Article 1.

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AFGHANISTAN
The Alien Presence

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Composed in November 2001
(was published by International War and Peace Reporting)

[Anthony Fitzherbert: the author of this article is an agricultural consultant, has had a long association with Afghanistan going back to his first visits in the early 1970s on holiday from Iran where he was managing some private farms. In the mid 1980s when he was responsible for the Afghan desk for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the U.N. (FAO), based in Rome he visited Kabul and Mazar i Sharif several times, then still under Soviet control. Subsequent to the Geneva Accords in 1988 he went on several missions to establish contact with the mujahideen groups in different areas in order to assess the war damage and start the process of agricultural rehabilitation following the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in February 1989. Between 1989 and 1995 he managed the FAO's agricultural rehabilitation programme in Afghanistan. This involved travelling regularly and widely throughout rural Afghanistan, which he knows extremely well. On one of these missions to monitor agricultural projects in Kandahar province early in 1994 he was one of the first (if not the first) foreigner to meet the Taliban. At that time they were a new and mysterious armed movement of 'mullahs for peace' that had started to manifest itself in the villages west of Kandahar city, at that time under the control of four rival mujahideen commanders. He has met them since on a number of occasions and in different situations. Since the autumn of 1995 he has been working mainly in the Central Asian Republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but has continued to return on a regular basis to different parts of rural Afghanistan, both to areas under the control of the Taliban and to those still controlled by the opposition Northern Alliance. His most recent visit to Afghanistan, concluded only two weeks before the September 11th catastrophe, was a three week mission deep into the valley of the northern Hindu Kush. This is an area mainly inhabited by a Tajik and Hazara population, but controlled since 1998 by the Taliban.]

Article No. 1. Draft.

With the ending of the Cold War and the departure of the greater rivals for power and influence, the place of Soviet Russia and the United States in Afghanistan was filled by a horde of lesser predators fighting and snarling like jackals over a corpse. The Taliban are, as much as anything, the latest manifestation of would-be dominating powers. In this case they represent the imperial and economic ambitions of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, greedy to gain political control of Afghanistan on the road to the wealth of Central Asia and until they realised the serpents they were nurturing in their bosom, aided and abetted by certain Western oil interests.

In northern Afghanistan, west of Mazar i Sharif in the plains of Shiberghan, at least until the recent fighting started, Arab and Pakistani engineers were striving to restore the sources of oil and natural gas hastily capped by the retreating Soviets. The last great cedars and firs from the once beautiful forests of Nuristan, Kunar and Paktiya are being hauled out of the Afghan mountains by armies of mules marked with brands of the Pakistani army. Thousands of implacable Arab and Pakistani 'mujahids' make up the core of the Taliban fighting force against the Northern Alliance.

This army of fanatics have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities committed during Afghanistan's years of internecine strife. They are an alien force hated, despised and feared in turn by most Afghans, powerless in the face of, or corrupted by the economic resources that back them.

After a nationalist mob had burned the Pakistan embassy in Kabul, the British handed over their still intact and respected embassy, set among its neat beds of Wisely roses, to the Pakistan government in 1995. One of the last monuments to British Imperial glory in the Sub-continent. "The finest embassy in Central Asia" built on the orders of the Viceroy - Lord Curzon "Worth" (in his words.) "ten battalions of our finest troops!". After the last British diplomats had packed their bags and left, this memorial to a
vanished power was in its last few years guarded, perhaps appropriately, by a handful of unarmed Gurkhas, yet no Afghan of any side had deliberately harmed it. Six months almost to the day after Whitehall had handed over this imperial after thought to the Pakistanis, another irate mob of nationalist Kabulis, infuriated at the role played by the Pakistan military in the taking of Herat by the Taliban, ransacked and set it alight.

In December 1988, I was called at twenty four hours notice, from my desk in Rome, to join a small joint United Nations agency mission in Pakistan in order to travel into the Kunar valley in south eastern Afghanistan, from which the Soviet forces had only recently withdrawn, in order to assess the damage wrought by ten years of war and meet the mujahideen forces. Starting from Peshawar we travelled to the Afghan border through Bajaur tribal agency and because the roads on the Afghan side were sown with land mines we walked into the Kunar valley from the top of the Nawa pass down a narrow track, very carefully, one behind the other.

The formerly rich Kunar valley irrigated by its wonderful river rising in the heights of Nuristan in the eastern Hindu Kush and in the Pamirs, had been reduced to a desert by ten years of fighting. The villages all lay in ruins, the land lay un-tilled. The civilian population had long ago fled to refugee camps in Pakistan. The valley was strewn with the wrack of battle; burned out tanks and armoured personnel carriers and wrecked artillery pieces their barrels pointing crazily towards an empty sky. We arrived that evening foot-sore and weary at the bombed and burned out remains of the provincial town of Asadabad and slept that night on the floor of one of the few habitable buildings. All that night the sky over the mountain tops to the west was lit by the flashes of explosions from the fighting that was still raging between the Soviet forces and the mujahideen round Shiwa, on the approach road to Jalalabad.

