

## World Conflicts: Asia and the Middle East

# Afghanistan

A country long plagued by foreign occupations, repressive governments, political instability, and warfare, Afghanistan became a center of international attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century. During the 1970's, the Soviet Union established a puppet regime in Afghanistan. After the Soviets withdrew all their military forces in 1989, a communist president stayed in power, while tribal guerrillas continued to fight for the freedom of their country. In 1992 an Islamic government replaced the puppet regime, but internal strife continued and intensified. The Muslim Taliban controlled most of the country by the beginning of 2001, but resistance forces survived in some areas, chiefly in the north. During the struggle against Soviet occupation, Muslim fighters from other countries had become heavily involved in Afghanistan and the Taliban government was allied with the international radical Muslim group known as al-Qaeda, which was led by wealthy Saudi Arabian Osama bin Laden. Terrorists believed to be members of al-Qaeda conducted devastating attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Afterward, when Afghanistan's Taliban regime refused to deliver Osama bin Laden to the United States, large-scale military forces led by the United States invaded Afghanistan and made common cause with the anti-Taliban resistance forces within the country. This resulted in the defeat of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government. However, Taliban fighters kept the war going, and the country continued to suffer from political and economic disorder.

Afghanistan is strategically situated with Iran on its western border and Pakistan to the east and south. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan border Afghanistan on the north. The northeastern tip of Afghanistan touches China. A landlocked country covering 250,000 square miles, Afghanistan has been overrun by foreign armies since antiquity. North of Kabul, the Afghan capital, the Hindu Kush Mountains, reaching altitudes of more than 21,000 feet, provide many safe locations for guerrilla forces. Trade with Pakistan flows through the thirty-five-mile-long Khyber Pass. The Pakistani border region has provided a haven for munitions smuggling throughout the years of warfare.

Kabul, which had an estimated population of 1.5 million people at the end of 2001, has been the capital of Afghanistan since 1776. When the Soviet forces left Afghanistan in 1989, the city was still whole and beautiful. As most of the fighting up until then had occurred in the countryside, Kabul remained relatively untouched. Afterward, however, fighting became concentrated in and around Kabul, as guerrilla leaders fought for control of the capital. The city started to be ravaged by bombings, gunfire, and constant bombardment. By 1998 Kabul was divided into sections that represented different controlling factions. Virtually no area of Kabul escaped attack. In late 2001 the city began suffering further damage in the war between the Taliban and forces allied with the United States.

Half of Afghanistan's people speak Dari (Afghan Persian), 35 percent Pushtu, 11 percent Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen), and 4 percent more than thirty other, minor languages (primarily Baluchi and Pashai). Bilingualism is prevalent throughout the country. With so many different languages and tribal allegiances, it has been difficult for the Afghan people to unite under one government.

Although no fully accurate census of the Afghan population has ever been taken, the estimated population of the country in 2002 was 22,813,000, not including approximately 2,000,000 Afghan refugees believed to be in Pakistan and another 2,000,000 refugees in Iran. Approximately 38 percent of Afghanistan's population was Pashtun, 25 percent Tajiki, 6 percent Uzbek, and 19 percent Hazara, with other minor ethnic groups making up the rest. The country's predominant religion is Islam, with 84 percent of the people practicing Sunni Muslims and 15 percent Shiite Muslims.

### **Early History**

Known in ancient times as Ariana or Bactria and in the Middle Ages as Khorasan, Afghanistan was long used as an invasion route by outsiders. Darius I, the Persian emperor, conquered parts of what is now Afghanistan in the sixth century b.c.e. Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered the country three centuries later on his march to India. Foreign empires, local emirs, and kings ruled until the eighteenth century. The classical Bactria was the home of the prophet Zoroaster.

The seventh century rise of Islam and the subsequent Muslim conquests changed the ancient world. Several powerful kingdoms disappeared. An Arab army invaded Afghanistan in 652, and many people converted to Islam. In 1219 Genghis Khan invaded Afghanistan. Several other conquerors came to the country over the next few centuries. Afghanistan also saw the rise of some ethnic rulers during these centuries.

