

THE BATTLE FOR MARJAH



A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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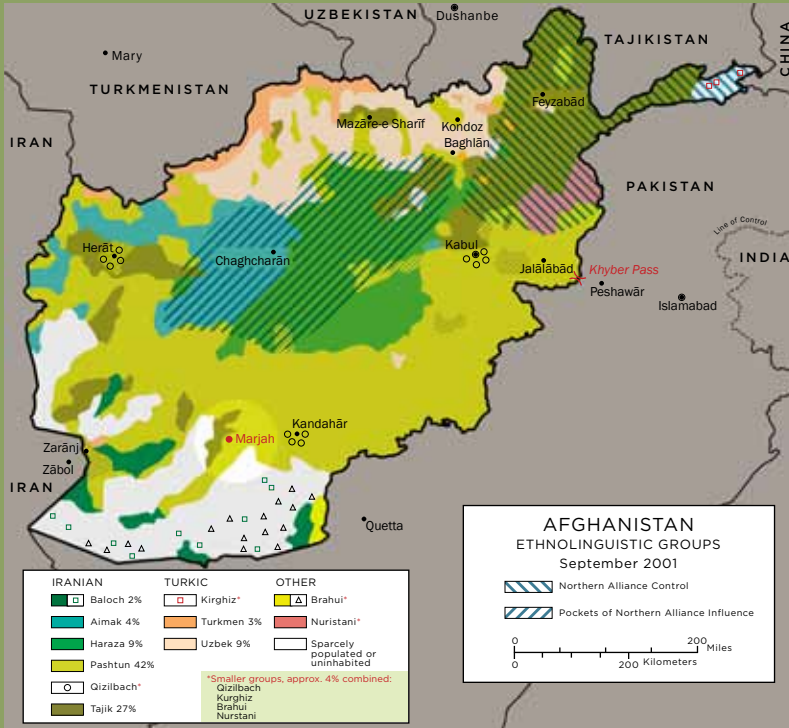
HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan occupies a pivotal geostrategic position, located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Landlocked, inhospitable, and mountainous, the region has nevertheless long drawn outsiders. Some were traders, making their way along the Silk Road that stretched from the Far East across the continent to Europe. Others were invaders and empire builders, often on their way somewhere else.

Afghanistan has frequently been in the crosshairs of conquest, its plains and valleys the backdrop against which world history has unfolded. Alexander the Great came here from the west and Genghis Khan from the east. Centuries later, the British arrived from India in the south, and czarist Russia threatened from the north.

Successive world religions have swept across the country, too. The Indian emperor Asoka brought Buddhism to Afghanistan in the middle of the third century BCE, and the religion later spread along the Silk Road. Hinduism may have been introduced as early as the first millennium BCE, and it prospered among kingdoms near Kabul and Ghazni in the 7th century CE. Islam came with the Arabs in the late 7th and early 8th centuries and soon eclipsed all other faiths. Among the early converts to the new religion were the Pashtuns, the region's largest ethnic group. Eventually, these Islamic tribes began to unite, and by the mid-1700s an Afghan nation-state was emerging.

In the following century, Afghanistan became part of what Rudyard Kipling dubbed the "Great Game," a struggle for regional dominance between the empires of Russia and Britain. The Russians were eyeing a route to the Indian Ocean and its warm-water ports; the British were eager to keep the Russians at bay. For the Afghan people, the greatest impact of the "game" was a series of wars fought against the British. During this period, the



Map source: "Operation Enduring Freedom: The United States Army in Afghanistan, October 2001-March 2002," last modified March 17, 2006, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/Afghanistan/Operation%20Enduring%20Freedom.htm>. Source of ethnic group percentages: CIA World Factbook.