The next morning, before being taken to see the mass graves of those massacred by the Communists eleven years previously in the wake of the Saur revolution that overthrew the rule of Daud Khan, our mujahideen hosts proudly took us out to watch a 'lashkar', a war party, set off down the valley towards the Jalalabad front. They were a motley force of Kunari Pushtoons and Nuristanis, variously arrayed and armed. Some heavily bearded, others still beardless boys. Leading this force of warrior peasants on the march down the valley was a rather different group. Strangers from another land, more uniformly dressed and armed, more implacable in aspect, who glared at us 'faranghis' with loveless eyes. After a prayer recited in unison they marched off down the valley chanting as they went "Jalalabad by the spring! Kabul by the summer! Bokhara by the autumn!". Well it was not quite completed in that time scale and part of the objective is still to be achieved, but there was no doubting the intent.

Later, we learned that when they overran the villages of Shiwar and Shegah, which had remained within the Soviet security ring around Jalalabad throughout the Soviet war, the Arab forces fighting with the Afghan mujahideen committed some terrible atrocities relating to women. This was something new and traditionally quite outside the Afghan code of fighting, that had usually honoured the integrity of women, lest it lead to unlimited tribal feuding.

Two years later in the spring of 1991 the agricultural rehabilitation programme that I was managing was engaged in an intensive programme assisting the population of Kunar returning from the refugee camps in Pakistan, with seed to replant their fields, nurseries of fruit trees to re-establish their orchards, and assistance in repairing their irrigation systems, fallen into disrepair during ten years of conflict. It was about this time that we started to meet increasing problems and harassment from Arab fanatics occupying a 'training camp' near the old government agricultural station at Salarbagh. There were several of these training camps scattered up the side valleys in Kunar and we would meet these foreign 'mujahids' from time to time, but did our best to give them as wide a berth as possible. They were mainly Arabs, but there were also groups from the Southern Philippines and other areas of Moslem discontent.

We had been working in Kunar since the autumn of 1989 and up to that point had received nothing worse than black looks from these foreign fighters whenever we encountered them, marching up the road or going to collect water from the river. They lived under the protection of the Afghan Wahhabis who controlled most of the central Kunar valley, who were being well paid for this 'honour'.

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This most extreme branch of Sunni Islam had been brought to Kunar by Arab missionaries from Saudi Arabia well before the Soviet war. Acceptance of the Wahhabi view of life had, however, always been somewhat uncertain among the Kunari Pushtoons and Nuristanis. The extreme puritanical tenants of the Wahhabi belief run contrary to the tradition of most Sunni Afghans, with their pirs and saints and zyarats (the venerated graves of saints), grave yards, martyrs flags and Sufi brotherhoods. Among the Pushtoon tribes the fierce code of honour, the famous pushtoonwali- the code of the Pushtoons has customarily taken precedence over shariat law and the Nuristanis are comparative newcomers to Islam, having been forcibly converted from their ancient pagan beliefs only a little more than a hundred years ago.

We had never had any problems with the Kunari Wahhabis themselves, who were always most cooperative, but that spring our difficulties with the Arabs began to increase until over a period of two days we were faced with a series of increasingly violent and aggressive confrontations.

The first of these incidents occurred as my chief engineer and myself were leaving a meeting with the Afghan Wahhabi commander where we had been discussing the priorities and progress of the irrigation rehabilitation work that we were engaged in at the time. Our meeting was entirely amiable and satisfactory.

As we left the commander's base we were confronted by a wild eyed Arab, vowing our destruction, foaming at the mouth and screaming anathema's. Cursing me as an infidel dog and our Afghan engineer and driver as being worse than infidel dogs. With us also was a charming Sudanese United Nations Volunteer - all six foot nine of Southern Sudanese Christian, who had joined the mission at the last minute. Particular fury and venom was aimed in his direction. It was only by dividing our forces and distracting the Arab's attention that we managed to make it safely to our vehicle and get back to our base in Assadabad, but not before he had ejected a great gob of phlegm and spittle into my face.

We complained to the Afghan Wahhabi commander, who apologised profusely, and with shame. begging us to continue with our work, with the assurance that we would have no more trouble. "We have shut the dog in his kennel. You will have no more trouble," were his exact words. That evening as we discussed the day's events our little team of Afghan engineers and driver passed many bitter remarks about these most unwelcome guests in their country; "They will be the final ruin of Afghanistan. Far worse, far more dangerous even than the cursed Shiravi (the Soviets)," was the general consensus. The language in which this was stated was less polite than is written here.

