

Scenario 225

THE TALIBAN: WHO ARE THEY?

Taliban group emerged in 1994-95 during the continuing civil war since after the **withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989**, predominantly in the south-west of Afghanistan and the adjoining border areas of Pakistan. They vowed to fight corruption and improve security, but also followed a scrupulous and rigorous form of Islam.

During 1996-98, they had taken control of almost all of Afghanistan except some pockets of *Panjsher* valley which remained under the command of Commander Ahmad Shah Masoud – as the US and UK were backing the later with needed finances and required arsenal.

The Taliban enforced their own hard-line version of Islamic *Shariah* and introduced brutal punishments. Men were made to grow beards and women had to wear the all-covering *burka*. TV, music and cinema were banned. After their overthrow in ending 2001, they regrouped themselves in Pakistani border areas. In year 2021 there were about 85,000 full-time fighters – much stronger than at any point since 2001 – that’s why they were able to defeat regular Afghan army, NATO forces and, of course, the America too.

Although the US cannot be fully blamed for crafting the Taliban, then also called Afghan Arab community; nevertheless, by distributing arms through Pakistan’s ISI, the US developed an atmosphere in which radical Islam could flourish rapidly. This factor also brought thrilling optimism. In Afghanistan, teachers, merchants and many medical professionals started believing them as saviours of their Islamic values because the Taliban promised two things: Security and an end to the conflict between rival *mujahdeen* groups that continued to ravage their country through the 1990s and they continued to deliver the said two virtues until ending 2001.

AFTER THE SOVIETS LEFT:

After withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghan soils, a communist ruler Najibullah, in 1989, governed Afghanistan for three years without

any foreign sponsorship. In 1992, Tajik faction of *mujahedeen*, under the command of Ahmad Shah Masoud, captured Kabul, dethroned the Rabbani [a scholar and head of *Jamiat e Islami*]. However, Shah Masoud [head of the Northern Alliance] and Rashid Dostum [an Uzbek commander in Afghan Army] could not rein the control of the capital because another Commander Hekmatyar had immediately challenged their rule. Soon Dostum defected from his troika alliance with Rabbani and Masoud, and joined Hekmatyar *Mujahedeen* Group.

The new alliance of two groups of Hekmatyar and Rashid Dostum, devastated the whole Kabul city with their ruthless and brutal bombarding from the hills surrounding the city and left the rival *Mujahedeen* groups miserably bleeding.

On 28th June 1992; Burhanuddin Rabbani officially became president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, but had to battle other warlords for control of Kabul.

[In early 1994 [perhaps] in Kandahar, *Mulla Omar* led 30 men armed with 16 rifles to free two young girls who had been kidnapped and raped by a warlord. After armed scuffle, Mulla Omar caught that warlord and hanged him at a tank gun barrel; **National Geographic Documentary** (2007) '*Inside the Taliban*' is referred.

Another instance of the same year 1994: - two militia commanders confronted each other over a young boy whom they both wanted to sodomize first. In the ensuing fight, Omar's group got freed the boy. Appeals soon flooded in for Omar to intercede in other disputes of the surrounding villages.

Mulla Omar's Taliban movement gained momentum through the year and he quickly gathered recruits from Islamic schools totalling 12,000 by the year's end with some Pakistani volunteers. By November 1994, Omar's movement managed to capture the whole of the Kandahar Province and then captured the Herat Province in September 1995; some writers estimated that he had already taken 12 of the 31 provinces in Southern Afghanistan by that time.]

The **Daily Telegraph** dated 31st July 2015 is referred.

As mentioned earlier, Hekmatyar's forces had taken up their positions in the mountains around Kabul and bombarded the city ruthlessly. Meanwhile, one Ismail Khan controlled Herat and its surroundings; and several *Pashtun* commanders held *Kandahar*, *Helmand* and the south.

