

Part II: The Soviet Invasion and the Rise of the Taliban

In April 1978, Mohammed Daoud ordered the arrest of a group of communist students at Kabul University who were protesting his rule. Four days later, Daoud was shot dead by Soviet supporters within the Afghan army who wanted to create a Soviet-style government. These events began what is called the Saur Revolution. (Saur is the Persian word for the month that the revolution began.) The revolution did not have widespread popular support, but relied on about one thousand Soviet-trained Afghan army officers and about eleven thousand members of communist groups that had been supported by the KGB (Soviet intelligence agency).

Why did the Soviet Union support a coup in Afghanistan in 1978?

With Daoud dead, a new communist government took the reins of power. Throughout Afghanistan, following directions from the KGB, Afghanistan's communists began a campaign to eliminate those who might oppose the new government. These included intellectuals, religious leaders, and members of political movements. More than ten thousand were executed.

“A million Afghans are all that should remain alive—a million communists and the rest, we do not need. We’ll get rid of all of them.”

—Sayed Abdullah, head of Pul-e-Charki prison, 1978

The new government worked to create a government and socialist economy based on the Soviet model. Its brutal, heavy-handed policies provoked resistance among Afghans and even concerned the Soviet government in Moscow. In rural areas, it attempted to impose new rules about land ownership. The new regulations altered the way that communities and families used and shared lands. For rural Afghans, used to little interference from the government, these changes had dramatic economic effects.

The government also enacted a campaign against illiteracy, which included educating men and women together. This was a sharp change in practice, particularly in rural areas. Those who refused to attend classes were harshly punished.

In addition, Afghanistan's new leaders declared that the government was secular and not based on the religious values of Islam. For many in Afghanistan, this meant that the government was not legitimate. Opposition and violent resistance began to grow. In the city of Herat, an army captain named Ismail Khan led a revolt to defend Islam from the new government. His soldiers hunted down and killed Soviet political advisors and their families. In response, the Soviet-trained Afghan airforce bombed Herat and killed as many as twenty thousand people.

Violence and instability increased in Afghanistan as local leaders resisted the new government. Soldiers in the Afghan army began to desert as did members of the police. Both groups shrunk by about half their numbers. Even the leaders of the communist groups that had taken over the government fought each other for power.

The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

The Soviet government was very concerned about the divisions among Afghan communist groups and the growing resistance to the new government. In March 1979, it summoned to Moscow Nur Mohammed Taraki, one of the leaders of the communist factions, to meet Soviet Premier Brezhnev. Taraki returned with instructions to kill Hafizullah Amin, the president of Afghanistan. Instead, Amin had Taraki killed. Unhappy with Amin, and worried that he might be an American spy (he probably was not), the Soviet Union sent a group of assassins to kill Amin. They also prepared their military to invade Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's leaders were unwilling

to let the socialist revolution in Afghanistan descend into chaos and fail.

“Bearing in mind, that we will be labelled as an aggressor, but in spite of that, under no circumstances can we lose Afghanistan.”

—KGB Chief Yuri Andropov,
March 17, 1979

What were the results of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and installed a new leader. Soviet generals assumed that they would be there for a few months. In fact, the invasion provoked violent resistance that would last a decade. During this time more than one million Afghans would be killed. Between five and seven million would flee Afghanistan, many taking refuge in Iran and Pakistan. Millions more would flee the violence of their home villages and become refugees in their own country.

Afghans became united by a common purpose: resisting the Soviet invasion. Since the time of Abdur Rahman in the nineteenth century, many Afghans had believed resistance to foreign invaders was a form of *jihād* (a struggle against the enemies of Islam). Armed groups opposing the Soviets called themselves the *mujahideen* (a word that means “those who struggle for Islam”).

The odds were against the *mujahideen*. The Soviet Union was one of the world’s superpowers and had a strong military with advanced airplanes, helicopters, tanks, and heavy weapons. The *mujahideen* could not win a large battle against the Soviet army, so instead they fought a guerilla war. Small groups of *mujahideen* would ambush Soviet troops from Afghanistan’s rug-

ged and mountainous terrain where soldiers with heavy weapons could not easily follow. At least fifteen-thousand Soviets were killed in the war and another thirty-seven thousand wounded.

