Return to the Silk Routes

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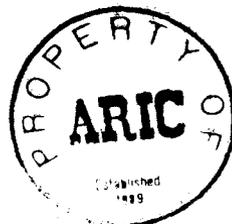
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War and Change in Afghanistan
Reflections on Research Priorities*

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Insufficient knowledge of the social and political transformation in Afghanistan during the war is an obstacle to finding solutions to the conflict. This is the basic assumption of this paper, in which I will elaborate on some of the war-initiated processes that I consider to be insufficiently studied. New research on these processes could provide essential input to the building of peace.

Recent publications on the peace process in Afghanistan have revealed the extent to which negotiators have had minimal insight into Afghanistan's social and political make-up.[1] To some extent the explanation is that negotiations have taken place under a cold-war logic, according to which only the international dimension of conflict was a legitimate concern. However, no mediation processes have fully neglected the need for a domestic political solution.

Academic interest in Afghanistan grew throughout the 1960s, resulting in a number of high-quality publications within history and social science. Research suffered a dramatic setback from the onset of war, as the indigenous academic environment became severely affected by the political conflict and the opportunities for foreigners to do fieldwork became increasingly constrained. Although the war led to a dramatic increase in publications on Afghanistan, many of the wartime analyses are severely biased, and they

[1] Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, New York 1995, and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State*, New Haven 1995.

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are rarely based on primary material.[2] Travelling and working in the country have become easier since the communist abdication in April 1992, but this has not stimulated a new wave of research. The requirement now is for empirically solid, fieldwork-based studies.

Research themes emphasized in this paper are guided by an interest in contributing to an understanding of the current conflict, and ultimately in inspiring solutions to it. This is not a denouncement of other research priorities, but it reflects the conviction that whatever the short-term developments will be, Afghanistan is in dire need of a debate about its future, informed by knowledge about its recent past. Furthermore, the lack of references to any particular theoretical or methodological framework is not incidental. There is both room and need for a variety of approaches; what is important is that the dialogue between researchers, as well as between researchers, policy-makers and people, is strengthened. Hence, the selection of themes is policy-oriented, and their presentation here is general. The six themes of the paper secure a wide catch: the politicization of society, the militarization of society, war economy, the technological revolution, migration and the international dimension.

1. Politicization

Afghanistan before the war was a country whose population cared little about politics at the national level. The so-called palace politics of Kabul barely affected living conditions beyond the capital. If people had to throw their support behind any political candidate, the choice would reflect little but local loyalties based on kinship and economic relations. Yet, rulers in Kabul have historically lacked the resources to control the country, and

being in power has depended on alliances with various forces, most often the tribes. The 1973 coup, in which former prime minister Daud dethroned the king, Zahir Shah, was the first instance of an Afghan ruler taking power solely with the force of the army.[3]

With the onset of war, intense ideological struggles were introduced into the most remote valleys. Although traditional loyalties continued to play a role, they did so within a different context, one in which people also saw their participation in a movement with national ambitions as one aspect of their personal identity. The most recent empirically solid work on the politicization initiated by the war is Olivier Roy's *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*.[4] The fundamentalist Taliban movement, which emerged in late 1994 and currently controls two thirds of the country, including the capital, Kabul, has yet to be analysed. Peace proposals for Afghanistan often assume that pre-war arrangements can again stabilize the country, an assumption that neglects the deep politicization brought about by the war.[5] In fact, had these arrangements functioned, there would most probably have been no war.

1.1. Large-scale identities

Numerous political parties were established in Afghanistan from the early 1960s, when new political openings were provided under the so-called New Democracy initiative. The parties, whether Islamist, Marxist-Leninist or Maoist in orientation, had much in common. The scene of their political battles was Kabul, particularly the university campus. Their recruits were young people who, in their encounters with modern science, had developed a deep dissatisfaction with Afghan traditionalism and wanted swift political and economic change.[6] While all these movements presented themselves in strong ideological terms, their membership was as much decided by belonging to a network based on kin, common place of origin or enrolment at the same institution. The popular support for these movements was extremely