1 In short, there was chaos all over the country. A Pakistani journalist
2 argued then that:

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4 *".....the internecine fighting, especially in Kandahar, had virtually*
5 *eliminated the traditional leadership, leaving the door open for the*
6 *Taliban.*

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8 *The southern Pashtun warlords and bandits continued to fight each other*
9 *for territory, while continuing to sell off state machinery, property and*
10 *factories to the foreign traders. Kidnappings, murders, rapes, and robberies*
11 *were frequent as Afghan civilians found themselves in the crossfire."*

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13 The above situation gave rise to the Taliban movement; Afghan Arabs,
14 members of *mujahedeen*, students of Islamic seminaries [*madarasa*] in
15 Pakistan joined them promptly. Initial objectives of the Taliban movement
16 included restoration of peace, disarmament of the population, strict
17 enforcement of the *shari'a*, and defence of the Islamic values in country.
18 Mullah Omar, their organizer, used to teach at a Pakistani *madrassa*,
19 who had been injured during clashes with the Soviet army, returned to
20 Kandahar and surfaced as the new leader of the Taliban then.

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22 By December 1994, in addition to earlier 12000+ recruits, the Taliban's
23 each victory resulted in thousands of new recruits and local warlords'
24 influx into the Taliban movement.

25
26 **What they believed?** The Taliban are often portrayed as employing a
27 narrow interpretation of Islamic ***Shariah law*** inspired by the *Deobandi*
28 school of thought. However, by 1998 – during their first period in power,
29 ended with the US attack after 9/11 – the Taliban issued their own harsh
30 interpretation of Islamic life equally inspired by the *Pashtun* tribal code,
31 called the ***Pashtunwali*** in local language and culture.

32
33 This pushed away women from public life, mostly barred them from
34 working or studying and confined them to their homes unless accompanied
35 by a male guardian [called *MEHRAM*]. Public executions and floggings
36 were common, western films and books were banned and cultural
37 artefacts seen as blasphemous under Islam - so were destroyed.

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39 Some have suggested that the latest interaction of the Taliban in 2021 –
40 has the potential to be more moderate than during the period from 1996-
41 2001, but yet to see once they got established. In the immediate aftermath
42 of their astonishing conquest of Afghanistan, including Kabul, there
43 were mixed worrying indications.

Referring to **Michael Robin's** analysis captioned as ***Who Is Responsible for the Taliban***; appeared at www.Washingtoninstitute.org on 1st March 2002:

"Territorial conquest began on October 12, 1994, when 200 Taliban seized the Afghan border post of Spin Baldak. Less than a month later, on November 3, the Taliban attacked Kandahar, the second-largest city in Afghanistan. Within 48 hours, the city was theirs. Each conquest brought the Taliban new equipment and munitions from rifles and bullets to tanks and MiG fighters, for their continued advance.

The Taliban maintained their momentum and quickly seized large swathes of Afghanistan. By February 11, 1995, they controlled 8 of Afghanistan's 30 provinces. On September 5, 1995, the Taliban seized Herat, sending Ismail Khan into an Iranian exile. Just over one year later, Jalalabad fell, and just 15 days later, the Taliban took Kabul."

TALIBAN'S 1ST GOVERNMENT 1996:

On 27th September 1996; the Taliban, with military support of Pakistan and financial support from Saudi Arabia, seized Kabul and founded the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They imposed selected Islamic injunctions in areas under their control. Researchers estimated that:

"....between 1994 and 1999, an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 Pakistanis trained [students from Islamic schools and madrassas] fought in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban".

[p 288 of **William Maley's** book ***The Afghanistan wars***, 2009; Palgrave Macmillan, is referred]

This was the time when Ahmad Masoud and Commander Dostum, two former arch-enemies, had created a united front against the Taliban, later named as the Northern Alliance [NA]. In addition to Masoud's Tajik force and Dostum's Uzbeks, the Alliance included *Hazara* factions, *Pashtun* forces and some defected *Pashtun* Taliban. Both had agreed to work together under the exiled Afghan King Zahir Shah. The NA received all sorts of support from Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and India.