Afghanistan’s geography played an important role in how *mujahideen* groups organized themselves. Without any central leadership, the various regions of the country had different resistance groups led by charismatic leaders. Members of these groups were often members of the same tribe or ethnic group. For example, groups in the east were often made up of Pashtuns. The groups in the north were Uzbek or Tajik. The Afghan resistance groups were from different regions of the country, different ethnic groups, and had different political beliefs, but they all called themselves *mujahideen*. At the same time, these groups did not coordinate their efforts and at times even fought each other.

The Soviet military actions were tremendously destructive. The war took a terrible toll in Afghan lives. In addition, it altered the structure of Afghan society. To clear the rural areas of *mujahideen* guerrilla soldiers, the Soviets used violence to terrorize the Afghan people and force them out of the countryside to the cities; the population of Kabul tripled. With farmers driven from the countryside, Af-



Mujahideen sitting on top of a destroyed Soviet tank, September 1988.

Afghan Media Resource Center, Williams Afghan Media Project.

ghanistan became dependent on food aid from other countries. For Afghans, the war became a struggle to preserve themselves and repel invaders who threatened their way of life.

Why did other countries become involved in the conflict?

There were a number of countries that played a significant role in this war. These countries were involved for very different reasons. For these countries, the struggle was not about survival like it was for the Afghan people. Rather, they were motivated by ideology and principles.

The Soviet Union: Afghanistan bordered the Soviet Union and so the Soviet leadership had an interest in events in a neighboring country. But there was an even more compelling reason for the Soviet invasion. The Soviet Union saw itself as a leader of an effort to spread the Soviet form of socialism worldwide. When Afghanistan's socialists began to fail in their attempt to create a new society, the Soviet Union decided that it had no choice but to intervene. Socialism could not be allowed to fail. Soviet leaders also believed that its Cold War foe, the United States, would step in and threaten the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.

The United States: The central principle of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War was to contain the expansion of Soviet power and influence. The invasion of Afghanistan shocked U.S. leaders who saw it as a Soviet attempt to expand towards the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. The U.S. government worried that it was losing influence in that important region. The year before, the Iranian people had forced the shah of Iran, a long-time U.S. ally, from power. Iran had become an Islamic republic and hostile to the United States.

In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) declared that the United States would use force to protect the oil of the Persian Gulf region from the Soviet Union. He also began to send military aid to Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence agency), which in

turn sent it to *mujahideen* groups fighting the Soviets. U.S. aid increased substantially under President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). It eventually reached hundreds of millions of dollars a year and included surface to air missiles that could shoot down Soviet aircraft.

Pakistan: Pakistan had been founded in 1947 as a secular democracy with Islamic values. Between 1977 and 1988, Pakistan was ruled by a military dictator named Muhammed Zia al-Haq. Zia al-Haq was a political Islamist who believed that Islam should become the basis for Pakistan's government and laws. Al-Haq was a Sunni Muslim who promoted Sunni religious ideas. He saw a chance to increase Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan by helping Afghans resist the Soviet invasion. Pakistan wanted influence in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. For one, the countries were neighbors. In addition, Pakistan wanted Afghanistan on its side in the ongoing confrontation between India and Pakistan. Al-Haq also wanted to defend a Muslim country whose religious values were under threat.

Pakistan's ISI had contacts with many of the exiled and refugee Afghans who had settled in Pakistan. Although Afghans had diverse political viewpoints, the ISI chose to support only Islamist groups and insisted that Afghan refugees register with one of them. With the start of the war, these groups began to grow in importance. Tens of thousands of Afghans received military training in Pakistan so that they could return and fight the Soviets.

The United States, which had cut off aid to Pakistan because of its nuclear weapons program, wanted to find a way to get weapons and assistance to the Afghan *mujahideen*. Pakistan offered to help.

“We must remember that without Zia's support, the Afghan resistance, key to making the Soviets pay a heavy price for their Afghan adventure, is effectively dead.”

—U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz,
November 29, 1982

In return for U.S. aid, the ISI handled the huge transfers of weapons into the hands of *mujahideen*. Through this process, the ISI could control which groups would receive the weapons and become powerful. Pakistan strengthened the Islamist groups that it believed would further Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. The ISI then directed the actions of these *mujahideen* groups inside Afghanistan. The huge inflows of U.S. cash also strengthened the ISI and Pakistan's military dictatorship.

Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia saw the war in Afghanistan as a religious issue. Its authoritarian monarchy, flush with money from selling oil, channeled billions of dollars through Pakistan to Afghan *mujahideen*. The Saudis wanted the money to support Islamist groups whose particular branch of Sunni Islam they supported.

Along with the ISI, Saudi Arabia's intelligence services played an active role, coordinating the distribution of aid from Pakistan. In addition, several hundred Arabs—from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries—came to participate in the *jihād* against the Soviet forces. One of them was Osama bin Laden.

China: Although China was a communist country like the Soviet Union, it had its own brand of ideology and was often at odds with the Soviet Union. China sold weapons to the CIA, which in turn provided them to the ISI. The CIA hoped that if any *mujahideen* weapons fell into Soviet hands, they could not easily be traced to the United States.

Iran: The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew a dictatorship and replaced it with an Islamic republican government. The Iranians were Shi'i Muslims who hoped to export their revolution and form of Islam throughout the region. They supported and trained Shi'i *mujahideen* who practiced the same type of Islam. The cultural, ethnic, and historical ties between people in Western Afghanistan and Iran were also reasons for support.

Why did the Soviet Union withdraw its forces from Afghanistan?

During the war, Soviet forces numbered between 90,000 and 110,000, but they were unable to defeat the *mujahideen*. Soviet soldiers came to dread being posted to Afghanistan. The war cost between seven and twelve billion dollars a year, and the likelihood of succeeding seemed low. Even in a closed society like the Soviet Union, where the government controlled the media and press, the war became increasingly unpopular. Stories trickled back with returning soldiers, many of whom had physical and psychological wounds. The new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began looking for a way to get out.

In 1989, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, after installing a man named Mohammed Najibullah as president. Most expected that he would not last long, but a lack of unity among the *mujahideen* and continuing financial and military aid from the Soviet Union allowed him to hold on to power. Soon after the Soviet Union dissolved in late 1991 and Soviet aid to Afghanistan dried up, Najibullah resigned.

Why did a civil war begin in Afghanistan?

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan coincided with the end of the Cold War and improved U.S.-Soviet relations. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. The U.S. government saw little reason to continue pouring its resources into Afghanistan.

In the meantime, the rivalries between *mujahideen* groups grew into a civil war for power and control of Afghanistan. Most of the fighting took place around Kabul. The United Nations tried to negotiate a transfer of power to a new government, but these efforts failed. Afghanistan essentially had no central government. For a country devastated by ten years of war this situation was catastrophic.

The heavily armed *mujahideen* groups fought to capture Kabul and created a lawless environment in which ordinary Afghans paid a terrible cost. Tens of thousands were killed. Murder, coercion, rape, corruption, and rob-



Ahmad Shah Massoud on a wireless radio. Takhar Province, Afghanistan, June 1990.

bery by these groups were commonplace. The leaders became known as “warlords” and the groups remained divided largely along ethnic lines.

One of the most powerful groups was led by Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, a Pashtun. He was supported by the ISI, which wanted a pro-Pakistan Islamist government in Kabul. His primary rival for power was Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was the military commander of a group of Tajik fighters. Rajid Dostum commanded a band of Uzbek fighters in the north. The western area around Herat was controlled by Ismael Khan, a Shi‘i Muslim.

The Rise of the Taliban

For some of the men who had fought to drive out the Soviet army, the violence and chaos plaguing Afghanistan was a tragedy. Their *jihād* against the Soviets had succeeded, but clearly a struggle for Afghanistan was continuing. Many returned to their villages to consult with elders or attended *madrassas*

(religious schools) in Pakistan. They believed that Afghanistan’s problems could be solved by drawing on religious principles. These men became the leaders of a new armed movement based on a narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam. Its members called themselves the Taliban, which means “religious students who seek justice and knowledge.”

“We would sit for a long time to discuss how to change the terrible situation. We had only vague ideas what to do, but we believed we were working with Allah [God] as his pupils.”

—Mullah Mohammed Ghaus

How did the Taliban come to power?

The Taliban began to generate support by protecting the population from the abuse and crimes of the warlords. The leader of the Taliban was a man named Mohammed Omar. Omar was poor and had little formal education.