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[2]   For a useful bibliography, see Schuyler Jones, *Afghanistan* (World Bibliographical Series, vol. 135), Oxford 1992. Another useful source is the historical dictionary by Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, Metuchen (New Jersey) 1991. A useful collection of essays that can inspire new research is Ewan W. Anderson and Nancy Hatch Dupree (eds), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, London 1991. Although the quality of contributions is more uneven, the following seminar reports are also useful: Rasul Amin (ed.), *Social and Cultural Prospects for Afghanistan*, WUFA [Writers' Union of Free Afghanistan] Journal of Afghan Affairs, Special Issue, 5:4 (1990), Rasul Amin (ed.), *Rebuilding Afghan Political and Legal Institutions*, WUFA Journal of Afghan Affairs, Special Issue, 7:1 (1990), E. Eide and T. Skaufjord (eds), *From Aid During Times of War to Aid for Reconstruction and Development*, Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, Peshawar 1992, and Suroosh Irfani and Fazal-ur Rahman (eds), *Afghanistan: Looking to the Future*, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad 1991.

[3]   Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, Richmond 1995.

[4]   Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986. Roy's book, first published in French in 1985, has not only become a reference work on Afghanistan; it is also a frequently quoted source on political Islam.

[5]   Kristian Berg Harpviken, 'Transcending Traditionalism: The Emergence of Non-State Military Formations in Afghanistan', *Journal of Peace Research* 34:3 (1997), pp. 271–287.

[6]   Olivier Roy, op. cit.

small, but it was from this environment that the key figures of the conflict were to come, communists and Islamists alike.[7]

The politicization of Islam is crucial. Islam was the common denominator for the resistance. Core Islamistic political organizations with a potential for expansion were in existence and the international radicalization of Islam meant inspiration, political support and funding. Not least, in a population strongly Muslim in a popular religious sense, Islam provided a rich repertoire for collective action, exemplified in *jihad* (struggle in defence of one's religion) and *hijrat* (the escape of Muhammed from Mecca to Medina; refuge to protect one's religious belief). There is a need to understand better the distinction between fundamentalist and modernist Islamic movements when it comes to recruitment, principal objectives and popular support. This was demonstrated by the emergence of the Taliban, whose initial success largely reflected dissatisfaction with the irreconcilable line of the Islamists. Ethnic differences have become important dividing lines, with different movements seen to represent primarily the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek or Hazara populations. Apparently, ethnic divisions became more prevalent with the disappearance of the Soviet threat.[8] There are several possible explanations for this: the new political awareness makes the traditional Pashtun domination in national politics unacceptable; new political and military organization makes protest an opportunity; the Soviet-inspired nationality policy of the communist regime has strengthened ethnic identities.[9]

The movement towards adherence to larger-scale identities is insufficiently studied. Emerging from what is said above, one crucial concern must be the interplay between religion, ethnicity and the formation of political groups.[10] The apparent contradiction between modern and traditional organization should be addressed. In my view it is exactly the ability to rely on traditional

networks that has been the major success criterion for the so-called modern organizations.[11] Changes reflecting the policies of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) or the Soviet Union are almost neglected, probably because research itself was so politically influenced during the war. New source material should now be available thanks to the opening of Soviet archives.[12] Existing studies of political change in Afghanistan tend to treat the relations between the communist government and the population as static rather than dynamic, failing to grasp the extent to which the government interacted with all parties.

1.2. New leaders

Looking at Afghanistan's present-day leadership, it consists of people who all have a share in the responsibility for the current state of affairs. In other words, the country is in dire need of unifying leaders, but has no Nelson Mandela. This is largely the result of the war itself. War rarely promotes those leaders that one needs in peacetime, but there is more to it than that. The communists, once in power, targeted leaders with a potential for rallying an opposition faction, including religious leaders, village leaders and political opponents within the Maoist or Islamist groups. The Islamists targeted intellectuals with a capacity for opposing their line of resistance politics, effectively joining hands with the Kabul regime in securing the political arena for the Islamist-communist confrontation. Independent members of the country's intelligentsia, as well as many local leaders, were killed or escaped to a country outside the region.

Simultaneously, the war has fostered a change in the forms of leadership.[13] Traditional local leadership was based on patron–client relations. The local leader had to be able to gather support from his followers, and from his sovereign, the state administration. Support from below is dependent on the ability to mediate resources; support from above is dependent on the ability

[7]   The coming government party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), had around 5,000 members, from the technocratic élite of bureaucrats, officers and students. About 200 members were within the armed forces (Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, Durham (North Carolina), 1983). For a comprehensive pre-war political history, see Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 3rd ed., Princeton 1980.

[8]   Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, New Haven 1995, pp. 264–265.

