistan. Coll's account and others seem to argue that US attention was fixed wholly on a 'covert military strategy' that only began to shift toward political considerations after the Soviet-sponsored government did not immediately fall to the resistance.<sup>70</sup> This aligns with Michael Latham's arguments as well concerning Reagan's focus on hard-line military victories and repudiation of modernization theory in US foreign policy.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps, then, what is more interesting is that CIA officials were willing to supply the mujahidin with money and guns even though their lack of coordination and internal disputes obviously limited the resistance's efficacy and had no obvious endpoint.

Whether the general lack of any sort of planning or recommendations for post-invasion Afghanistan is a result of archival limitations, or whether it perhaps had broader implications concerning US foreign policy in Afghanistan and abroad remains in question. Given the broader regional context – the tensions that emerged between Pakistan and the United States due to the Pressler Amendment (intended to limit Pakistan's nuclear capabilities), the unexpected death of Zia ul-Haq in 1988, an unfriendly Iran, an unstable Central Asia following the break-up of the Soviet Union – either a total withdrawal or shoring up the United States' position in Afghanistan could have been promoted. Either the region was so insecure that non-involvement was best, or it required even further oversight. Given

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<sup>70</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 196; Andrew Hartman, "'The Red Template': US Policy in Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan", *Third World Quarterly*, 23, 3 (June, 2002), 467-89.

<sup>71</sup> Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, NY 2011), 181.

the available information, it would seem the CIA promoted the former rather than the latter. Yet ironically, as Ahmed Rashid has pointed out, American interests in Central Asia rekindled by the mid-1990s due to the region's oil and gas reserves.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps another facet to US ambivalence lies in the limited terms that CIA analysts used to describe and understand Afghan society both before and during the Soviet invasion. Static understandings of Afghan society did not adequately equip CIA analysts to deal with the rebuilding of Afghan society following a Soviet withdrawal. In their analyses throughout the Soviet occupation, CIA terminology changed little, and the dominant focus remained on the tribal and ethnic fractures dominating Afghan society; Islam was largely portrayed as a weak adhesive that could overcome only some divides. The focus on 'traditional' tribal, ethnic, and religious relationships shaped analysts' approaches to the conflict.

In this context, then, CIA analysts arguably did not possess the knowledge base to confront the massive changes that had swept Afghanistan during the course of the 1980s. While Afghan society continued to face tribal and ethnic divisions that had their roots in pre-invasion times, other social dynamics undoubtedly had changed. This was obvious within resistance as well as refugee networks: millions of Afghans faced displacement and encounters far beyond their homelands; younger generations of Afghans were coming to the fore in the fundamentalist parties; some religious leaders had attained positions that far outran the historical role of the mullah within Afghan (particularly Pashtun) society; and many Afghans' homes and livelihoods had been decimated. Afghan society could not return to pre-revolution norms: rebuilding had to occur.

So why does the CIA's contemporary approach to Islam and tribality matter?

Understanding the knowledge base that underpinned policy decisions helps us to understand

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<sup>72</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London 2000).

the information limitations that could influence officials both in the CIA and beyond.

Looking at historical documents like CIA analyses also certainly nuances current perceptions concerning the overwhelming influence of increasingly radical Islam on the mujahidin. It is difficult for many scholars not to link the rise of the Taliban directly to the Afghan resistance, but this denies the numerous political and social identities that abounded in Afghanistan at the time of the invasion.<sup>73</sup> The increasing influence wielded by the political parties in Peshawar did not stem tribal and ethnic preferences. And if anything, the experiences of the vast Afghan refugee community in Pakistan further complicated 'Afghan' identity, or identities, in the wake of the invasion. CIA officials seemed to perceive Islam far more as an ingrained element of Afghan society rather than a revolutionary impulse for most resistance fighters. Perhaps, then, CIA analysts were not in a position to recognize and understand the emergence and rise of the Taliban, though this must remain a matter of speculation.

Ultimately, it is not particularly helpful to give the CIA agents of the 1980s a slap on the wrist and argue that they should have known what they were unleashing in the form of extremist Islam along the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands. This is unfair, as it is clear that most analysts did not view Islam as a key political factor in the Afghan resistance. But officials did seem to lack imagination or forethought in considering how to 'unfragment' Afghan society. Instead what perhaps is most clear is that a very particular reading of Afghan history, which largely limited Afghan agency and discounted ability to adapt, dominated US intelligence approaches to the conflict in Afghanistan. This largely static understanding of Afghanistan and its people provided little room for musing the huge social and political changes that

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<sup>73</sup> Ayesha Jalal offers a particularly salient critique of the 'clash of civilization' theory that has overwhelmed studies of rise of global political Islam and its relationships with the west. See Ayesha Jalal, 'An Uncertain Trajectory: Islam's Contemporary Globalization, 1971-1979', in Ferguson, Maier, Manela, and Sargent, *Shock of the Global*, chapter 20.

would be necessary in a post-invasion of Afghanistan. Political Islam arguably could have – and in other areas, did – work as an alternative form of modernity, one that eschewed Cold War binaries. Perhaps, then, the ultimate lesson of CIA involvement in Afghanistan must be the overwhelming need for more flexible, nuanced readings of history to underpin the decision-making occurring throughout global governance – not just in the late twentieth century, but today.