“We were fighting against Muslims who had gone wrong. How could we remain quiet when we could see crimes being committed against women and the poor?”

—Mullah Mohammed Omar

The Taliban had two powerful and important backers. Pakistan’s military and ISI, hoping for a pro-Pakistan Islamist government in Kabul, threw its resources behind the Taliban. Pakistan provided military advisors, training, and supplies. Without Pakistan’s support, the Taliban would not have succeeded in taking power. Saudi Arabia also funneled financial support to the Taliban. Saudi money bought supplies, provided for training and transport, and even helped pay other warlords not to oppose the Taliban.

After Taliban forces took the city of Qandahar in late 1994, thousands of young Afghan Pashtun men flocked to join them. Many had grown up in poverty in refugee camps in Pakistan and been educated in *madrassas* funded by Pakistan’s Islamist military dictator Zia al-Haq. While an earlier generation had embraced the religious idea of *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a new generation found in the Taliban another religious ideal to rally around. Radical Islamists from outside of Afghanistan came by the thousands to train and participate in what was to them an international *jihad*—a struggle against those they saw as enemies of Islam around the world (see box below). The international jihadists—many of them from Pakistan—helped Taliban forces gain control of the country.

The civil war was brutal. More than 100,000 Afghans died. Kabul was badly dam-

aged by bombing and rocket attacks. Former president Najibullah, who was hiding in a UN building, was dragged from the building and hung by the Taliban in 1996. By 1998, the Taliban was in control of all of Afghanistan except the Northeast, which remained in the hands of Ahmad Shah Massoud. Massoud’s forces received weapons from India, Russia, and Iran, which saw the Taliban as a threat to their own security.

What was the rule of the Taliban like?

After they took power, the Taliban imposed a new legal system based on their own “traditional” values and a narrow interpretation of the Islamic legal tradition, or shari’a. (Shari’a is a wide body of literature that lays out legal principles and norms but is not a legal code or single document. Consequently, there are different interpretations of shari’a.) Women were banned from working. Schools for girls were shut down and women were forced to be completely veiled. All games were banned. Music and television was prohibited. Criminals faced severe punishment including amputations of limbs or death by stoning.

Led by Mullah Omar, who was called “Commander of the Faithful,” the Taliban thought that Afghanistan should be ruled by a group of six religious leaders. The population was generally grateful for the peace and order that the Taliban brought. But as they imposed their strict rules they became more and more unpopular.

“Like so many mujahideen I believed in the Taliban when they first appeared in 1994 and promised to end warlordism, establish law and

What is *jihad*?

The term *jihad*, often associated with Islam and violence, is open to interpretation. Scholars point out that the term, which literally means struggle or effort, has two meanings. For the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, the “great *jihad*” was the struggle against one’s own moral shortcomings. The “little *jihad*” was the struggle against the enemies of Islam. Nevertheless, in recent years, the idea of *jihad* and the term jihadist have been commonly used to describe Islamic terrorists or extremists.

