

**Knowing Afghanistan:  
Can there be an end to the saga?**

**A geopolitical alternative on how to settle this self inflicted  
wound of the West in the East**

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**Abstract**

*War on terrorism*, as the motto which formed the cornerstone of global policies of former neo-conservative administration of the United States, is increasingly becoming ineffective in Afghanistan with the dreaded consequence of spilling over into Pakistan. This inevitable consequence of *War on Terrorism* in Afghanistan has brought the West face to face with the 'nest of terrorism' that CIA built in Pakistan's so-called madrasas of extremist Wahhabi teachings in the first place, with the enthusiastic assistance of Nawaz Sharif's government in Pakistan, the Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia and the Al-Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates in late 1990s. In their evil planning they found it necessary to invent a state history for Afghanistan based on former British colonial designs for the region during their geopolitics of Great Game with Russia in 19th century. They invented the Afghan state by putting together territories they severed from the veining Persian Empire of the time. This process of state-manufacturing in Afghanistan though served the colonial purposes at the time, never proved to be working in the sense that is expected of a genuinely founded nation and nation-state. The ills of this ill-designed state will naturally disallow any remedy that is not based on a genuine state-building process in that country. To produce such a remedy Afghanistan needs to address the ills of its state-structure by pinpointing the centrifugal forces that drives various ethnicities apart and to try and find some kind of accommodation among components that makes up the state of Afghanistan. The best method to achieve this in today world of politics would probably be a genuinely designed federalism.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Britain, Iran, state-building, nation-building, USA, Taliban, terrorism, war, Kabul, security.

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Based on a talk to the Kensington Library On the occasion of publication of Small Players of Great Game.

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**Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh** \*

### **Introduction**

As Western military operation against Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan prove desperately ineffective, Washington seems to find itself left with no alternative but to seek some sort of accommodation with the Taliban, the foe for uprooting of which the West invaded Afghanistan in the first place. The saddest part of the saga of *war on Terrorism* is that a compromise with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan will only serve Washington's by now obvious desperation to escape from the war that increasingly appears to be endless without any hope of even a face-saving solution, let alone the idea of creating a democratic state in the reunified country of

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Afghanistan. The reason for this is that the west has never realized the geopolitical fact that there has never been a real *state*, borneon the basis of the existence of a genuinely and authentically created *Afghan nation*.

Revelling in this universal complacency the public media in US and Europe went as far as faking political history, implying that Afghanistan has been a country or a nation in existence since the dawn of man's civilization. They claimed in several radio and television programs that Alexander the Great's Eastern expedition was for going to Afghanistan. Little did they know that though tribes of unruly nature with no political cohesion at all existed during the history at best in the form of Persian dependant principalities of Herat, Kabul and Qandahar, there has never been such a country or nation in Central Asia as Afghanistan up until mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when at the height of the famous Great Game British geopolitics of creating a buffer state to halt Russian advances towards India, precipitated emergence of a loosely defined state under a lately emerged name "Afghanistan".

In their euphoria of war on terrorism the West even did not bother to learn that since its inception in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Afghanistan caused huge embarrassment to the British in three wars and frustrated Soviet occupation in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A few of those in the West who learnt a thing or two about history of this unruly nature of the Afghan tribes interpreted it, with the help of a highly questionable Pakistan interest, as the bravery of "Afghan nation", instead of striving to learn the fact that those political incidents were the natural outcome of the chaotic nature in which a rag bag of tribes hostile to each other were put together as Afghanistan in the first place. Moreover, in their Afghan Euphoria precipitated by terrorist attacks on USA, generally referred to as the incidents of September 11 of 2001, the West sought assistance of Pakistan to eradicate the sources of terrorism in Afghanistan without remembering the facts that working for Saudi geopolitics of spreading the Wahhabi brand of Islam in South and Central Asia, Pakistan itself was in a major way instrumental in creating the new wave terrorism. Using vast financial resource put at its disposal by Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, Pakistan, particularly under Saudi puppet Nawaz Sharif, who lives in Saudi Arabia after being expelled from his homeland, created the Wahhabi Madresa in which was manufactured the Taliban terrorism.