[9]   E.g. Kristian Berg Harpviken, *The Dynamics of Identity: Shifting Scales in Recent Mobilisation among the Hazara*, unpublished manuscript, 1995, 40 pages. See contributions on ethnicity in Afghanistan in Jean-Pierre Digard (ed.), *Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*, Colloques Internationaux (Editions du CNRS), Paris 1988.

[10]   Robert L. Canfield, 'Afghanistan: The Trajectory of Internal Alignments', *Middle East Journal* 43:4 (1989), pp. 635–648.

[11]   Kristian Berg Harpviken, *The Dynamics of Identity*, and Kristian Berg Harpviken, 'Transcending Traditionalism'.

[12]   Odd Arne Westad, 'The Foreign Policy Archives of Russia: New Regulations for Declassification and Access', *The Society for Historians for American Foreign Affairs Newsletter* 23:2 (1992), pp. 1–2.

[13]   Asger Christensen, *Aiding Afghanistan: The Background and Prospects for Reconstruction in a Fragmented Society* (NIAS [Nordic Institute of Asian Studies] Reports no. 26), Copenhagen 1995.

to prevent conflict and prepare the ground for state interference. Maintaining a leadership position consists of balancing these conflicting interests within a multi-tiered patron–client system. This traditional form of leadership was challenged during the war, and many resistance organizations, particularly the Islamist ones, were hierarchical, with a greater potential for large-scale mobilization and quick action and with lesser checks on leadership.

1.3. Silent majority?

Soon after the Soviet invasion, Pakistan, which was fronting for the United States in supporting the Afghan resistance, granted recognition to six resistance parties thereby effectively excluding dozens of others from foreign support. The parties recognized were all Islamic, primarily Sunni Muslim, and had an established working relationship with Pakistan's Foreign Office and intelligence.[14] Membership in one of these parties was also obligatory for becoming registered as a refugee. Pakistan effectively stopped all other political initiatives, resulting in a divided resistance susceptible to outside control.[15] Military and financial support was dependent on military efficiency, not political popularity. The effects became clear after the 1992 communist abdication. Of seven Pakistan-based parties, only three survived, the common denominators being efficient military organizations, foreign support and the will to apply violence to gain power.[16] Other groups had problems making their voices heard in the ongoing violent conflict.

The indication is that the parties currently dominating the political scene in Afghanistan are anything but representative of the population.[17] The

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[14] Riaz M. Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal*, Durham (North Carolina) 1991.

[15] Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story*, London 1992.

[16] These parties were Jamiat-e Islami, Hezb-e Islami and Ittehad-e Islami. The parties that have more or less withered away during the past four years are Harakat-e Inqelab, Hezb-e Islami (Khales), National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA) and Afghanistan National Liberation Front (ANLF). Furthermore, there was a number of Shiitic groups, most of whom joined Hezb-e Wahdat in 1989; see Kristian Berg Harpviken, *Political Mobilization Among the Hazara of Afghanistan 1978–1992* (Report no. 9, Department of Sociology, University of Oslo), Oslo 1996.

[17] This was also the analysis of the United Nations, when its 1994 mission concentrated on creating a 'public space', meeting numerous personalities not affiliated with the battling parties and arranging virtual mass meetings both in Afghanistan and in refugee centres elsewhere (Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, p. 136). The

country has a 'silent majority', and it might be by enhancing the expression of this majority's view that one can foster a peaceful solution to the conflict. The challenge here is not only to lay bare the facts of political loyalties but also to promote a debate on how to provide an opportunity for the silent majority to influence the political process.

2. Militarization

The processes of politicization and militarization are closely intertwined. Indeed, one of the central arguments above is that much of what is seen to be politicization is actually militarization, making open political debate impossible. When militarization is here treated independently, it is because it entails a number of distinct issues, such as the impact of modern warfare and the potential for demobilization. Yet, it needs to be emphasized that it is exactly in analysing and disentangling phenomena within the broader politicization–militarization complex that one of the major research challenges lies.

2.1. Modern warfare

Present writings on Afghanistan often assume that the post-communist fighting in the country is merely a return to a normal state of affairs, based on a conception of the inherently warlike Afghan. In contrast, some analysts have attempted to establish the difference between modern war and a traditional, tribal mode of warfare, also called feud. The feud is a limited kind of warfare: fighting appears only during times of leisure, it does not go beyond the group's primary area, infrastructure is not destroyed, casualties are limited, and women and children are spared.[18] Hence, pre-war Afghanistan was a society with a conflict level exceeding that of many other societies, but the conflicts and their effects were restrained by a comprehensive set of norms. It is exactly these norms that were violated when the communist government and the Soviets exposed Afghanistan to total warfare. The

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1994 U.N. initiative was brought to a halt by the emergence of the Taliban movement.