Although no boundaries were established for Afghanistan until the nineteenth century, modern united Afghanistan was created in 1747, when the Afghans assembled at Kandahar and chose Ahmad Khan Sadozai as their shah. Ahmad Shah had a vision of uniting the Pushtu speaking tribes, and he changed his tribal name from Abdalie to Durrani. His reign and that of most of his successors was plagued by uprisings by the various chieftains. The Sadozai kingdom came to an end in the nineteenth century.

### **International Domination**

Afghanistan became the focus of international conflict in the nineteenth century. The British sought to protect India from the Russians. In an effort to stop the Russians, Britain brought pressure on Afghanistan, which resulted in two British-Afghan wars, one from 1839 to 1842 and the other from 1878 to 1880.

British forces first pushed into Afghanistan in 1839, taking Kandahar and Kabul. Tribal opposition led to the withdrawal of the troops in 1842. During this withdrawal, almost all the British troops were killed by Afghan tribal warriors. The Second Afghan War erupted in 1878 over British concerns about negotiations between Shir Ali Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1863 to 1878, and the Russians.

Once again, Great Britain was afraid of Russian interference with the Indian border. The conflict ended when Abdur Rahman Khan became Afghanistan's ruler in 1880. He ruled until 1901, promoting the idea of national unity and diminishing the power of the warlike tribes. In 1893 he talked with the British and established the Durand Line, the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan that remained into the late twentieth century.

Habibullah Khan reigned next. He succeeded in keeping Afghanistan neutral during

World War I. The British retained control over Afghanistan's foreign relations until 1919.

### **Modern Afghanistan**

The Third Afghan War with Britain occurred in 1919. At this time Britain gave up any interest in Afghanistan's external or internal relations. Amanullah Khan, who reigned from 1919-1929, promoted many reforms in Afghanistan. He wanted a more efficient administration, a constitution, and a modern social structure. His plans outraged many of the traditional religious and tribal leaders. Kabul was seized by Afghan rebels in 1929, and Amanullah abdicated and left the country.

Nadir Shah Ghazi became the new ruler. A constitution was adopted, but internal strife resulted in his assassination in 1933. Mohammed Zahir Shah, Nadir Shah Ghazi's oldest son, was declared king upon Nadir's death. Mohammed's uncles and cousins were influential throughout the country during this time. The traditional policy of isolation was abandoned, and the first factories, roads, and irrigation projects were begun. Afghanistan remained neutral in World War II, but the resulting lack of trade in the country strained the economy.

Mohammed Daud became premier in 1953. During the next decade, the government was run by Mohammed Zahir Shah, Mohammed Daud, and Mohammed Naim. By the late 1950's, new social and political reforms had been instituted. In 1963 Mohammed Daud resigned and was replaced by Mohammed Yusuf, the first nonroyal premier in office. A new constitution was adopted in 1964. This constitution provided for parliamentary government and the basic rights of the people. The government functioned inefficiently during this democratic period, because no political parties were established.

### **Soviet Occupation**

A military coup led by Mohammed Daud ushered in a republic in 1973. Daud was named president and premier of the new republic. He declared the 1964 constitution invalid and replaced it with a new constitution in 1977 that supported the presidential form of government in a one-party state. Daud's control over the army weakened, and in April, 1978, another military revolt overthrew his government. Daud was killed.

The days of April 27-28, 1978, known as the Great Saur Revolution, established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and nullified the 1977 constitution. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) became the only legal party. Nur Mohammed Taraki became president of the council and premier. The Soviet Union extended its support, and a treaty of friendship was signed in December, 1978.

The Muslim tribal communities were not happy with the new government, and they soon revolted. The Soviet Union airlifted guns and military equipment into the capital. Infighting also occurred in the PDPA. In September, 1979, Taraki was ousted from power and replaced by Hafizullah Amin.

At that time the Soviet Union intervened when it became obvious that the new ruler was no more effective than the last. Thirty thousand Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December, 1979. Amin was executed, and the Soviet Union gained control of the government.