Still under the influence of the impact of Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, which was and still is interpreted as Iran's move for regional supremacy, Washington moved to disseminate among Iran's perceived regional rivals a sense of rivalry in power politics among Iran's powerful neighbours like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It was with the planning and other material assistance of US Central Intelligence Agency CIA and the said financial support from Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi that Pakistan helped Taliban to capture 95% of Afghanistan by toppling the alliance of varying Afghan tribes just when their alliance had toppled the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. These developments paved the way for the emergence in Afghanistan of the Al-Qaeda Wahhabi terrorists, not an organization hostile to the House of Saud as we were led to believe in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but an extension of the Al-Saud Wahhabi geopolitics. Furthermore, it is sad to say that encouraged by the terrorist events of September 11, the same energies that had created Taliban and Al-Qaeda duped the US Neo-Cons to rush in getting themselves sunk in the depth of the political swamp Afghanistan has been known for over a century by declaring their so-called "war on terrorism".

Today the United States and its European allies make no secret of their frustration of getting in quagmire of endless and fruitless war in Afghanistan without knowing how to get read of it. Some of us have been trying to warn the United States (1) of such a consequence if attention is not paid to details of political geography of the region which seem to have fallen in deaf ears. As a result it is quite apparent now that in a quick bid to run away from that God-forsaken world of relentless tribal and religious fanaticism, the United States, encouraged by the same dubious sources in Pakistan, has gone as far as considering the incredible idea of power sharing with the Taliban in Afghanistan which represents nothing but the scale of US desperation to run away from Afghanistan, another dreadful recipe for future disasters of perhaps greater consequence for South and Central Asia and the World at large.

The United States of America must realize that it cannot treat the future peace of the world in finding ways of escaping from self-inflicted wounds in Afghanistan. Washington must realize the problem has to be settled in its appropriate way and that is not possible unless the unruly nature of Afghan tribes is studied well and, more

importantly studying how the *state* of Afghanistan was put together out of Britain's geo-strategic needs of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in total absence of any sense of national cohesion and any desire for nationhood among the belligerent tribes bungled together to create the state of Afghanistan. To contemplate a peaceful future for Afghanistan and the region history teaches us that its past and the way it has been created must be fully examined in order to understand the unreal terms of reference the state of Afghanistan was founded in the first place.

### **Creation of Afghanistan; a Geopolitical Falsification (2)**

What we know today as the country of Afghanistan, has not emerged in a natural process of nation-building exercise, it was created by British geopolitical interests of mid-nineteenth century when the Anglo-Russian Great Game in Central Asia was in full swing. What is crucial for us to realize is that the British decision of creating Afghanistan from a rag bag of Persian-dependant tribes and principalities was only to serve British geo-strategic need of the time for creation of a buffer-zone to fence off Russian encroachment towards British India and the warm waters of the south.

British rivalries with the French intensified European colonial rivalries in Asia and Africa in 18<sup>th</sup> century. When Lord Wellesley completed his conquests in India at the turn of the nineteenth century British Empire reached global proportion. This was the time when Russian Empire was also making rapid advances in Central Asia making it a global superpower. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Russians completed their Kazakh conquests and began their southward push (3).

The territories contested in this geopolitical game of giants in Trans-Caucasia, Transcaspia and Central Asia belonged to Iran, or as it was known then, the Persian Empire. These territories were used as pieces of squares of a chessboard on which Britain and Russia conducted their geopolitical game. This reality is testified to by Lord Curzon of Kedelston, Britain's Viceroy in India at the end of nineteenth century who assets: "...Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia... I confess... are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world". (4).

Having captured India and almost completed his campaign of

unifying Iran, Nader Shah Afshar, the last of Iran's great emperor was assassinated in mid-night of 19<sup>th</sup> June 1747. The next morning the whole camp was in chaos, the most powerful generals of the Naderi forces took their contingents and headed to their own quarters of the empire. The contingent that included Uzbek, Hazara and other central Asian peoples lead by Ahmad Khan Abdali headed towards Qandahar where the Abdali khan was eventually crowned as Ahmad Shah Dorrani. Before their eastward march the said contingents held together under the command of Nour Mohammad and Ahmad Khan Abdali, both loyal to the memory of their late sovereign, took up arms and prevented the pillage of the royal tent. This act of loyalty to the concept and idea of what was then a *Persian Empire* does not, in any way suggest that Afghan peoples and leaders had at then considered themselves as peoples of a different political entity separate from Persian Empire in the way that suggested a century later by British officers involved in the task of state-building exercise in Afghanistan and its boundary making; people like (Colonel, General, Sir) Frederick Goldsmith (5). In their legal-geographical arguments in legitimizing the state of Afghanistan at that time, and shaping boundaries for it these officers used the advent of Ahmad Shah Doran's crowning in Qandahar as legitimate historical terms and references of a process upon which emergence of the state of "Afghanistan" was to be argued. This legitimacy was of serious doubt from the beginning as there is no evidence suggesting that the peoples or local leaders of what is now Afghanistan had any design or desire for a country or state separate from Persia. In reality there is much evidence pointing to the fact that Ahmad Shah Dorrani had crowned himself in Qandahar as the Shah of Persia, not Afghanistan, which was not then in existence. In a communiqué issued on the occasion of his coronation as Shah of Persia (Iran) he hoped the: "God *willing... he will bring under his control the whole of Iran*" (6). Ahmad Shah's pre-occupation with renewing Nader Shah's conquest of India prevented his dominion to expand to the whole of Persia.