[18] Louis Dupree, 'Post-Withdrawal Afghanistan: Light at the End of the Tunnel', in A. Saikal and W. Maley (eds), *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 29–51.

population adapted to the requirements of modern warfare and with external aggression gone, it has become evident that traditional warfare norms have withered.

A different mode of explanation would emphasize the organizational change brought about by the war. The military organizations of Afghanistan today are very different from those existing before the war. They are larger in scale, they are more formally hierarchical, and they consist of permanent troops. Changes in military organization are closely linked to the politicization process, including the trend towards larger-scale identities.[19] A major cause of the emerging military relations is, of course, the external threat; the brutality with which the communist regime approached the local communities is truly astonishing.[20] However, the scope and durability of the military mobilization would be unthinkable without a change of leadership, the introduction of new technology and extensive foreign support.

2.2. *Conditions for demobilization*

Afghanistan has a young generation that has never experienced the absence of war. Not only does this mean a generation suffering from war-traumas; it also means a generation that is more competent to make war than to undertake most other activities. Thus, for any settlement to hold in Afghanistan, demobilization becomes a major challenge. With the resistance entering Kabul after the communist abdication in April 1992, one would have expected the communist government's military to dissolve. Exactly the opposite happened; their skills were in demand, creating competition between different resistance groups in making the best offers to the élite troops of the former regime, often co-opting whole units *en bloc*.

However, there have been examples of indigenous demobilization. With the fall of the PDPA government in 1992, many resistance fighters and commanders felt *jihad* was over and withdrew from fighting.[21] Being part

of the traditional Islamic network, these people had a non-military retreat, hence an opportunity to withdraw with dignity. Apparently, demobilization is facilitated when people have access to a different position which is more attractive than continuing fighting, in terms of both economic security and social status. In the past few years, demobilization has become a major theme in the study of conflict settlements, yet no study has been undertaken on demobilization in Afghanistan, in spite of the fact that indigenous instances of demobilization have taken place.

2.3. *Might is right*

As long as conflicts are resolved by military means, it is military might and not political support that will decide matters in Afghanistan. This is most clearly seen in the withering away after 1992 of the parties that had no strong military organization or external sources of supply.[22] In a sense, this is the 'silent majority' theme revisited: it is the few who possess the military means to enforce their claims who get heard, there is no space where the population is heard, and political change becomes hostage to the manipulation of military–political leaders who are hardly accountable to anyone. The current domination of military power in politics fosters a vicious circle of violence that needs to be broken, yet military forces continue to enjoy foreign support, while any group opposing the continued violence is unable to make itself heard.

3. War economy

The war has initiated a profound change in the economy, inspiring new demands, altering transport and distribution networks and providing new business opportunities. A distinct war economy has developed, parts of which are closely integrated with the new political and military organizations. The war economy includes drug production, smuggling and processing, the importing and smuggling to neighbouring countries of a variety of capital-intensive goods, the taxation of transport by armed groups, the taxation of

[19] Kristian Berg Harpviken, *The Dynamics of Identity*.

[20] Fredrik Barth, 'Cultural Wellsprings of Resistance in Afghanistan', in R. Klass (ed.), *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited*, London 1987, pp. 187–202, and M. Nazif Shahrani, 'Introduction: Marxist "Revolution" and Islamic Resistance in Afghanistan', in M. N. Shahrani and R. L. Canfield (eds), *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan*, Institute of International Studies (UCLA), Berkeley 1984, pp. 3–57.

[21] Asger Christensen, op. cit., p. 68. When the Taliban emerged in late 1994 in protest against the incompetence and 'heresy' of the other political parties, the core of its

network was formed by traditional religious leaders (*ulama*), who had withdrawn from fighting in 1992. Some had in fact demobilized after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

[22] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 265.

local residents by local leaders, arms trade and the looting of private and public buildings following the conquering of new territory.

