

'Islam and the Soviets in Afghanistan

by

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Like most people here and elsewhere, I have been trying to understand the recent events in the Muslim world in general and in Afghanistan and Iran in particular. These are not, as many think, anomalies of events brought about by a single person such as Imam Khomeini. These events are reactions against oppression, injustice, and humiliation of the Muslim people from the Maghrib to Mindanao. This last sentence is paraphrased from a line by the late Lloyd Fallers in his essay in Clifford Geertz's book Old Societies and New States. Fallers was writing, then, about the late 19th century and early 20th century movements among the Muslim people such as the Pan Islamic movement of Jamaluddin Afghani and Mohammed Aubduh, the Mushruta group in Iran headed by persons like Malik Al-Mutakllamin and Tabatabai, and the Jadidists like Ismail Ghasperali among the Tatars of the Crimea, and Abduruf Fitrat, Bihbudi and others in West Turkestan. Contemporary "Orientalists" in both the USSR and the West have called the leadership of these movements deviant and the movements themselves pathological and anomalous to the expected behavior. The early 20th century Orientalists' perceptions of men and events as anomalies served to legitimize the destruction of these people and their movements at the hands of the authorities in the Middle East and Turkestan. As a result, a great many Muslim intellectuals perished in the colonialists' dungeons.

The events in Iran and Afghanistan are in this series of reactions of the Muslim people against oppression from without and within. The colonialization of the Muslim lands of Afghanistan and Palestine are examples of the former type of oppression, and atrocities such as those committed by shahs, kings, amirs and presidents are instances of the latter. Also, the Muslim people have reacted violently against the type of western* social engineering and western economic development that have little or no roots in the social, political and cultural dimensions of these societies. Naturally the oppressed, once they have the power, will try to change the structures of their societies to those that they think are just. Consequently, what is happening in Iran and Afghanistan are Islamic revolutions rather than Islamic "renaissances" or fundamentalist movements such as the earlier Wahabi in Arabia. These are revolutions in the sense that these societies are trying to build institutions capable of fostering the "new" and Islamic values of the revolutionaries.

The tragedy in Afghanistan is an example of the Soviet Union's attempt to (a) establish a power base in that particular geographical location, (b) establish a bulwark against Islamic revolutionary stirrings within Soviet Central Asia and to thrust a wedge between Iran and Pakistan and (c) impose its own brand of modernization upon a poor country. The Soviet Union is apparently ready to accomplish these tasks regardless of the cost in human lives. Eventually the Russian people will perceive that the cost to themselves will be too great

*The term 'western' as used here includes not only American-West European ideas of modernization but also Russian Marxist-Leninist ideas of modernization as well.

price to pay for the Soviet aggression into Afghanistan. But by then the Soviet aggression will have already become a disaster for both the Afghan people and the Soviet Union - much like Vietnam was a disaster for both the Vietnamese people and the United States. Such international forays by the superpowers should be prevented. However, as I pointed out in two papers in November 1978, what happened in Afghanistan in December 1979 was the logical synthesis of a dialectic that was put into motion by the April 1978 coup.

The Russian government which thought it knew its puppets well in Kabul certainly did not really know the Afghan people. Nor did the Soviet Union's Afghan puppets. Both erroneously assumed that in the population of Afghanistan it had a potential pool of surrogate proletariates who would rally round the red flag for promises of land and equality. But Afghanistan does not have landholding "gentries" similar to the feudal lords of the West or the landed aristocracy of Syria. Nor is there a proletariat seething for a communist revolution. The Afghan people also questioned the legitimacies of the donors from the Mohammedzais to the Russians. They knew full well, too, that the ideal of equity as practiced north of the Amu Darya by the Russians was a shameful sham. The Afghan people know better than the Russian puppets Taraki, Amin and Karmal that the Soviet Union poses a direct threat to the freedom of Afghanistan and her people. The Soviet decision makers were as wrong about Afghanistan in 1980 as they were wrong in the 1920's when they conquered Turkestan over the bodies of the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, and got in return the eternal antipathy of the Central Asian Muslims even after sixty years of Soviet-type acculturation of these minorities to the Russian culture. The present massacre of the innocent Afghans is a continuation of the supremacist policy of the Russians; and it will not stop in Afghanistan.