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country lost much of its territory to British India, in what is now Pakistan. As a result, today many Pashtuns live on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

One famous episode from this time of conflict was the British retreat from Kabul in 1842. The British had invaded Afghanistan and occupied the capital three years earlier. But they were unable to pacify the city and, in the face of mounting resistance to their presence, decided to evacuate. They were massacred as they tried to make their way back through the snowbound passes of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Some 4,500 British troops set out from Kabul—and only one Englishman completed the journey. Few incidents demonstrate better the wisdom of Alexander the Great’s legendary pronouncement about Afghanistan: “easy to march into, hard to march out of.”

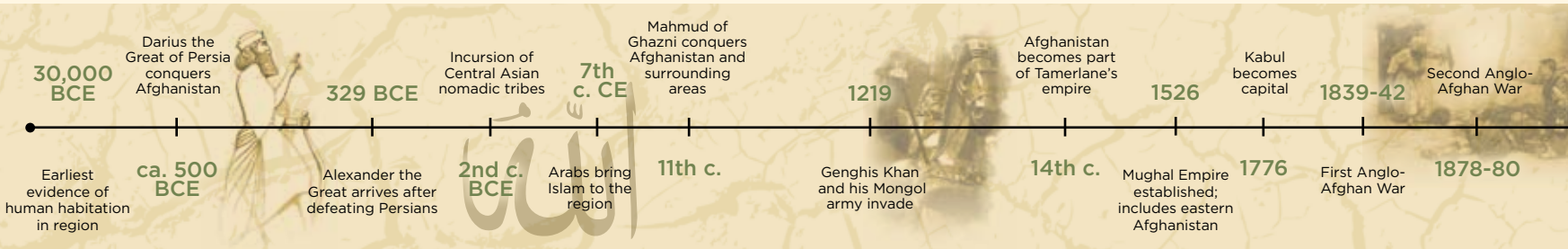
The Russians reaffirmed the truth of these words when Soviet troops invaded in 1979 to prop up the communist regime in Kabul. Beyond the capital, mujahideen fighters launched a guerrilla campaign against the Soviets. The conflict quickly escalated, with the United States supplying handheld antiaircraft missiles so the rebels could hit back at Soviet attack helicopters. For the rebels themselves, the struggle had become jihad, or religious war. Fighting between the Soviets and the mujahideen continued throughout the 1980s. Millions of Afghan refugees fled across the Pakistani

and Iranian borders. But as some left, others began to arrive, determined to play their part in the fight against the Soviets. Among them was a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden.

A decade of conflict followed before Moscow finally recalled its troops. Civil war and anarchy engulfed Afghanistan. Eventually, a group known as the Taliban emerged as the strongest of the warring factions. Seven years after the Soviets left, the Taliban captured Kabul and began to shape the country in their own image. But the Taliban’s reign was short lived. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, they continued to shelter those responsible for the atrocities, and the United States supported an anti-Taliban coalition that rapidly drove them from power. Hamid Karzai became the new president of Afghanistan. However, like nearly all of Afghanistan’s history, the post-Taliban period has been fraught with insecurity and instability, with the government in Kabul unable to establish its authority in all parts of the country.

THE TALIBAN

An Islamist militia that briefly ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban was originally a group of Islamic scholars from religious schools, or madrassas, in Kandahar province and from refugee camps in



Pakistan. Often they were veterans of the Soviet war of the 1980s. Weary of the country's fragmentation and infighting, the Taliban recruits had a powerful desire for the creation of a unified Islamic nation—at seemingly any cost.

Chaos had reigned in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989, with rival militias and warlords exerting power in their own regions. Disorder and lawlessness prevailed. By 1994, the Taliban had emerged as one of the strongest factions, determined to reestablish law and order in the country. With the backing of Pakistan, they seized Kabul in 1996.

As the Taliban sought to exert authority over their rivals in the rest of the country, they also started to implement a strict version of sharia, or Islamic law. This included bans on everything from the Internet, television, secular radio programs, music, and movies to playing cards, musical instruments, chess, and kite flying. Girls were denied education, and men were imprisoned for trimming their beards. Afghan Hindus were forced to wear yellow tags identifying them as non-Muslims. Stonings and public floggings were among the punishments meted out for violations of Taliban laws.