Despite Ahmad Shah's desire for renewal of Nader Shah's Persian Empire, his dominion remained limited to the three dependant principalities of Herat, Kabul and Qandahar which was largely the home of three distinct tribal entities:

- 1) The Hazarachs located mostly to the west of the road from Qandahar

to Kabul, who are Shiite and (Dari) Persian speaking, mostly of Mongolian origin.

- 2) Tajiks and Uzbeks, who include most of the settled population. They are Agriculturalists with (Dari) Persian as their native language. They are descendants of the ancient race, who had migrated from Central Asia to Iran. G. P. Tate describes the Tajiks as: *one people and in all probability they represent the original Iranian or Aryan race, among whom Zoroaster published his doctrine; among whom the Greek colonists of Alexander settled...* (7)
- 3) The Pashtuns who are nomadic by origin. They are said to be Pathans, the name of the people mentioned by writers of antiquity. Pashtun or Afghan is applied to the tribes collectively, and also to the pastoral nomads among them. They are strict Sunni Muslims and speak Pashtun, and almost all of them can also speak (Dari) Persian.

Not only there was no evidence suggesting existence of a country named Afghanistan throughout the history, even the name 'Afghanistan' was, according to British sources of history, invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Mogul Empire of India, as a convenient term referring to the districts and dependencies of Kabul. The term had existed in the old chronicles, first used in the Ghaznavid writings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the term was applied to the mountain and cultivable tracts which were of the Afridis and Vaziris. Sir Percy Sykes asserts that General Houtrum Schindler believed that the Afghans were termed "Aghvans" in the Safavid times (16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries). (8).

### **The Renewed Afghanistan; still a state falsification**

However, with Ahmad Shah's demise in 1773, his kingdom also disintegrated and the three principalities of Herat, Kabul, and Qandahar returned to their former political status as dependencies of Persian Empire.

### **The British Interest – A New Dimension**

A new dimension was added to this general state of affairs in the region in the form of a westward expansion and geo-strategic interest of the British Indian Empire. Britain began, as from early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to view the principalities of Afghanistan and to some extent, Iran

itself, as vulnerable gateway through which attacks could take place by either France or Russia or possibly the two together with Iran, against its possession in India. Both France and Russia had realized that although it was difficult, if not impossible, to challenge British supremacy at sea, it would be easily possible by land through Afghanistan. An additional source of anxiety for the British was the active efforts of French diplomacy in Iran (9) as well as all over Asia. A French mission, led by Monsieur Olivier arrived in Tehran in 1795 seeking friendship and alliance. Britain found the activities of Napoleon's representatives in the east, especially in Iran, for the purpose of contracting alliance, hostile to its position in India. At the same time, the British came to the conclusion that Shah-Zaman, ruler of Kabul, was posing serious threats to the stability of India and the position of the British India Company (10). This whole situation provoked a wide-range of British reaction which manifested itself in two different ways: 1- *to counter the weight of the French in Iran by endeavouring to seal treaties of friendship and alliance with the Iranians.* 2- *to expand their influence throughout the Afghan territories and to bring all three Afghan principalities under an effective political control.*

In the first instance, Mirza Mehdi-Ali Khan, as officer of the East India Company at Bushehr, was sent to Tehran in 1799 to prepare the ground for the launch of British diplomacy in Iran. But much more than fearing a French rivalry in Asia the British became fearful of the sudden expansion of Russian influence in Iran in the wake of the 1828 Russo-Persian treaty of Turkamanchai. This development gave rise to the British anxieties of Russian threat via Iran to their possessions in India, bringing the strategic importance of Herat to their attention. The followings are examples of the views expressed confidentially to the British Government by British diplomats in Iran:

The key of all Afghanistan towards north is Heart. The country between the frontiers of Persia and India is far more productive than I had imagined it to be; and I can assure...that there is no impediment, either from the physical features of the country or from the deficiency of supplies, to the march of a large army from the frontiers of Georgia to Kandahar, or, as I believe, to the Indus.

