

Conference Report

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Afghanistan – Country without State?

From 15-18 June 2000, more than 200 persons participated in an international conference entitled, 'Afghanistan – Country Without State?', organized by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Afghanistan (AGA) and the Mediothek für Afghanistan e.V. in Munich. In the almost 30 presentations given, researchers as well as representatives of NGOs and political institutions addressed the central question of whether Afghanistan is a failed or failing state.

Most papers focused on the construction of the Afghan nation state and the political culture related to it. From these analyses, it appeared that the state apparatus that had evolved in the 20th century was a quasi-foreign body that tried to impose various forms of control on the country and its people, but failed to build an Afghan nation. Karl Jettmar (University of Heidelberg) pointed to the necessity of re-examining the existing nation-state structures of Central Asia in general. Rasul Rahim (Wuppertal) discussed the tremendous obstacles that prevented the development of a civil society in each phase of Afghan history. Eckart Schieweck (UN-Special Mission to Afghanistan) analysed the growth of Afghan government institutions and their destruction in the course of the Afghan War. Rangin Dadfar Spanta (University of Aachen) argued that the protracted war has led to the destruction of political culture in Afghanistan, which constitutes the major problem for developing a common idea of state and civil society. The papers of Angela Parvanta (University of Bamberg), Conrad Schetter (Center for Development Research, Bonn) and Rameen Moshref (New York) dealt with the constructed character of the Afghan nation and the equation of Afghan nationalism with Pushtun

culture. The role of the state in the notions of political Islam was stressed by Olivier Roy (Centre National Recherche Sociale, Paris). He concluded that political Islam has failed to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity in Afghanistan. He and Neamatollah Nojumi (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Somerville) discussed the question of how the failing state in Afghanistan and the inter-linked export of international Islamic brigades are affecting the neighbouring states as well as other countries. Almut Wieland-Karimi (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung), Max Klimburg (University of Vienna) and Bruce Koepeke (Australian National University, Canberra) dealt with the effects of the war and Islamist policies on local culture and popular religiosity, which revolves around Sufi networks and saint worship, and, in the case of Nuristan, is rich in pre-Islamic traditions. Two presentations concerned the institution of the *jirga* and its potential as a means of decision making on the local and national levels. Bernt Glatzer (Deutsche Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung) pointed out that the assemblies held in the rural setting primarily serve as a public enactment of a consensus negotiated by the local leadership before the *jirga* is summoned. This process of conflict resolution hinges on the ability of influential men to act as opinion leaders and is entirely local in scope. Christine Noelle-Karimi (University of Bamberg) drew attention to the limitations of the *loya jirga* as a political mechanism on the national level. Initiated as an instrument for promoting government policies in the early 20th century, it by no means represents a time-honoured basis for installing democracy in Afghanistan.

Other speakers focused on the current situation in Afghanistan. Amin Saikal (Australian National University, Canberra) gave a detailed overview of the external actors (e.g. Pakistan and Iran), that are involved in the Afghan conflict and weaken the reconstruction of the Afghan state. Reinhard Schlagintweit (Bonn), as well as Michael Pohly (Freie Universität Berlin) and Citha Maass (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin) discussed the meaning of state for the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. They concluded that none of the war parties had either a conception of state or the capability to assume its responsibilities. Two major sources of support for the Taliban were examined by Ahmed Rashid (Far Eastern Economic Review, Lahore) and Michael Lüders (Die Zeit, Hamburg). Rashid depicted the dynamics at work between the Taliban and the Pushtun tribes. While certain tribal groups made the upsurge of the Taliban possible in the first place, others openly reject their policies. Michael Lüders gave an inside view of the indoctrination young students and potential Taliban cadres are subjected to in the Pakistani *madaris*. Peter Schwittek (Caritas, Kabul) reported on the desperate need for education programmes and the contradictions he encountered at different levels of the Taliban government in his (ultimately successful) efforts to establish schools for 13,500 boys and girls. Heike Bill (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, Jalalabad) discussed the Taliban policies concerning women. She pointed out that the restrictions imposed on women do not reflect a specific Taliban ideology but have rather had the effect of institutionalizing and legitimizing patterns of oppression already prevalent in Afghanistan before its as-

sumption of power. Michael von der Schulenburg (UN-International Drug Control Programme, Vienna) investigated the factors encouraging opium production in Afghanistan and its rising proportion on the world market. Jonathan Goodhand (Manchester) presented a study on the local level concerning the social and economic transformations a rural village in North Afghanistan underwent with the introduction of opium production.

In summary, the conference has shown that the state has lost its influence on the political, ideological, social and economic affairs in Afghanistan. Therefore, it might be right to claim that Afghanistan is a country without a state, even though a failed state keeps its responsibility by law as Hermann-Josef Blanke (University of Erfurt) emphasized. How to cope with a region in which state structures have collapsed is a salient problem not only related to Afghanistan – as Schlagintweit mentioned – and will pose a challenge to international security systems in different parts of the world (e.g. Somalia, Sierra Leone) in the future.

The papers presented at the conference are in the process of publication. ◆

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■ Afghanistan are fighting with such powerful determination to resist the Taliban attempt to return the country to the status quo ante, i.e. the conditions of Pushtun internal colonialism before the onset of anti-Communist jihad (1978).