3.1. Basis for conflict

The war economy generates its own interests and resources which then become further incentives or bases for the continuation of conflict. Economic success, hence also political survival, becomes dependent on the control of certain resources, such as access to the border or control over a territory that contains specific assets (for example, minerals or fields suitable for poppy cultivation). Hence, when the Taliban in early September 1996 took control over three more provinces in eastern Afghanistan, including Jalalabad on the main road from Kabul to Peshawar, this was a major blow for the government, which lost direct access to the country's borders.[23] When Ahmad Shah Massoud in the late 1980s allowed Soviet arms transport to go through against a certain compensation, this was also motivated by the economic needs of his organization. It is likely that most political decisions in present day Afghanistan are motivated by the wish to secure a group's resource base in the short to medium term, not by the contribution it makes to a long-term solution at the national level.

3.2. Independence of political formations

Afghanistan has a weak state, controlling only a share of the country's territory, with coercive capacities that are at best on a par with those of its adversaries. In other words, the government has no monopoly over the means of coercion. As a matter of fact, it is also an open question whether it is a legitimate government, even though the international community has so far decided not to tamper with its recognition.

In analysing the current situation, there are two contradicting positions. On the one hand, it is claimed that with the collapse of the PDPA government and the drying up of external resources, there has been a shift of power from the new commanders back to traditional leadership figures.[24] On the

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[23] Kabul fell to the Taliban on 27 September, 1996, in a relatively bloodless overtaking, as the government forces fled their positions.

[24] Asger Christensen, op. cit., p. 67.

other hand, it is claimed that the 1992 change led to an economic revival for many commanders, with their new independence being further strengthened by the downgrading of foreign patronage.[25] This divergence of views might be explained by local differences, but it is more likely that both underestimate the extent to which there is continuity in change. I tend to believe that the most successful 'modern' leaders are those who have managed to accommodate traditional sources of loyalty and existing forms of organization.

3.3. Business prevents peace?

The war economy favours a few at the expense of many. Before the war, most economic transactions involved a benefit for both parties. Now, in what is still effectively a war situation, the one who possesses the means of coercion can enforce his will, obtaining a benefit by threatening evil. Unfortunately, the few who gain will find it in their interest to protect their business opportunities, which again presuppose some state of war. With time, the war economy penetrates much of society, making most people dependent on it, hence also making it resistant to change. If a functioning government were to be established in Afghanistan, it would have to target the war economy. That is an extremely demanding task, yet one that is necessary to restore human dignity, to secure the government's survival and to rebuild Afghanistan's international relations. The problem is not easily addressed, but problem-solving gets easier with more substantial knowledge of how the war economy operates.

4. Technology shock

Afghanistan was, and most certainly is, one of the world's least developed countries, ranked 169 of 174 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's 1996 Human Development Index.[26] The war has led to the destruction of much of the country's infrastructure, including buildings, roads, electric-power supply and industrial installations. However, the war

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[25] Barnett R. Rubin, The Search for Peace in Afghanistan, p. 97.

[26] UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), Human Development Report 1996, New York 1996.

has also introduced an extremely traditional society to a technological revolution, particularly in those sectors that were important for the war effort.

4.1. Weaponry

Probably the most significant technological change has been in military equipment. In pre-war Afghanistan, weapons were fairly common, but Lee Enfield rifles were the most advanced and even those were relatively rare. Remote valleys, whose inhabitants had barely been visiting their neighbouring valley and where wooden ploughs were still dominant, suddenly became exposed to modern military equipment like tanks, helicopters and even Stinger heat-seeking ground-to-air missiles.[27] More advanced weaponry increases the effectiveness of military formations: more people are killed in battle since a relatively small group can inflict large-scale damage. The link to the militarization of society is clear; indeed the militarization rests on access to advanced weaponry.

The new availability of arms is not only a political problem; it is also a criminal one. In Pakistan, there is great concern over the role that 'surplus arms' from the Afghanistan conflict play in both political and criminal violence in the country.[28] This concern also applies to Afghanistan, although its current chaotic situation makes it difficult to disentangle the effects. Undoubtedly, arms collection should be an integrated part of a settlement in Afghanistan. Further knowledge of the impact of weaponry would be an asset in the current situation, but it is even more important to come up with good ideas on how to bring about disarmament.

4.2. Media

The war has led to a media revolution in the country. Every family now has a transistor radio, the BBC news (in indigenous languages) being the favourite

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[27] David C. Isby, *War in a Distant Country. Afghanistan: Invasion and Resistance*, London 1989, and Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed., London 1990.