On 24th May 1997; the Taliban seized *Mazar-e-Sharif* town, however, after just 18 hours; a rebellion forced the Taliban to leave the city. When the Taliban again raided that town in August 1998, they took no chances and brutally massacred thousands of opponents there. The Taliban's

re-capture of **Mazar-e-Sharif** drove Dostum into exile while the conflict had gone extremely brutal. As per UN reports:

“...there had been 15 massacres between 1996 and 2001. The Taliban especially targeted the Shiite Hazaras in retaliation for the killing of 3,000 Taliban prisoners by Uzbek Gen Abdul Malik Pahlawan in 1997, the Taliban killed about 4,000 civilians after taking Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998”.

Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-E-Sharif
Human Rights Watch of November 1998 is referred.

Pakistan was backing the Taliban to conquer the whole of Afghanistan. With the fall of Kandahar, thousands of Afghan refugees, *madrasa* students, and Pakistani *Jamiat Ulama-e Islam* [JUI] supporters had rushed to join the movement. Upon the capture of their areas, other *mujaheden* commanders in Kandahar got angry with Pakistan, too.

The only exception was that the Taliban were unable to gain complete victory against Ahmad Shah Masoud, who retained control of his 5% territory in and around Punjsher valley in the north of Kabul. There was difference in fighting ability of the Taliban versus Shah Masoud who had received US support and training in the 1980s. Masoud remained undefeated against the Russian Army, too and [later] he held back the Taliban from ruling his territory of Afghanistan. Masoud's secret was superior training and loyal cadre of his fighters; whereas the Taliban's ranks mostly talked *jihad*. Moreover, unlike Masoud's men, the Taliban were incapable of fighting during night hours.

Another factor, that about 5,000 new '*Punjabis*' were seen by foreign media on their way into Afghanistan to supplement the fight against Ahmed Masoud. The American Defence Intelligence Agency [DIA] analyst also reported that amongst [Taliban] prisoners held by Masoud there were several Punjabi *madrasa* student fighters also.

The US State Department communiqués and analysis, drafted on the basis of Human Rights Watch reports, alleged that some Pakistani nationals fighting in Afghanistan were from the Frontier Corps of Pakistan. *Harakat-ul-Mujahedeen*, allegedly a Pakistan-supported warrior group in Afghanistan, had hijacked an Air India flight from Nepal to Kandahar in December 1999, eventually releasing the hostages after negotiations with the Taliban.

Pakistan has about 2500+ miles long border with Afghanistan thus most of the food supplies and livelihood items for the adjoining areas travel

through its cities like Peshawar and Quetta. However, some Taliban trade occurred with Turkmenistan and Iran too. Pakistan remained the effective diplomatic and economic lifeline for the Taliban leadership, elite and the general populace. Pakistan also provided crucial technical infrastructure support to allow the Taliban state to function smoothly.

Pakistan's support of the Taliban was a continuation of support for Islamist rather than nationalist factions inside Afghanistan. Nor was the ISI the only supporter of the Taliban within the Pakistan government; the then PM Benazir Bhutto's interior minister, Gen Nasirullah Babar also supported Taliban warriors actively. Some media reports also suggested that ***'Bhutto and Babar conceived of the Taliban as the solution to Pakistan's problems'***.

Referring to an article titled ***'Pakistan Ripe for Taliban-style revolution'*** published in **The Hindu** dated 24th February 2000:

"The Taliban were not beholden to any single Pakistani lobby such as the ISI. In contrast the Taliban had access to more influential lobbies and groups in Pakistan than most Pakistanis."