The ultimate product of person-centred tribal Pushtun political culture

Finally, the ultimate product of the person-centred, tribal Pushtun political culture in Afghanistan is the rise of the Taliban militia movement with its enigmatic, and increasingly apotheosized leader and his militantly anti-Shi'a, anti-modern, anti-Western, anti-women, and especially anti-democratic policies and practices. The Taliban's 'divinely ordained' reclusive leader, Mullah Umar, was proclaimed on 4 April 1996, by a gathering of some 1,200 mullahs in Kandahar, the spiritual capital of Talibanism, as the Amirul Mu'mineen (Commander of the Faithful). As such, he is the ultimate source for articulating and enforcing the 'new' Muslim orthodoxy/orthopraxy of Talibanism in Afghanistan – the basis of his legitimacy.

The Taliban project themselves as the bearers of peace and 'true Islamic justice' in the country, a form of justice bent on the enforcement of the harshest principles of *hudud* in the *shari'a*. Such punishments include, for example, amputating the limbs of thieves, stoning to death of adulterers, and public execution of murderers by the victims' relatives in sport stadiums with thousands of spectators. Their real claim to infamy comes from the imposition of a policy of 'Gender Apartheid' directed against the girls and women of Afghanistan. This collective self-image of Talibanism is further buttressed by the projected images of their for-

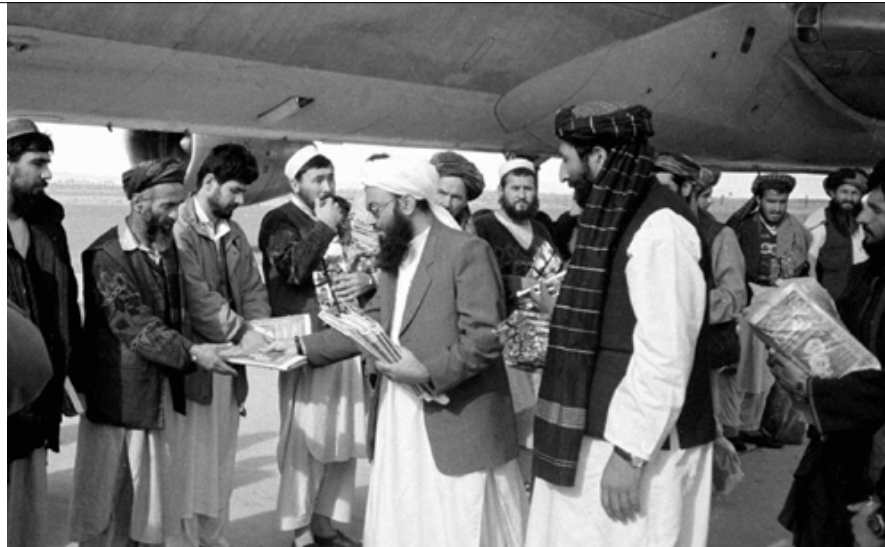


PHOTO: ANP, MOHAMMAD BASHIR, 14 FEBRUARY 2000

eign Muslim allies, the various conservative and radical Pakistani Muslim political organizations. These include, among others, two factions of the Jamiat-e Ulema Islam (JUI) led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Moulana Samiul Haq, the two rabidly anti-Shi'a terrorist groups, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and Harakat-ul-Ansar, as well as Ben Laden's military organization, Al-Qa'ida. True to the nature of person-centred tribal political culture, the projected positive 'Islamic' self-images of Taliban are contrasted by demonizing the Muslim character of their many opponents. Ironically, many of those being damned are, in fact, well-known heroes of the anti-Soviet jihad. The Taliban also demonize their opponents' foreign patrons, Muslim and non-Muslim, such as Shi'i Iran, Russia and Central Asian republics, except for Turkmenistan.

The rise and successes of Talibanism, fleeting as it may turn out to be, fits well within the structural patterns and dynamics of wars of

succession in Afghanistan, at least during the last 100 years. The mysterious beginnings of the Taliban, and their quick adoption by foreign forces in this instance by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,⁶ have had major precedents in Afghan history.⁹ The economic support of foreign Muslim sponsors has made it possible for the Taliban to purchase loyalties from a huge chain of economically desperate and dependent local commanders within the country. These external patrons, by extending official recognition to the Taliban regime, have also condoned the Taliban version of Islamic extremism and have facilitated the recruitment of much needed foreign fighters (Pakistanis and others) from Pakistani Muslim seminaries (*madrasas*) and beyond.

What distinguish the Taliban and the rise of Talibanism at this juncture in the history of Afghanistan, are the radically altered political ecological and economic conditions, both inside Afghanistan and in the region, following

Afghan Taliban Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel (centre) greets returning Afghan hostages.

the collapse of the former Soviet Union. That is, the presence of multiple competing foreign Muslim sponsors, with their divergent or conflicting strategic, ideological, political and economic agendas have proved to be the ideal situation for the emergence of an extremist militia organization such as the Taliban within the person-centred tribal political culture of the Pushtun in Afghanistan. Indeed, these same political ecological realities in the region have also fuelled the wars of resistance against the Taliban hegemony, forcing it to resort to increasingly violent policies and practices against women, Shi'is and the non-Pushtun ethnolinguistic communities in Afghanistan. ◆

Notes

1. North, Douglas (1990), *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 93.
2. Wolf, Eric (1982), *Europe and People without History*, Berkeley: UC Press, p. 94.
3. Banfield, Edward (1970), *The Unheavenly City: The nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*, Boston: Little, Brown, p. 85.

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