There is therefore...no security for India in the nature of the country through which an army would have to pass to invade it from this side.



On the contrary, the whole line is peculiarly favourable for such an enterprise (11).

These geopolitical concerns were given rise by the claim of discovery by British historians and colonial officers in India like Sir Percy Sykes, of a will attributed to Tsar Peter the Great in which Russia's territorial advances towards the warm waters of the south is prescribed (12).

The anxiety over a Russian design on Herat and eventually, India, become an obsession among the British, especially after arrival in Herat of Count Simonich, the Russian envoy in Tehran, with the Iranian troops in 1838. Suspicious of this move, British Minister in Tehran told his government;

it is currently reported and believed here, though I cannot say on what grounds, that there is a secret arrangement between Persia and Russia to exchange Herat for some of the districts beyond the Arras which formerly belonged to Persia. This report was first mentioned to me at Tehran in March last; but I then paid no attention to it, because I could not see how Russia was to get at Herat, and I still am inclined to regard it as probably unfounded, though Count Simonich certainly threatened Mahommed Ameen, a servant of Yar Mahommed Khan (who was sent with a message from his master to the Persian camp) that if Herat did not surrender to the Shah, he would march a Russian army against it(13).

In a letter to Sir John McNeil, British Minister Plenipotentiary at Tehran, the Secretary to the Government of India states:

The political interests of Great Britain and of British India are even more concerned that their commercial interests in the exemption of the countries between India and Persia from foreign aggression from the westward. There is too much reason to apprehend that Persia, under its present sovereign, has evinced an unprecedented degree of subserviency to Russian counsels... The pertinacity with which Persian Government has persisted in this design... (14) is of itself a sufficient ground for apprehending the existence of some ulterior and unfriendly design towards our interests (15).

Russo-phobia became widespread in India, and the theory of a Russian threat to British possessions in India via Iran and Afghanistan had become so realistic in the eyes of the British that formation of a buffer state out of an amalgamation of the Persian dependant principalities of Herat, Kabul and Qandahar in the form of the state of Afghanistan not only became the cornerstone of British India's foreign policy concerns in Asia, but it became a kind of universal obsession among British politicians, diplomats, and military officers alike. They were blinded by their geo-strategic views to the extent that it made them totally heedless of the lack of any kind of shared iconography among the tribes of those principalities which would glue them together as a distinct country or a nation; the iconographical glue that in the word of Jean Gottmann, father of modern political geography, is the most fundamental ingredient in any task of state or nation-building (16). They did not heed to the fact that a nation/state put together by forcing a rag bag of different tribes with differing national or ethnical tendencies will not amount to a nation that can survive the test of time because such construction has in its trait a strong centrifugal force that would always drive the differing tribes apart and would always. Leading British king makers were aware of the fact that tribes of what is now west of Afghanistan have always been Persian/Iranian identity. Viceroy of India, Lord George N. Curzon whose works on Iran and Afghanistan history and political geography are regarded as authoritative in late nineteenth century asserts:

Persia cannot forget that what is now Western Afghanistan has through the greatest part of history been Eastern Khorasan, that Herat has been habitually ruled by Persian sovereigns, viceroys, governors, or vassals, that is inhabited by people of Persian rather than Afghan traditions and sympathy, and that it is severed by no physical or ethnographical barrier from Meshed... (17).

In spite of all these and the fact that Curzon and consequently British India being aware that the terms of reference for building the intended state in Afghanistan was incorrect, they went ahead with their design of creating a country or nation that lacked the necessary national cohesion among the tribes they were putting together as they ignored the fact that

this very issue will be the main source of great discord among varying tribes of the new country and in the region at large.

### **The colonial manufacturing of Afghanistan**

In conclusion, it must be said that the political and military paralysis of the Iranian Government, resulting from the terms of the 1857 peace treaty, allowed finalization of the partitioning of Khorasan, and paved the way for the creation of Afghanistan. Ahmad Shah Dorrani (18) had in the second half of the eighteenth century created the Kingdom of Afghanistan, but it collapsed with his death in 1772, for it did not have the necessary geographical, historical, and cultural substances that is necessary for nation building and would hold Herat and Qandahar together with Kabul in a lasting union. Herat, for instance was more of a Khorasani environment than anything else and as Lord Curzon has asserted, it was geographical, historical, and cultural extension of Mashhad rather than being Afghan.