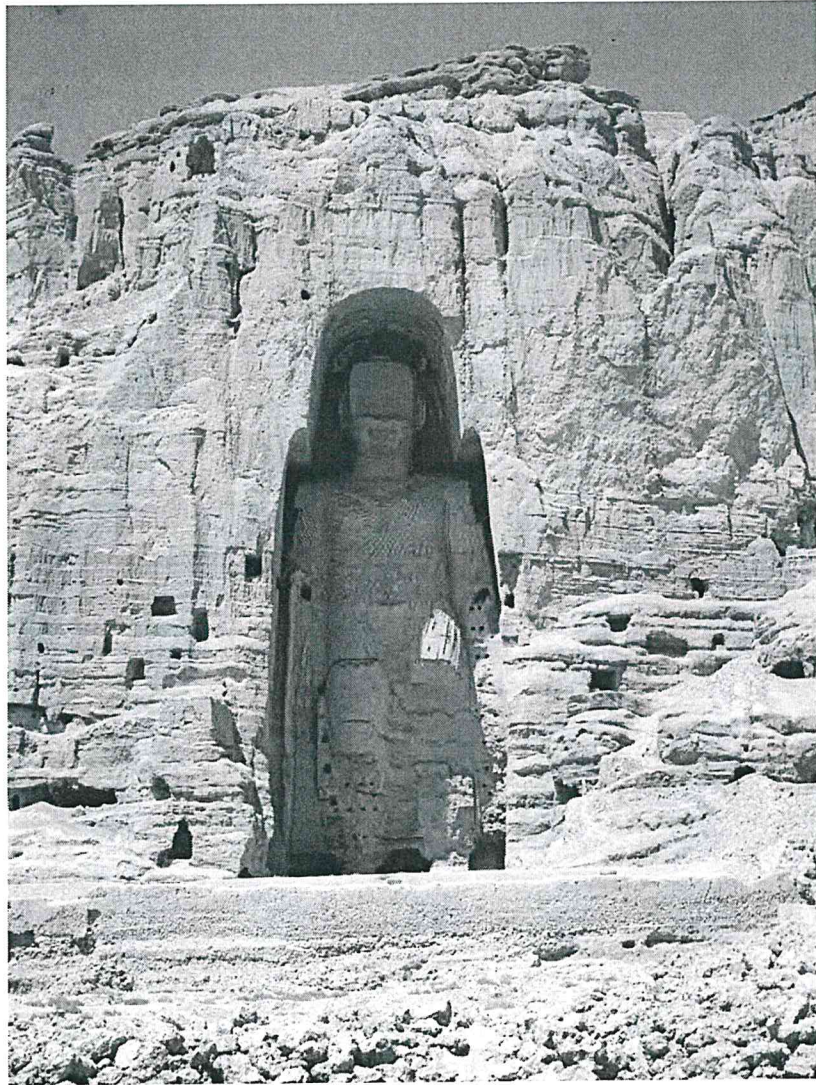
order, and then call a Loya Jirga to decide who should rule Afghanistan. The first Taliban I met told me that the jihad had become a disgrace and the civil war was destroying the country.... They were good people initially, but the tragedy was that soon they were taken over by the ISI and became a proxy...."

—Hamid Karzai, future president of Afghanistan, October 2001

Their unpopularity was strongest in the cities. The Taliban's interpretation of Islam was radical and represented a sharp departure from Afghanistan's traditions. For example, although Islam had always played a role in shaping Afghanistan's laws and policies, religious leaders had never ruled the country. In addition, although Afghanistan's people had always been pious Muslims, there was also a history of tolerance of different forms of Islam, other religions, and different lifestyles.

The Taliban's Pashtun leadership believed that its interpretation of Islam would unite Afghans, but their harsh policies against non-Pashtun groups alienated many. The Taliban's leaders, who had received only basic religious education at best, did not have the skills or knowledge to rule Afghanistan effectively. And after years of violence, war, and economic devastation, the Afghan people needed effective rulers and help from the outside world.

Since the earliest years of British and Russian involvement, Afghanistan relied on the flow of money from foreign countries to help prop up its government and economy. During the Cold War, billions of dollars from the Soviet Union and the United States helped build roads and schools, and buy food. These sources had disappeared. Into their place stepped the UN. The UN provided desperately



Richard M. Chisholm.

This photograph from 1962 shows one of two statues of Buddha carved into a cliff in the Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan. The statues were constructed when the region was a center of Buddhism. The statues were fifteen hundred years old and over 150 feet high. The Taliban believed that because the statues depicted the human form they violated religious law. They destroyed the statues in March 2001 despite pleas from the international community.

needed food, medicine, and medical care to Afghanistan, though it clashed with Taliban authorities about their consistent violations of human rights. For their part, the Taliban realized that they needed the UN to provide food; any government with a population that was starving was unlikely to remain in power. Despite Taliban policies that appalled many in the UN and a lack of cooperation from the Taliban on other issues, aid continued to flow.

What were the Taliban government's relations with other countries?

Only three countries established diplomatic relations with the Taliban government: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Pakistan became the Taliban's most important ally. Pakistan hoped a Taliban-led Afghanistan would be helpful to Pakistan in its ongoing confrontation with India. (Pakistan and India had fought three wars since 1947. Both countries had nuclear weapons and saw the other as a threat.) The Taliban government relied heavily on the ISI for weapons and Pakistan's *madrassas* for recruits. Pakistan saw the training camps in Afghanistan as a good source of fighters for an ongoing guerilla war in Kashmir—a territory claimed by both India and Pakistan.