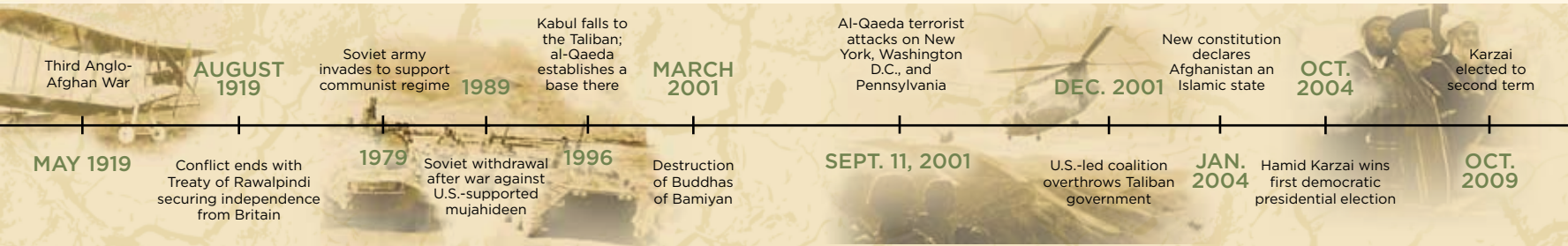
The extreme measures of the Taliban alienated most of the world. Their leaders were denied Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations, and the only countries that recognized the new regime were Pakistan, the United Arab

Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. One Saudi Arabian who particularly liked what he saw in the new Afghanistan was Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden took refuge in the country and began to set up training camps for his al-Qaeda terror group. In 1998, the United States launched cruise missiles at the camps in response to U.S. embassy bombings in Africa orchestrated by al-Qaeda.

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda operatives crashed commercial airliners into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania. President George W. Bush issued an ultimatum for the Taliban to turn over bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders. The Taliban refused. Weeks later, the United States and Britain began a bombing campaign against the Taliban and gave logistical support to the anti-Taliban coalition known as the Northern Alliance. After suffering early losses, the Taliban abandoned Kabul in November. With the surrender of their stronghold of Kandahār by year's end, Taliban rule came to an end, although the group continues to fight against the U.S.-supported Kabul regime.

BIN LADEN BIOGRAPHY

Osama bin Laden was born into a wealthy Saudi family in 1957. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, he moved to the country and became one of the "Arab Afghans" assisting the



mujahideen resistance fighters. After the Soviets left, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia but was expelled for antigovernment activities. He moved on to the Sudan before eventually making his way back to Afghanistan, where he was welcomed by the Taliban. In 1998, the United States government blamed bin Laden for bomb attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed 224 people. Three years later, Afghanistan's refusal to turn bin Laden over to the United States after 9/11 precipitated the American-led overthrow of the Taliban regime. U.S. forces tracked bin Laden to the Tora Bora cave complex southeast of Kabul, but he managed to escape across the border into Pakistan. In hiding, he continued to encourage his followers to attack U.S. targets, until May 2, 2011, when bin Laden was killed in a raid by Navy SEALs and CIA operatives at a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE

Counterinsurgency is a form of warfare that combines military, political, economic, and social measures. A major challenge in any action against insurgents is the need to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants. As Mao Zedong's famous axiom states, "The guerrilla must move among the people as the fish swims in the sea."

In the 19th century, Napoleon's army learned about the power of guerrilla forces in Spain (the term is Spanish for "little war"). When they formed themselves into regular fighting forces, the Spanish suffered repeated defeat at the hands of the more powerful French. But when the Spanish dispersed across the country in irregular units, the French had no means of beating them.



T.E. Lawrence

T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia") demonstrated the potency of such warfare when he helped organize

Arab insurgents against Ottoman rule during World War I. The rebels employed hit-and-run tactics against the Turks, riding in from the desert to strike enemy targets and escaping before they could be engaged. In World War II, the French Resistance proved a constant thorn in Germany's side—sabotaging telecommunications networks, railroads, and electricity facilities as well as carrying out guerrilla attacks on the occupying troops.