[28] Chris Smith, 'The Impact of Light Weapons on Security: A Case Study of South Asia', *SIPRI* [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute] *Yearbook 1995: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford 1995, pp. 583–593.

programme. There has also been an upsurge in the distribution of printed material, but more so in the refugee settlements abroad than in the countryside of Afghanistan. Newspapers and magazines have often been party publications and are propagandistic rather than informative in nature.[29] There are two effects of the media revolution. First, information on national and international politics has become widely available, leading to a different sense of being situated in the larger world. Second, the population is frequently exposed to political propaganda.[30] There are reasons to question the effectiveness of this propaganda; the priority given to the relatively neutral BBC is encouraging, as is the apparent loss of popular support for the political parties resulting from post-communist fighting. The media revolution is one of the most important war-induced changes, particularly because it has an inherent potential in the event of a political resolution process.

5. Migration

The conflict in Afghanistan since 1978 has led to the largest coerced movement of people in recent times, with about 5 million refugees in Iran and Pakistan and estimates of internally displaced persons ranging from 1 to 2 million.[31] Repatriation started after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but it became substantial only after the fall of the communist government in April 1992. By now, about half of the refugees have returned. The escalating conflict from 1994, particularly in Kabul, led to the displacement of up to half a million people, mostly within Afghanistan.[32]

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[29] Paul Bucherer-Dietschi, 'Change and Continuity: Documentation for Action and History', in R. Amin (ed.), *Social and Cultural Prospects for Afghanistan*, WUFA Journal of Afghan Affairs, Special Issue, 5:4 (1990), and Jan-Heeren Grevemeyer, 'Anmerkungen zur Literatur der afghanischen Widerstandsbewegung', *Orient* 34:2 (1993), pp. 195–198.

[30] David Busby Edwards, 'Summoning Muslims: Print, Politics and Religious Ideology in Afghanistan', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52:3 (1993), pp. 609–628.

[31] Michael Knowles, *Afghanistan: Trends and Prospects for Refugee Repatriation* (Refugee Policy Group), Washington DC 1992.

[32] USCR (U.S. Committee for Refugees), *World Refugee Survey* (Immigration and Refugee Services of America), Washington DC 1995, pp. 99–100.

5.1. Escape

Some research has been done on refugees who left in the 1980s, but the methods and conclusions were largely elementary. Most of these studies focused on what motivated flight.[33] The data sources are typically interviews with non-random samples of refugees, often several years after flight. Major reasons for escape emerge as being anti-Islamic government, fighting or bombing, threat of army conscription and belonging to a targeted group. Escalation in outflow is related to shifts in warfare. One of the studies touches on the interplay of coercive factors with attracting factors in the country of destination.[34] One feature of the Afghan refugee experience is the so-called 'refugee warrior' community; resistance groups established camps in exile where the families stayed while the men participated in the struggle across the border.[35] It is a puzzle that groups which were similarly situated in relation to all acknowledged refugee-driving factors still have enormous differences in flight rates. I believe that refugee studies suffer from focusing on either individual motivations or structural forces, while variations in escape rates are more likely to be understood by looking at relations between people, both within the primary group and between the potential refugee and people settled at the destination.

5.2. Exile

In exile, refugees have been exposed to societies different from their own in terms of belonging, culture as well as economic and technological development. Children up to mature age may never have seen their home country. Having had to live in dense settlements, often with people from a different part of the country, has led to changed living habits, as exemplified in a much stricter application of the female dress code. Many people are now well established in exile, with jobs or private enterprises, naturally

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[33] Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Afghanistan: Case Study* (UNCHR), Geneva 1992, Kerry M. Connor, 'Rationales for the Movement of Refugees to Peshawar', in G. M. Farr and J. G. Merrian (eds), *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival*, Lahore 1988, pp. 151–190, and Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, New York 1989, pp. 150–155.

[34] Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, op. cit., p. 12.

[35] Aristide Zolberg et al., op. cit.

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affecting the will to return.[36]

Exiled groups continue to be involved in politics. Soon after the communist coup of April 1978, the communists targeted political adversaries, particularly among the intelligentsia. A number of these people left before the Soviet invasion. With living conditions inside the country becoming increasingly difficult throughout the war, the bulk of the educated élite left the country. Many of them did not settle in neighbouring Pakistan or Iran but went on to Western countries. In fact, those who were politically active, but critical of the major resistance parties, were targeted also in their first country of exile. There are at least two important results of the intelligentsia's escape. First, the general 'brain drain' effect; it is by now a common saying that there are more Afghan medical doctors in Germany than there are in Afghanistan. The same goes for all other educated groups, with crucial competence for reconstruction and development being lost. Second, the exiles often appear to be less willing to compromise than people within the country. That is worrisome, because exiles appear to maintain substantial influence within Afghanistan, and so far they have also constituted a key resource for the U.N. in its attempts to mediate in the conflict, as well as in the transition administrations that the U.N. has proposed.