Babrak Karmal was installed as president on December 27, 1979. Afghan resistance

to Soviet domination was widespread. Eventually the Soviet troops numbered 115,000. Over five million Afghans left the country; three million sought refuge in Pakistan and two million fled to Iran.

The rebel guerrillas, known as mujaheddin, or "holy warriors," represented independent tribes with centuries of antagonism toward one another. The main strength of the guerrilla fighters was their knowledge of the countryside. The United States and China provided arms to the Afghan guerrilla forces through Pakistan to assist with their fight against the Soviet Union. However, guerrilla leadership and the power of the field commanders grew more quickly than the power of the political leaders.

By 1986 the Soviets desired to withdraw from the country. At this time the question of leadership within the country was unanswered. Karmal's faction of the PDPA, Parcham (flag), struggled for control of the party against the Khalq (masses). The Khalq had been the dominant force before the Great Saur Revolution. A new constitution was introduced in 1985 to ensure Parcham's grip on the party.

### **Political Shifts**

In May, 1986, another Parcham supporter, Major General Mohammad Najibullah, became general secretary of the PDPA and later Afghanistan's president. Karmal was relieved of his position. Najibullah, the former head of the Afghan secret police, attempted to bring about national reconciliation but failed.

The mujaheddin continued their attacks against the Soviet-backed regime in the Afghan countryside, where the guerrillas still had the advantage. In November, 1987, another constitution was adopted that greatly increased Najibullah's power. He was granted the command of the armed forces, the right of approval or veto over all laws, the ability to appoint all high-ranking officials, and the power to convene or dissolve the national assembly. The country was also renamed the Republic of Afghanistan.

In April, 1988, the United Nations (U.N.) mediated an agreement, providing for the withdrawal of Soviet troops, an end to Pakistan's rebel support, and the repatriation of refugees. Although the Soviets completed their troop withdrawal in February, 1989, the divisions between the rebels continued to cause fighting against the government of Najibullah.

Assisted by weapons left by the departing Soviet troops, the Najibullah government managed to stay in power for three more years. In response to an attempted coup and declining Soviet support, Najibullah and his government proposed a series of constitutional amendments. These amendments were adopted in May, 1990. The power of the PDPA was reduced, and the socialist orientation of the country was lessened.

### **Post-Soviet Conflict**

Communist president Najibullah resigned on April 16, 1992. The guerrilla forces, headed by the Tajik war hero Ahmed Shah Masood, were advancing on Kabul. On April 28, the rebels gained control, ending fourteen years of Soviet-backed regimes. Since 1979, more than two million Afghans had been killed while six million had left the country.

Clashes between moderates and Islamic fundamentalist forces began to occur soon

after the takeover. Each mujaheddin guerrilla leader wanted to succeed Najibullah. The mujaheddin leaders established a fifty-one member ruling council. The ruling council chose the interim president Sibghatullah Mujaddidi to run the government from April to June.

One of the Islamic factions, Hizbi Islamic Gulbuddin, led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar would not participate in the new Islamic government. Hikmatyar maintained that too many of Najibullah's officers had been pardoned. Hikmatyar took his troops to the south and proceeded to attack Kabul. General Abdul Rashid Dostam, a defector from Najibullah's army and leader of the Hizbi Wahdat Islami, withdrew from the ruling council and also began to attack Kabul.

On June 28, 1992, Burhanuddin Rabbani, one of the guerrilla leaders and founder of the Jamiat-I Islami political party, became president. The mujaheddin had retaken Afghanistan from the political leaders who were backed by the Soviet Union. Although the Muslim fighters had conquered the capital, fierce fighting continued around Kabul and other places in the country. At least nine different rebel groups began fighting each other. An attempt at peace was made on March 7, 1993, when President Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar signed an agreement. Hikmatyar was made prime minister designate.

### **The Taliban**

In 1994 the Muslim student group Taliban became the most powerful group in the war-torn country. The Taliban, consisting of Muslim fundamentalist students and clerics, believed that the ruling Rabbani government was too lenient toward the dissident guerrilla organizations and thought that the continued fighting by these guerrilla organizations stalled any peacekeeping efforts. The Taliban also believed that the government and the people of Afghanistan strayed too far from classic Islamic teachings. Thus, Taliban members believed that they were rescuing their country from both a corrupt government and a false religious orientation.