Generally, insurgents aim not for outright military victory over the enemy, but for inflicting enough casualties to demoralize it over time and sap its will to fight. As one of the leaders of the communist insurgency in Vietnam declared, "To protract the war is the key to victory."

A counterinsurgency strategy that simply seeks to pursue and destroy the enemy can often end in failure. This was the French experience in Algeria, which became a particularly brutal colonial conflict. The French succeeded in winning a military victory against the insurgents but only at the cost of alienating the locals, who increasingly opted for complete Algerian independence from France—the very thing the insurgents had been fighting for in the first place.

Another strategy is to "drain the water"—forcibly relocating the population to expose the insurgents ("the fish"). The British took this approach during the Malayan Emergency, in which they tried to establish protected New Villages to isolate communist insurgents from the peasantry. The United States and Ngo Dinh Diem employed a similar strategy in South Vietnam through the Strategic Hamlet Program.

According to current thinking, the most viable method of counterinsurgency pursues a "hearts and minds" strategy. By winning over the local population, the enemy would be deprived of everything it needed—shelter, supplies, moral legitimacy—to continue the struggle. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have renewed interest in this approach to counterinsurgency, particularly the need to understand and interact

with the local populace and to view such warfare as essentially a battle of ideas. With this in mind, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps published a new counterinsurgency field manual in 2006.

HISTORY OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

Formed at the outset of the Revolutionary War, the U.S. Marines were infantry units that served aboard navy vessels. They protected a ship's crew during enemy boarding operations, undertook their own boardings of enemy ships, and launched amphibious raids against enemy targets ashore. Over the years, the role of the marines changed to accommodate the evolution in foreign policy and military doctrine of the rapidly growing young nation. As the United States sought to project power around the world, the U.S. Marine Corps became an effective way of doing it.

One of the marines' most celebrated early expeditionary actions came against the Barbary Pirates during the First Barbary War (1801–05), commemorated by the phrase “to the shores of Tripoli” in the “Marines’ Hymn.” In the War of 1812, the marines helped win some of America’s great naval victories as U.S. frigates took on the Royal Navy. Their assault on Chapultepec in Mexico City during the Mexican-American War added another phrase to the hymn: “from the halls of Montezuma.”

Other marine service abroad ranged from Panama to the Far East, and Egypt to the Caribbean. But the marines played little role in the Civil War, whether as part of the U.S. Marine Corps or the newly formed Confederate States Marine Corps. The need to deploy from the sea during the Spanish-American War ensured they were fully engaged in that conflict, leading American forces ashore in the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. In World War I they fought as conventional infantry on the Western Front, earning a reputation for toughness from the battle-hardened Germans.

Amphibious warfare was the key to operations in the Pacific theatre during World War II. On island after island, the U.S. Marine Corps took on the might of the Japanese army. The photograph of the marines raising the American flag on Iwo Jima’s Mount Suribachi has become the corps’s iconic image.



USMC War Memorial at night

Important as their sea-based operations were, by now the marines were becoming something of a self-contained force, able to fight by sea, by land, and by air with their own paratroopers. But in the next major conflict, Korea, their seaborne role was central to U.S. strategy. In September 1950, the marines implemented General Douglas MacArthur’s amphibious landing at Inchon, a bold flanking maneuver that turned the course of the war.

In Vietnam, they conducted conventional operations against the North Vietnamese Army, as well as counterinsurgency measures against Viet Cong guerrillas. Following the war, they resumed their expeditionary function in a number of engagements around the world. These included the attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran and the invasions of Grenada and Panama. During the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91, marines liberated Kuwait, and in 2003 they helped lead the invasion of Iraq, later spearheading some of the most treacherous military operations in the country, including the assault on Fallujah.

During the offensive against the Taliban, marines were some of the first conventional forces across the border into Afghanistan. They have been engaging Taliban forces ever since.

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