5.3. Return

The exile experience affects not only the willingness of refugees to return but also their adaptation if and when they return. In spite of the massive repatriation that has already taken place, particularly in the summer of 1992, we know next to nothing about how the experiences in foreign countries affected the process of resettlement in Afghanistan.

Refugees who repatriate may have stayed away for more than a decade. Their home communities have changed, and there is considerable room for dispute. A classical conflict issue is landownership. In some places radical political groups have simply redistributed large landholdings and destroyed all archives.[37] In other places internally displaced people have simply accommodated themselves on 'no-man's land'. Similarly, repatriation may

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[36] Hanne Christensen and Wolf Scott, *Survey of the Social and Economic Conditions of the Afghan Refugees in Pakistan* (UNRISD [United Nations Research Institute for Social Development] Report no. 88:1), Geneva 1988.

[37] Michael Knowles, op. cit., p. 31.

be accompanied by conflicts over leadership. Some of the returnees belong to traditionally dominant families, while the new local leaders may have a totally different background. This is already a problem; in several areas traditional leadership has been re-established at the cost of wartime leadership.

Interesting ideas were presented by Bernt Glatzer in a comparative sketch of two regions where repatriation has been, respectively, massive and limited.[38] The author relates this difference to the maintenance of pre-war social structures in the area of origin, reflected in a low conflict level, hence good security. Further, he finds that return is facilitated by stability of pre-war social organization during the years in exile. Lastly, ties between people in the home and host areas seem crucial to repatriation. Glatzer's observations underline the need to focus on the role of interpersonal relations in flight and repatriation.

6. The international environment

This article has been focusing mainly on internal changes rather than external ones. This is to a large extent because the international dimension has received much more research attention than the internal one. It is also because I believe that the role of internal causes has been underestimated, and because any solution to the current crisis will have to be generated from within. It is important in itself to sensitize the Afghan and the international community to this simple fact. Nonetheless, I will sketch out a few themes relating to the international environment that I view as important to follow up.

6.1. International responsibility

The international responsibility for the Afghanistan war may seem obvious, not least when it comes to the Soviet engagement. Yet, as early as 1993, Russia refused any responsibility for the situation in Afghanistan, under the pretext of being a different state not liable for the actions of the former Soviet state. In recent years, new insights into the Soviet engagement have

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[38] Bernt Glatzer, 'From Refugee to Resident: Effects of Aid on Repatriation', in E. Eide and T. Skaufjord (eds), *From Aid During Times of War to Aid for Reconstruction and Development*, Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, Peshawar 1992, pp. 161–170.

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been gained; for example, it has become clear that the 1978 coup was indigenous and that the 1979 invasion was a very divided decision within the Soviet leadership.[39] A closer look at the U.S. role might be equally interesting. There are strong indications that dominant forces in the U.S. administration were motivated by the wish to let the Soviets 'bleed' in Afghanistan, confronting the cold-war adversary with relatively little risk for the USA. As a matter of fact, invitations to negotiate a settlement, first by Andropov in 1983, then by Gorbachev in 1985, were neglected by the Americans.[40] With an international settlement at this stage, things would have looked different; it was in 1985 that the USA stepped up its arms supplies, the same year that Soviet warfare intensified. There might well be a strong ethical case for a more extensive international engagement in solving the Afghan conflict, but this case is not easily made when serious investigative research is almost absent.[41]

6.2. Regional actors

A common denominator in policy-oriented articles on Afghanistan is the call for regional disengagement. The conflicting engagements by neighbouring countries are well established and have been an aspect of the Afghan war since its inception. Yet, it is much more difficult to establish the extent to which neighbouring states influence processes in any decisive manner.

The situation in Afghanistan demonstrates the conflicting interests of the states in the region. However, there have been attempts to build regional cooperative institutions, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), with the membership of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the new Central Asian states. Needless to say, ECO has not yet been very successful. However, strengthening regional security cooperation is as much

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[39] G. M. Kornienko, 'The Afghan Endeavour: Perplexities of the Military Incursion and Withdrawal', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 17:2 (1994), pp. 2–17, and Odd Arne Westad, 'The Foreign Policy Archives of Russia'.