Citizens of Kabul used to comment about ***'Punjabi volunteers'*** from Pakistan; guarding ministries in Kabul in March 2000 were Taliban officials who could only speak Urdu and not any Afghan language. The Pakistani government never disputed the reports that thousands of trained Pakistani volunteers were serving with the Taliban in those days; nor was considered it a sin or crime by worldly standards because Pakistan army used to serve in so many other countries of Africa and Europe under the commanding arrangements of the UN – then why not to help a neighbouring state when needed.

Authentic media reports like ***'Pakistan under Musharraf'*** in **Defence and Foreign Affairs' Strategic Policy** of January 2000 told the facts:

".... In 1971, there were only 900 madaris (religious seminaries) in Pakistan; by the end of President Zia ul Haq's regime in 1988, there were over 8,000 officially funded madaris, and more than 25,000 unregistered religious schools. The most prominent of the seminaries -- the Dar al-Ulum Haqqania [Akora Khatak] from which the Taliban leadership was excessively drawn -- had 15,000 applications for only 400 spots in 1999."

In fact, the Taliban have never been a movement that came to power by support from the society [*though they claimed so*] but they were the one

faction that the US chose to support in 1996 to stabilize the country ravaged by warlords after the Soviets' withdrawal.

What happened just recently in 2021 was the worst case, of course. The world think-tanks got worried if Afghanistan would become the showcase of an Islamic statehood following the template of the IS caliphate; no one knows in fact.

TALIBAN SUPPORT FOR OBL:

The Taliban and Osama bin Ladin [OBL]'s **al-Qaeda network** were distinct identities though inter-woven. In 1996, OBL left Sudan due to his differences with Sudanese government and re-settled with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Those were days when the Taliban were officially recognized as the government of Afghanistan by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE] only.

On the other hand, the Taliban continued to shelter OBL, even after knowing about his involvement in the 1998's bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Taliban continued to harbour OBL, despite the international anger - because of Afghan traditions of hospitality - quite contrary to the fact that the Afghans had killed nearly 17,000 British men, women, and children when they were evacuating Kabul under a treaty after the First Afghan War in 1842.

Osama bin Laden was not a '*medieval barbarian*', but a wealthy Saudi national and student before joining the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. He regarded Western secularism as an affront to the *Sharia* Law, basis of the whole social fabric in Saudi Arabia. The West considered other religious beliefs like *Wahhabism* [one Islamic school of thought widely prevalent in Saudi Arabia] as '*medieval barbarity*'. By OBL's dictionary, it looks like an ancient horror to common Western people, but its pure religious culture is only a little different from some Christian fundamentalist sects.

Many Europeans knew that OBL was not a medieval primitive barbarian but a highly sophisticated, intelligent individual, just seeking shelter and protection in Afghanistan. How the 9/11 attack was planned and perpetrated stood very widely documented later. One can read all versions that how was it planned and who financed what. Doesn't matter who did it. The only relevant truth remained that the US created this mess itself and also suffered at the end - that's Americans' hard luck that the logical end took two decades to come.

OBL had brought with him to Afghanistan a well-equipped and loyal 1 group of 2000 fighters, called 055 brigade; many of them trained in 2 al-Qaeda's camps for terrorism abroad. OBL had made available several 3 hundred to fight for the Taliban at frontline against Shah Masoud. 4 However, the Taliban suffered a high international cost for hosting OBL 5 alone. At least 1,000 more Arabs arrived in Afghanistan following the 6 9/11 Attacks, crossing over from Pakistan and Iran; many got based at 7 Jalalabad, Khost, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif districts / provinces. 8

The US didn't adopt a consistent line on the Taliban. During 1990s, the 10 US pressured Saudi Arabia to cut ties with OBL and Sudan to expel 11 him, but when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and Bin Laden 12 moved there; ***the Taliban were hosted at Camp David and treated like a legitimate government.*** 13 14

At Camp David, there was a press conference after the said TREAT 16 where the spokesperson was asked about the Taliban's human rights 17 record and he made remarks about how sorry he felt for the reporter's 18 husband. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations made threats they 19 didn't back up, bribed with no conditions and made requests without 20 considering why the Taliban would ever comply. 21