At present, the Russians have the following options in Afghanistan:

(a) to get out and let the Afghan people choose the type of government and way of life that they think is worthwhile and suitable to them; (b) to annex Afghanistan as the 16th Union Republic of the USSR. This probably won't happen because it would increase the number of the Muslims in the USSR and trigger the demographic dynamism already in process there; of course, there would be vehement resistance by the Afghan people to annexation, (c) to create a coalition government in Afghanistan. Any coalition that includes nationalists and communists but leaves out Islamic elements will be unacceptable to most Afghans who are devout Muslims. Bani-Sadr's thesis about a Muslim as a radical Mujahid and Islam as a radical answer to oppression everywhere is heeded by the Afghan Muslims. Moreover, there are very few educated nationalists and communists left in Afghanistan at the present time. Fifty years of graduates of Kabul University which included the above groups have been destroyed by the Khalqi and Parchami puppets of the USSR. By the government's own account more than 16,000 people, mostly political prisoners, perished in the Afghan jails during the past two years, and (3) to keep Babrak Karmal or a similar puppet in power by imposing nominal control on the country. In order to do that, having in mind the topography of Afghanistan and the antipathy of the Afghans to the Russians (many Afghans are refugees or the children of refugees who escaped the massacres in Qarshi, Dushanbe, Bukhara, Alma Ata, Marv, Charjui and similar places in Turkestan). In addition to the open borders to Iran, Pakistan and the Peoples' Republic of China, the Soviet Union will have to deploy at least a million troops in Afghanistan. How long the economy of the USSR will tolerate such a cost is hard to speculate. In this connection, Prof. George Kennan's testimony to the Foreign Relations Committee of the U.S. Senate* to the effect that the U.S. should ease the pressure on

*The New York Times (February 28, 1980), p. A10.

the USSR is chilling in articulating an American nationalist's point of view. Kennan, no friend of the fascism that is practiced by the Kremlin, is not, it seems, a friend of the poor Afghan peasants. He wants to see the end of the USSR's arrogance and empire building by seeing it spread too thinly from Cuba to Korea and bleed itself to death in places like Afghanistan. But a Soviet defeat in Afghanistan also means the destruction of the Afghan people. More than 300,000 of them have perished in their struggle for liberty since 1978 and more than 1,000,000 of them are refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

One should be in favor of any method that will convince the Russian government of the USSR to withdraw from Afghanistan, including keeping international pressure on the Soviet Union. An easing of that pressure on the Russians will encourage the government to keep its hold tightly on the country. Their eventual withdrawal by humiliating defeat after perhaps years of struggle may not permit the world to prevent the Russian government of the USSR from lashing out at some other innocent bystanders. Remember that the Tsarist's defeat at Crimea in the mid-nineteenth century resulted (as a face-saving device) in the conquest of the Steppe in Turkestan and the massacre of thousands of people. To paraphrase Kennan again, "the Russian government is like a spoiled brat who when punished and sent to his room slams the door so hard that the house will fall down on everybody else."* Can we afford this Russian temper tantrum? Supposing the Russians choose option (b) or (d), to annex Afghanistan or to keep a puppet enthroned in Kabul by force. The following are some of the methods that may be used by them, individually or in combination, hoping to pacify the population of Afghanistan:

- A. The "Red Mullah" method, as was used in Turkestan, ostensibly to convince the Muslims that the Russian colonialization of their land was in accordance with Islamic principles. In Afghanistan, almost all such mullahs are killed by the mujahidin.
- B. Falsification of Islamic scriptures such as Ayas from the Quran and the Sunnah in order to convince the Muslim population that what has befallen them is something in accordance with Islamic procedures. For example, it would be said that this is the unhappy lot of the Muslims in this world, they should be patient, and wait for the next.
- C. Bringing in more and more Central Asian Muslims into Afghanistan. Could the Soviet Union count on these peoples' loyalty? Many, given the choice, would rather fight their Russian bourgeoisie overlords than fight the Afghan people.
- D. Pouring in material goods as a form of capital transfer as they did in Turkestan since 1920. By doing this the Russians will hope that the improvement in the material environment of the Afghans will change their behavior. Will it? Can they afford it?
- E. Installing a more moderate nationalist in power in the local government and trying to wipe clean their blood-stained hands on those peoples' more or less clean garments.
- F. "Hostaging," by forcing good and decent people to cooperate by keeping their relatives hostage.
- G. By bribing people in order to co-opt them. One should not count on Afghans remaining bought.

*Lecture on the USSR, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, November 1, 1979.

H. By giving the assurance that the Russians will leave the country if their local elites keep law and order as they did with the Khojaev brothers in Turkestan in the 1920's; once the Soviets got entrenched and consolidated their power, then they removed these people through violence in the form of bloody purges -- a tradition which the Soviets have kept alive since the inception of the USSR.

I. Terror. By terrorizing the population of Afghanistan into submission. In this draconian method, the Russians are truly the masters, surpassing even in ingenuity the Nazis.

Why these methods will fail? (1) this is a different era in which colonization by anyone on any matter is looked upon as obscene by most decent people including the Afghan peasants who are not isolated from the rest of the world especially the world of Islam because of his transistor radio and other means of communication; (2) the Afghan peasants, and the average urban Afghan; because of their experiences with the Russian governments in the earlier times are wise to any method of pacification that the Soviets will engineer. The Afghans will look at these methods not as the genuine desires of the Russians to keep the Afghans culturally intact, but as a tactical move by the Russian government for the eventual subjugation of the Afghans and standardization of their culture to that of the Russians, similar to what occurred among the nationalities of the USSR; (3) Islam as a response to oppression, especially now, is not going to be ignored by the great powers, including the Soviets, nor by the oppressed of the world regardless of their religion. Islam is a general methodology for social justice, cultural pluralism, and economic and political equity. (4) Most Islamic countries are independent nations now, a situation that did not exist in the 1920's. Any power will have to reckon with the aspirations and expectations of one billion Muslims; (5) there are a great many very articulate Muslims all over the world who will describe and document the imperialists' atrocities befalling the Muslim people; (6) Afghans are committed to their liberty and they will fight any alien group who would like to subvert that commitment. Afghan freedom fighters or mujahidin are committed to go back to their villages and their livelihoods in an independent and free Afghanistan. The Russian move into Afghanistan has already made revolutionaries out of the Afghan peasants. There are many among the freedom fighters and refugees who have nothing in mind except to go back as free men and women to their homes. They, their Muslim brothers and sisters and others committed to the creation of a decent world will keep the pressure on the aggressors (as we have noticed in the United Nations and Islamic countries' resolution asking the Russians to withdraw from Afghanistan); (7) the Muslim people are in no way going to accept anybody's ideology, be it the liberal ideology of the West if it gives birth to the demonic persons like the Shah of Iran or the Russian brand of socialism if it transforms itself into the oppression by the clerks. So they have opted for a third alternative--Islam. Islam is a revolutionary ideology as well as a blueprint for development. It should be supported by all who subscribe to a set of values that are basic to civilized and humane living. Other ideologies including home grown or imported nationalism are only steps leading to eventual russification or americanization of the Islamic culture. Islam as a path to growth and development provides a much better and also familiar vehicle for the creation of an Islamic federation between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. This is the best obstacle to anyone's imperialism and would foster freedom and liberty for everybody within the federation as a natural development rather than the artificially created so-called democracies which are no more than disguises for the misdeeds and oppressions of the brain-washed elites.