With the exception of Pakistan, bordering countries were not pleased with their new neighbors. For example, the Taliban

nearly provoked a war with Iran by murdering Iranian diplomats, massacring Afghans who practiced Shi'i Islam, and criticizing the Shi'i religion practiced in Iran. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (before 1991, part of Soviet Central Asia) worried about Taliban insurgencies against their secular governments. Russia sent twenty thousand troops to both countries' borders to protect against this. Both Iran and Russia sent aid to Ahmad Shah Massoud's fighters, the last holdout against the Taliban.

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the United States government had largely lost interest in Afghanistan. In fact, the United States closed its embassy and withdrew its diplomats that same year. Aid programs also ended. The United States was content to let Pakistan and Saudi Arabia take the lead in Afghanistan. But a development in 1996 convinced the United States to reconsider its policy: the arrival of Osama bin Laden.

Who was Osama bin Laden?

Bin Laden was the founder and leader of an international terrorist organization known as al Qaeda (loosely translated as "the base"). Bin Laden came from a wealthy and influential Saudi family. In the 1980s, he had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bin Laden believed that he and the *mujahideen* had helped bring about the end of the Soviet Union. When Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden proposed to the Saudi government

Bin Laden and Islam

Bin Laden used his beliefs about Islam to justify his methods and attacks against the United States. For many around the world this raised concerns about Islam. Some wondered whether there are justifications for terrorism within Islam. For others, the events seemed to confirm a perception of Islam as a violent and fanatical faith. In contrast, many Muslims worried that their religion would be wrongly associated with the beliefs of bin Laden.

Like all religions, Islam is subject to interpretation. Most interpretations of Islamic tradition note a history of tolerance and peace. (The word Islam is related to the Arabic word *salaam*, which means peace.) Throughout much of history, Muslims have lived peacefully with followers of other religions. For example, many Jews fled the persecutions found in Christian Europe for the relative freedom of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Islam permits the use of force in self-defense, but not the killing of innocents or civilians. After September 11, numerous important Islamic clerics from many branches of Islam and different countries condemned bin Laden.

that he be allowed to raise volunteers to fight like he had in Afghanistan. Bin Laden saw Saddam Hussein's secular government as an enemy of Islam. The Saudi government rejected his suggestion. It grew concerned about his increasingly radical ideas and eventually took away his citizenship. Bin Laden fled to Sudan in the early 1990s. When the U.S. and Saudi governments began to pressure Sudan's government to hand bin Laden over, he fled to Afghanistan.

Why did Osama bin Laden go to Afghanistan?

Afghanistan was an attractive place for bin Laden to go. It was the site of a dramatic success against the Soviet Union, a success that gave al Qaeda the confidence to believe it could take on the United States. In addition, the Taliban government and bin Laden had similar ideas about what an ideal Islamic society should be. The Taliban also resisted relationships with the outside world, which put bin Laden out of reach of the United States and other governments. At the same time, the Taliban government was very weak and had little influence over al Qaeda's actions.

Bin Laden wanted to start an international *jihād* that would end U.S. and European dominance, cause the governments of the Middle East to fall, and create one large nation ruled by a single Islamic ruler. For its part, the Taliban was not interested in international *jihād*. Instead, they were focused on destroying what they saw as the enemies of Islam inside Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Taliban welcomed international jihadist groups that provided fighters and resources in Afghanistan's ongoing civil war.

In Afghanistan, bin Laden trained thousands from Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa to fight for the Taliban against Ahmad Shah Massoud's fighters, who were known as the Northern Alliance. Al Qaeda camps also trained Pakistani militants to fight against India in Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan provided military officers to coordinate the attacks against Massoud. Bin Laden also began to organize international terror

operations. From Afghanistan, bin Laden directed the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 that killed 224 and wounded nearly 5,000, and the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen by suicide bombers in 2000 that killed seventeen and wounded thirty-nine U.S. sailors.

Why did Osama bin Laden launch a terror campaign against the United States?