As per UN regulations, a unilateral attack on another country could have 23 been considered to be a violation of international law so the NATO 24 minions were roped in to provide plausible deniability of this war crime 25 of 2001. Also that Bin Laden was known to have been on the payroll of 26 the same '*coalition*' that invaded Afghanistan to get him; details of the 27 ***Operation Cyclone*** are referred. It was then perceived or known by the 28 whole world - Bin Laden to be a CIA asset. 29

[Operation Cyclone: A code name for the CIA's program to arm and 31 finance the Afghan *mujahedeen* and supporting militant Islamic groups 32 in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, prior to and during the military 33 intervention by the USSR in support of the Democratic Republic of 34 Afghanistan. The *mujahedeen* were also supported by Britain's MI6 in 35 conducting separate covert actions. The program had heavily supported 36 groups with *jihadi* ties that were favoured by Pakistan's Gen Ziaul 37 Haq, the then military ruler. 38

In May 1979, US officials secretly began meeting with Afghan rebel 40 leaders through Pakistan's ISI contacts. Additional meetings were held 41 on 6th April and 3rd July 1979 [and then off and on]. The same day, 42 President Carter signed a '***presidential finding***' that authorized the 43

CIA to spend \$500,000 aid to the *mujahedeen*; and the patronisation started.

The said operation was one of the longest and most expensive covert CIA operations ever undertaken. Funding officially began with \$695,000 help in 1979, was increased dramatically to \$20–30 million per year for 1980s, and rose to \$630 million per year in 1987. The first consignment of weapons comprised of discarded **British Lee-Enfield rifles** shipped out in December 1979, but by September 1986 the program included US made hi-weaponry like **FIM-92 Stinger missiles**, c2300 in numbers. Funding continued after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal also as the *mujahedeen* continued to battle the forces of President Najibullah's army during the Afghan Civil War 1989–92).]

**Peter Bergen's *Holy War Inc.*, [2001],
& Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars:***

*The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan,
and Bin Laden...* [2004] are referred.

All of this Al Qaeda rubbish was a direct result of America's megalomania. Starting in the Kissinger years, the US had weaponized Islam as a tool to draw the USSR into a quagmire, which backfired on them. More details are available in www.independent.co.uk/news/terror-blowback-burns-cia-11820

Terror 'blowback' burns CIA? America's spies paid and trained their nation's worst enemies; revealed *Andrew Marshall* in Washington on 1st November 1998.

[The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has its own jargon for describing the hallucinatory world within which its employees move. None of its mysterious terms are more euphemistic than 'blowback', the term coined to describe operations which end up rebounding against their creators.]

We have to continually remind ourselves what happened after an actual terrorist attack on the twin towers on 9/11, most of the terrorists were Saudi nationals. The alleged mastermind, Osama bin Laden was a Saudi national. Money trails led to Saudi Arabia. What was the US response to airlift Saudi nationals - including relatives of Osama bin Laden - out of the country whatsoever?

The attacks on Afghanistan and subsequently on Iraq using the false pretexts that OBL or Al-Qaeda had attacked on Twin Towers in

New York and President Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass ¹ destruction [WMD] respectively – were ***all statements of persistent lies*** ² ***and deceit by the West*** which ultimately back-fired in the two devastated ³ countries.

[It was, perhaps, all about oil and taking the opportunity to divert hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayer money to the privately owned defence industry - yes thinking about Dick Cheney as major beneficiary. All was done in partnership of hi-military officials in the US and Afghanistan both.]

A 100 million dollar question from the intelligentsia that: **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TALIBAN THEN.** In 1980s, America had a very desolate choice: Either the US could support an Afghan opposition, or they could simply cede Afghanistan to Soviet domination, an option that might result in an extension of Soviet influence into Pakistan, India & Iran. Those were the days the US wanted to dictate [in routine] its desires to its foreign allies but could not afford to do so in the given Afghan situation.