[40] Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, op. cit., and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan.*

[41] Recently, the argument for international responsibility has been emphatically made by Amnesty International (*Afghanistan: International Responsibility for Human Rights Disaster*, London 1995). However, the Amnesty report has a weak empirical base for its claims, actualizing the question about how to secure a better dialogue between researchers and policy-makers including international humanitarian organizations.

a normative project as a political and economic one, and with the near absence of debate on the issue, progress is not likely. It is important that major efforts are invested in exploring the resources for and constraints on enhancing regional cooperation, preferably by researchers within the region.[42]

When debating regional influence, it must also be emphasized that the borders are less clear-cut than in developed states with strong state capacities. For example, many of those living in the border areas of Pakistan/Afghanistan, and the nomads in particular, have never paid much attention to this division line, a fact that has also made the registration of refugees problematic. In a parallel vein, several of the movements might have political, financial and military backing from neighbouring countries, support not endorsed by the governments. A number of movements in Pakistan, Iran and the Gulf states have backed their preferred groups in Afghanistan, groups that they might regard as extensions of their own international movements, rather than as independent recipients in a foreign country. Much political analysis of foreign involvement fails to account for this, presupposing that each country involved has a consistent policy. Clearly, the opposite is true, but disentangling the dynamics of external support to the adversaries in Afghanistan is no simple task.

6.3. International humanitarian aid

While the international research interest in Afghanistan withered with the onset of war, a number of international humanitarian organizations became interested, ranging from the U.N. to small European solidarity initiatives set up exclusively for the Afghan cause. To begin with, aid was aimed solely at the refugees in Pakistan. Throughout the late 1980s, more and more agencies started to operate in Afghanistan, and from 1992 aid was intentionally redistributed to Afghanistan in order to encourage refugee return. Much of the aid was politically motivated, as when the United States redirected its aid programme to the Afghan Interim Government from 1989 in order to strengthen its legitimacy.[43] More recently, people in

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[42] See Rahim M. Elham (ed.), *The Impact of Nascent Soviet Changes on Central Asia and the Region*, WUFA Journal of Afghan Affairs, Special Issue, 7:2 (1992), for a number of contributions by researchers from the region.

[43] This is interesting, given that the USA did not officially recognize this government, despite having been heavily involved in its establishment.

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the aid community have become interested in the conflict-driving effects of aid and the potential to design aid projects in such a way as to foster conflict resolution rather than feed the fire.[44] Further investigation of the way aid interacts with conflict should be prioritized. Given the current situation in Afghanistan, it is much more realistic to build peace by starting out with local, small-scale undertakings than by continuing to concentrate on the top-level leadership, a strategy that has failed for more than a decade.

It has become a common assumption in the aid community that refugee aid 'clientelizes' its recipients, ultimately becoming in itself an obstacle to repatriation. The designed cutback in aid by international agencies, as well as the 'U.N. repatriation package' to encourage refugee return, have been based on this assumption. For many of the refugees, education and health services in exile were better than what they had been used to at home. On the other hand, the aid community itself should also be made subject to research. For example, the clientelization argument has an important function in legitimizing aid cuts and should be made subject to closer scrutiny.

As is familiar from other places, the establishment of international organizations has the effect of legitimizing domestic challenging forces. This has been particularly true in the past decade with ethnic discrimination becoming so prominent on the international agenda. The international presence helps to legitimize domestic challenging forces, whether based on religion or ethnicity.

7. Concluding remarks

If an effort to contribute to a long-term solution in Afghanistan is to succeed, one needs to acknowledge the limitations of research. In itself, research is not the answer; there is a need for a broader collaborative effort, engaging people involved in policy-making both at various levels and in different contexts. Their contributions are essential but can be secured only by an invitation to comment on the research agenda.

The erosion of Afghan academic capacity is a problem. Nonetheless, an

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[44] See Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace through Aid* (Collaborative for Development Action), Cambridge (Mass.) 1996. This general booklet is to be followed by a larger book, in which Afghanistan will constitute one of twelve case studies.

enhanced international engagement would need to pay attention to the need of training a new generation of Afghan academics, even though this would often mean starting at a relatively basic level. It is possible to find talented, committed people in Afghanistan who deserve to be given the opportunity. Nor should the possibility of bringing back exiled Afghan academics be ruled out. In any case, I am inclined to argue that unless one secures a comprehensive Afghan involvement, the whole exercise remains futile.