Dust Mohammad Khan succeeded in the second half of the nineteenth century in reviving the Afghan Kingdom with direct and indirect assistance of the British in India whenever this assistance was needed. These assistances were given because it served British geo-strategic designs of wanting to create a buffer state between India and Russia. It had nothing to do with British excuses that Iran had territorial designs against the countries of Afghanistan. Afghanistan was thus created to suit geo-strategic needs of British India, that is to say; the clamours that had intensified throughout British empire in the 1830s through to 1850s of a possible joint Russo-Iranian design against India was only to serve the enthusiastic geopolitical and geo-strategic assumptions of Sir John McNeil, Sir Justin Sheil and other political strategists of British India.

Sir John McNeil's fantastic assessments of geo-strategic position of Herat was adopted by the British whereas London appears to have remained somewhat uneasy on the question of depriving Iran completely of her rights in Herat as a British Foreign Office document states:

Persia's claims to Herat were of long standing. It had been the capital of Eastern Khorasan and geographically was not separated by any natural barrier from Mashhad. (19)

This is an echo of the statement made earlier by Lord Curzon on the fact that Herat had been a historical part of Iran's Eastern Khorasan (20). Yet, convinced of the vitality of Sir John McNeil's geo-strategic assessments, Lord Curzon, like most other officers and diplomats serving in India, was critical of the London Government's repeated proposals on returning Herat to Iran. He stated that *Lord Beaconsfield after the war of 1878 committed the inexplicable error of proposing once again to hand over Herat... 'Key of India' to Persia to the tender mercies of the Czar.* (21)

## Conclusion

A study of Afghanistan's history of state-building process lives little doubt that a political geography that has been formed as a result of colonial geopolitics of the past will always lack the necessary iconographical glue, in the word of Jean Gottmann (22) that holds various ethnicities together as a nation and provides it with the possibility of relative safety and security in its environment. In other words, a colonial re-arrangement of territories and boundaries of the past will cause instability and insecurity of states in the political geography arrangements of today and future, unless the nature of colonial arrangements of political geography are addressed properly and remedied with the iconographical possibilities that are available to those who want to address the problems.

In the case of Afghanistan we learn that the state has always been susceptible to the challenges of political geography through centrifugal forces which has not allowed this British manufactured entity to settle as a genuine nation and a proper state. The post-colonial period of relative stability proved to be ineffective in creating a sense of nationhood among varying tribes and warring ethnicities. That was the main reason which led to a succession of *coop d'etat*, followed by Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980s. While coordinated Afghan tribes' struggle defeated Soviet occupation as an external threat which normally brings unity among various components of a nation. But this event amazingly led to a full scale internal/civil war at the same time, which signified Afghanistan's lack of proper statehood that is based on the existence of a properly constructed nation.

*War on terrorism* was the post-September 11 slogan that brought US neo-con administration to Afghanistan with dreaded consequences that have spilled over into Pakistan. This was in reality, Washington's self-inflicted wound as it was the CIA that had helped create in Pakistan the so-called *madrasas* of extremist Wahhabi teachings in early 1990s, with the assistance of Pakistan's government of the time as well as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In their neo-colonial designs they found it necessary to invent a state history for Afghanistan which was based on British manufacture of political history of state in Afghanistan. They had invented the Afghan state by putting together territories they severed from the veining Persian Empire of the time. This process of state-manufacturing in Afghanistan though served the colonial purposes of the time, never proved to be working in the sense that is expected of a genuinely founded nation and nation-state. The ills of this ill-designed state will naturally disallow any remedy that is not based on a genuine state-building process in that country.

At present, given the circumstance of quagmire created by US neo-con's *war on terrorism* in Afghanistan and Pakistan, there seems to be no alternative left for the West unless Taliban and Al-Qaeda are uprooted in their root-nest in Pakistan and with full cooperation of Pakistani army which has been behind it all. As for Afghanistan, producing a remedy to its deep-rooted ills needs re-examining its state-structure by understanding the centrifugal forces that drive various ethnicities apart, and to try and find some kind of accommodation among components that makes up the state of Afghanistan. The best method to achieve this in today's world of politics would probably be a genuine approach towards adaption of a home-grown democracy based on a genuinely designed federalism in which varying ethnicities would have very little to do with each other directly but live in harmony with each other within a federal state which would play the role of the ultimate arbiter.

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