Washington needed Pakistan's cooperation; but Pakistan ought to be mindful of its own interests, too. The most alarming was the nationalist threat to Pakistani integrity developed after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971; *Pashtunistan* claims were catching air. Accordingly, Islamabad allowed religious groups to operate on Pakistani territory and the American policymakers had to bow their heads for Pakistani interests.

After the Soviet Union's collapse in Afghanistan, Washington could have withdrawn itself from the Afghan arena and could have left sufficient home-work to do by Pakistan while passing remote instructions from the Pentagon – however, the US policy makers preferred to stay at the Afghan soils – thus faced humiliation and un-ceremonial trounce to move out suddenly after two decades' futile war.

How the Taliban govern? Historians, however, noted that a fundamental problem of the Taliban during their rule during 1996-2001 remained that they were ***“essentially caught between a tribal society which they tried to ignore and the need for a state structure which they refused to establish”.***

When the Taliban took power in 1996, they had no funds and no plan or programme for governance beyond a vague and generalised idea of a government based on the ***Sharia system.***

HAVE TALIBAN CHANGED IN 2021?

That was the key question. The intelligentsia suggested in a paper that:

“During their resurgence [post-2003], and particularly their expansion into non-Pashtun areas, the Taliban increasingly proved that they were a learning organisation.

Awareness grew within their movement that their own repressive policies had resulted in global isolation as well as opposition from many Afghans, including those who had initially welcomed the Taliban when they almost ended the inter-factional wars of the 1990s.”

Also a point to consider that the Taliban – unlike other armed insurgent groups elsewhere – never developed a political wing distinct from their military arm, with the closest to a political structure being a negotiations office in Doha. The Taliban didn’t indicate what form of government they envisage, although remarks by some officials indicated that *‘they plan to return to an Islamic emirate model’*.

The UK had very good relations with Saudi Arabia for decades regardless of its treatment of women. Indeed UK still sells arms en masse to help the Saudis fight their proxy and real wars throughout the Middle East. Thus paroxysms of moral outrage about the status of women in Afghanistan should not have been relevant for crafting a coherent and rational foreign policy. The same Western liberal interventionists drove Afghanistan back into the arms of the Taliban, after another generation of devastating conflict and destruction.

The Afghan Taliban is very different tribal community that occupy mountainous space left over when one takes away surrounding real countries. The US made deal at Doha with the Taliban which were [still are] an association of conservative rural *Pashtuns* from the south, to get rid of the corrupt westernized *Pashtun* elite like Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. The strategy didn’t pay – couldn’t go viable - after their foreign sponsors [the US, UK & NATO] finally gave up, like Soviet invaders before them.

The intelligentsia had given thought to the issue and opined that with the passage of time, things would settle down after a conservative Taliban’s reaction, and things would be far less bad for urban women and progressives like in Saudi Arabia of 2020-21.

In 1970s, when the Russians were building roads, schools and hospitals, ¹ and training female teachers and doctors, most women were wearing ² 'burkas' back then; in those times the West used to give the *jihadis* ³ money and ammunition to sabotage the Socialist plans. Now the West ⁴ finally lost the Great Game – so all gimmicks to cover their follies. ⁵

The crucial point to remember is that the Taliban had taken over 'the country'; cities and capital, within in a fortnight in 1996, with a similar former alliance of convenience.

Fact also remains that the then Taliban rulers had actually sent their foreign minister to Quetta to negotiate the arrest and trial of OBL under *Sharia law* in November 2001 - but instead, the CIA wanted to have *him* arrested and get transferred to one of their prisons.

The US military and political elite since 2001 should admit that 20-years' partial occupation was a political and military strategic disaster from even before it started.

However, - THE AFGHAN WAR has been the most successful US business plan in the history of warfare whosoever drafted it.