Osama bin Laden's public statements outlined his justifications for the attacks against U.S. citizens and others. (Like the Taliban, bin Laden had an extreme and narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam.) He expressed anger about the presence of U.S. troops in Arabia, the sacred lands of Islam. He saw their presence as a way for the United States to fight against and humiliate the peoples of Islam in the region. He objected to U.S. support of Israel and Israel's presence in the holy lands, as well as to the deaths of Muslims at the hands of Israel. Bin Laden believed that U.S. actions amounted to a declaration of war by the United States on God and Muslims. Bin Laden presented his call to arms as a defense of Islam, a struggle against an enemy whom he believed wanted to destroy Islamic culture and religion.

“We call upon Muslim scholars, their faithful leaders, young believers, and soldiers to launch a raid on the American soldiers of Satan and their allies of the Devil.”

—Osama bin Laden, 1998

In public statements and interviews with news organizations, bin Laden warned repeatedly that he would take revenge on the United States for humiliating Muslims.

What was the response to bin Laden's terror campaign?

Bin Laden's actions and the support he received from the Taliban regime began to focus international attention on Afghanistan. After the attacks on the embassies in 1998, President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) ordered seventy-five missiles fired at al Qaeda camps in Af-

ghanistan. That attack killed some Pakistani militants and some members of the ISI, but no senior members of al Qaeda. The CIA formed a group devoted to finding bin Laden. They worried that he was trying to obtain chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons.

At the UN, the United States helped pass resolutions demanding that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and stop harboring terrorists, and that all nations stop sending weapons to the Taliban. Saudi Arabia demanded that Mullah Omar hand over bin Laden. When he refused, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Kabul. In the midst of international efforts to pressure the Taliban, Pakistan remained a firm supporter. The ISI organized political support in Pakistan to help the Taliban resist international pressure and continued sending weapons.

“We are trying to stop the U.S. from undermining the Taliban regime. They cannot do it without Pakistan’s help, because they have no assets there, but we will not allow it to happen.”

—Major General Ghulam Ahmad Khan of Pakistan, May 15, 2000

When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, U.S. national security officials told the new administration about their growing concerns about bin Laden. They worried that an attack was coming. It was just uncertain where and when it would be.



The World Trade Center buildings, September 11, 2001.

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“There will be a significant terrorist attack in the next weeks or months.... Multiple and simultaneous attacks are possible and they will occur with little or no warning.”

—CIA official in a briefing to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, July 10, 2001

U.S. diplomats began to pressure Pakistan to end its support of the Taliban and to stop al Qaeda from recruiting new members in Pakistan. France and Russia presented information at the UN showing that Pakistan was violating UN resolutions and still arming the Taliban. There were other diplomatic efforts including one in Europe where Iranian and U.S. officials met to discuss a plan to arm Ahmad Shah Massoud’s Northern Alliance and undermine the Taliban. This was remarkable because Iran and the United States had not had an official relationship since 1979 and were generally hostile to each other in public.

“There were essentially two sets of conversations going on between the Americans and the Iranians, one in public and the other in private, where they discussed how to undermine the Taliban.”

—UN Diplomat Francesc Vendrell, March 1, 2006

As the international community tried to figure out how to deal with the Taliban, bin Laden was planning a big attack on the United States. He knew this attack would lead to pressure on the Taliban to hand him over. To

preserve his sanctuary in Afghanistan, bin Laden needed the Taliban’s leaders in his debt and willing to shield him from the outside world. He offered to assassinate Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance and the last organized resistance to the Taliban. On September 9, 2001, two Tunisian men, disguised as television journalists, killed Massoud with a bomb hidden in a television camera. Two days later, planes hijacked by al Qaeda terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center buildings in New York, the Pentagon building in Washington, DC, and a field in Pennsylvania. The suicide attacks killed nearly three thousand people.

The attacks had profound effects that rippled around the world. In the United States, disbelief, patriotism, and anger were followed by sharp changes in U.S. laws and foreign policy. They would also change the course of Afghan history.

In this section of the reading you have explored how U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War affected the people of Afghanistan. You have seen how the withdrawal of Soviet forces, a loss of U.S. interest, and an active role by Pakistan contributed to the rise of the Taliban and the arrival of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

In Part III of the reading, you are going to learn about the overthrow of the Taliban and the effort led by the United States to remake Afghanistan. You will also explore the important role of Afghanistan’s neighbor, Pakistan, in events in the region.