In 1994 the Taliban began a military campaign that resulted in their occupation of half the country by February, 1995. They insisted that Afghanistan become an Islamic fundamentalist state and gained increasing control. On September 6, 1995, the city of Herat fell to Taliban forces. The same day that Herat fell, the state controlled Radio Afghanistan announced that Pakistan had financed, directed, and led the Taliban forces into the city. Pakistan had never hidden its involvement in the Afghan civil war.

During President Najibullah's term, the United States sent money and arms to the mujaheddin through Pakistan. When the Cold War ended in the early 1990's, Western policy changed. The United States began to seek a peaceful solution to the Afghan unrest. Pakistan continued to support the mujaheddin.

By 1996 the Taliban had established a government in Kabul. The Taliban executed former President Najibullah. Strict Islamic rule was imposed and the laws were strictly enforced by armed police. Local Islamic judges handled judicial matters. Punishments were given according to traditional practices, including public executions and amputations of hands and feet. Burhanuddin Rabbani fled to northern Afghanistan, where anti-Taliban forces known as the Northern Alliance launched a rebellion.

The Taliban continued to receive aid, monetary backing, and moral support from

Pakistan. Much of the Taliban philosophy had been developed by Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the years 1979 to 1989. Saudi Arabia and some of the Arab Gulf states had also backed the Taliban forces. In the southern Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime was welcomed because it brought some prospect of peace. The Pashtun people also supported the Taliban as a way to stop the increasing political power of the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and other non-Pashtun controlled parties. The strict Islamic policies enforced by the Taliban in Kabul and Herat outraged the urban population but did not particularly affect the conservative southern Pashtun villages.

Iran backed the political leaders of the Northern Alliance who were fighting the Taliban. Other countries that supported the Northern Alliance included Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, and India. The United States continued to distance itself from the Taliban. Western interests and involvement in Afghan affairs had flagged when the Soviet threat was removed. The high cost of maintaining its military forces in Afghanistan played a significant role in the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Another problem that Afghans had to overcome was the loss of some foreign aid because of the planting and cultivation of opium poppies. Jalalabad, located east of Kabul near the Pakistani border, was well known for its poppy orchards and misuse of foreign funds throughout the 1990's. In 1993 more than 58,000 acres of poppies were sighted by satellite. Afghanistan became established as a major supplier of heroin. Many countries wanted to see a government emerge that would attempt to control the drug problem.

In 1997 the United Nations made a plea to all nations to stop interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Reference was made to the fact that the continuing internal conflict provided a safe haven for international terrorists and criminals. As long as the war continued, the promotion, production, and distribution of heroin would continue unchecked. Afghan violations of human rights were also addressed by the United Nations. A special envoy was sent to Afghanistan to assess peacemaking efforts and activities.

The strict Taliban regime continued. As an example of the control of the organization, on May 7, 1997, the Taliban announced the criminalization of the use of paper bags, claiming that the bags could contain recycled Korans. The Islamic *Sharia* law imposed by the Taliban prohibited alcohol, videotapes, music, television, and social activities between the sexes.

Women in Afghanistan were not allowed many basic civil liberties and rights. By October, 1997, they had practically been removed from public life. No woman could take a job outside the home or leave the home without a male relative as an escort. Afghan women did not receive adequate medical attention, because they were barred from the main hospitals in Kabul. The despair felt by most Afghan women could not adequately be assessed or expressed as the Taliban's strict rule continued.

By January, 1998, Taliban had lost much of its power in the north of the county. The bitter military struggle continued with the return from exile of General Abdul Rashid Dostam from Turkey, who established his former power base. Because of the strict Taliban blockade, many people north of Kabul faced famine conditions in 1998. The northern resistance to Taliban control remained intense. The Shiite elements of the Northern Alliance continued to be the most committed to destroying the regime of the Taliban. Burhanuddin Rabbani remained as president.