The following morning and despite the assurances we had been given the previous day, as we set off to inspect the work in progress, we were set upon and surrounded by about fifteen or twenty of these Arabs in the centre of ruinous Assadabad. They had lain in wait in a side alley from which they appeared, whooping and yelling, clinging to the sides of two pickups, like so many bearded Keystone Cops, mouthing oaths and curses and clearly bent on our destruction !! If the intent of these fanatics had not been quite so alarming, the scene might have been one of comedy.

I will never forget my brave driver, Wasiullah, a diminutive Pushtoon from the Jaii valleys in Pakhtia, with a fine turban and a finer long black beard, that any Wahhabi would have proud of; though he was not one. He scrambled out of our vehicle, against my orders, and put up his lists ready to take on the whole of Arabia in our defence or die in the attempt. We were saved from a lynching by a huge Afghan Wahhabi commander, who with a group of his mujahideen arrived just in the nick of time and restored order. Picking up the slighter Arabs two at a time and tossing them to the right and left.

So we were able to return to our base where we were joined shortly afterwards by the deputy mujahideen commander of the area, a pleasant well educated and reasonable man with whom we had always been on the best of terms. He was full of shame and swore that this was not the Afghan way. He assured us that we were their honoured guests. We were helping them recover from the ravages of war. Again and yet again he repeated that this was not the Afghan way. We had to realise that these were not Afghans. These were Arab dogs and once more they had been "shut in their kennel !!" But. he did not know how long they could keep be kept there and possibly it might be better if we left the Kunar valley for the time being until calm had been restored. They would provide us with an escort.
I replied, that I knew that this was not the Afghan way, but why did they give shelter to such “dogs”?. At this he indicated that there was little they could do to resist the power or money. "You know us" he said ingenuously! "We are poor men!" he said grimly! "When the money runs out!" Here he made a gruesome gesture, "We will cut the dogs' throats!"

There was growing tension in the valley fomented by these Arabs, which broke into open conflict shortly after this incident and the work of rehabilitation came temporarily to a halt. It was later, when Sadam Hussein marched into Kuwait, that indeed for a short while the flow of money for these particular Arabs did appear to dry up. They were thrown out of Kunar and we resumed our work of rehabilitation uninterrupted and on our customary good terms with the local Kunaris. This does not imply, in any way, that the Kuwaiti government was financing the operation, but certainly it indicated the direction from which the funds were coming. A strange side effect of another act of banditry. Unfortunately they returned later when the cash began to flow again and the Kunar valley is still, by all accounts, a favourite place for these training camps of mercenary fanatics.

Other more lethal incidents followed this one and the following year two United Nations international staff and another foreign aid worker were pulled out of their vehicle on the road to Jalalabad and shot through the head with cold deliberation. Another escaped with his life as by a miracle. The perpetrators of this outrage were never officially identified or apprehended but the finger of evidence pointed directly towards the Arab ‘training camps' in Nangarhar.

I have never before and I hope will never again be confronted by other humans who quite so clearly saw neither myself nor my colleagues as fellow beings in any sense, but as creatures like cockroaches to be destroyed, crushed under-foot and eliminated from the face of the earth.

Before and since that time, I have been on many missions into some of the furthest and remotest corners of rural Afghanistan. It has been my good fortune to be engaged in agricultural work and this has kept me in the countryside in the villages and among the fields and orchards rather than dodging the shells, rockets and mayhem in Kabul as many less fortunate colleagues have been. Most of these missions have been without worse “alarums and excursions” than rough roads, long days and hard beds. Almost without exception I have met with the greatest courtesy, good manners and hospitality from rural Afghans whose own lives and livelihoods have been shattered, often repeatedly, by conflict, the death of their families, the destruction of their homes and the dislocation of their lives and their country.

That is not to say that missions have always been without hazard. Like the time we were bombed four times by Doctor Najibullah’s MIGS on the road between Urgun and Gardez. Fortunately they missed us! Or when we ‘mislaid’ for a week or so, our New Zealand agronomist and three of our Afghan team, when they with their vehicle were kidnapped by Afridi ‘dacoits’. But that was in Pakistan, not in Afghanistan, and on the approach road to Peshawar from Darrah Adamkheil. There have been crazed mujahideen commanders, opium trading mullahs, unwarrantable young ‘mujahideen! still in their teens, manning check posts with their AK 47s at full cock and their eyes rolling in their heads with ‘chars’, land mines to look out for when you went for a pee and other hazards. But nothing has been quite so un-nerving as the expression on the faces of these fanatics. Utterly malignant and pitiless! The face of the minds that blew apart the heart of New York. But they were NOT, as it happens, Afghan faces.

It is that first incident, when I was spat at full in the face by a man who I had never met before, with whom I had no quarrel and who was himself a foreigner in Afghanistan, that is indelibly and terribly imprinted on my memory. It is this visage so contorted with unreasonable hate that I see in nightmares all often years later. Unless we understand the causes that have created the reality in which this hatred lives and the powers that manipulate it in their own greedy interests we can never adequately defend ourselves against it. It is neither as simple as bombing them with high explosive nor bombing them with peanut butter.