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THE MISSING INGREDIENT: NON-
IDEOLOGICAL INSURGENCY AND STATE
COLLAPSE IN WESTERN AFGHANISTAN,
1979-1992

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Introduction: ideology, hegemony, common action and polity-building

In studying the *jihad* movement in Afghanistan, a major problem arises when trying to explain the failure of these organisations to maintain or re-establish a nation-wide state structure after 1992. In fact, after 1992 much of the country fell into chaos. One of the main factors of the post-1992 collapse is identified, in most of the literature, with the factional and personal rivalries of the *jihadi* movement, that is 'elite disunity'.[1] Indeed, even the few Islamist pockets that were spread around Afghanistan were split along factional and personal lines. Under these conditions, even if the Islamists had controlled most of the movement, a civil war would probably have been unavoidable. However, even the unified factions, such as *Jami'at-i Islami* proved unable to produce a consistent and shared view of how the Afghan state should be organised. Instead they were internally divided between a thin layer of Islamists and a bulk of non-ideological players such a warlords, strongmen, etc. Had *Jami'at*, which was the strongest faction, succeeded in eliminating or severely weakening its competitors for power, it would still have found re-establishing a state structure very difficult. This paper argues that the ultimate cause of failure was the weak role of ideological organisations in the original *jihadi* movement and tries to explain why ideological actors remained marginal in the struggle. In order to do so, I will focus on the *jihadi* movement of a specific part of Afghanistan which is the west, and more specifically Herat province.

The importance of ideology in insurgent movements cannot be overstressed. In Afghanistan, a major struggle took place for hegemony[2] over the *jihadi* movement. Initially, a widespread interpretation among Afghans viewed *jihad* as meaning a 'just war' against a widely perceived threat, be it from an oppressive government or a foreign army. Therefore everybody could potentially take part in *jihad*. An alternative interpretation, propagated by the Islamist groups, viewed *jihad* as the struggle to establish an Islamic state, a goal that preceded the communist government but whose chances of success were greatly enhanced by the new situation. As such, the Islamist parties claimed the right to decide who was entitled to take part in the struggle. In other words, they ideologised the notion of *jihad*. The Islamists realised that the grassroots feelings of the *jihadi* movement predisposed Afghanistan for the hegemony of the Islamist ideological vision. They would then have a unique opportunity to root out their ideological enemies, such as leftists and nationalists.

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[1] See among others Maley (2002), p. 196; Saikal (1998). The other popular explanation is the lack of external support for a unified government (see See Rubin (1995).

[2] Meant here in the Gramscian sense, of the ability to exercise moral and intellectual leadership and obtain consensus.

However, the importance of ideology in insurgent movements is not limited to the mobilisation or attempts to achieve hegemony. Ideology has historically been proven of crucial importance in polity-building processes. Various authors have pointed out the role of ideology in fields such as legitimisation, the development of loyalty and cohesion among 'the agents of coercion'[3] and more generally for management of collective action. In Geertz's words, ideologies are 'matrices for the creation of collective conscience'.[4] Ideology provides 'the motivation to seek […] technical skill and knowledge, the emotional resilience to support the necessary patience and resolution, and the moral strength to self-sacrifice and incorruptibility'…[5] It is possible to carry out a mobilisation, exercise hegemony and obtain legitimisation with a relatively weak organisational/bureaucratic presence (for example, through the clergy and local notables). However, as far as loyalty-building and sophisticated long-term management of collective action are concerned, ideology needs a specialised carrier, a mass political party/organisation.[6] Here the Islamists faced a major challenge, given their small initial numbers and they had two basic options. One was to absorb into their ranks a large number of different non-ideological actors, thereby diluting the ideological commitment of the organisation. The other was to recruit selectively and be content to field a disciplined, committed, but small force.

For the purpose of this article, we shall distinguish between different types of local politico-military leaders such as strongmen, warlords and commanders. Strongmen control a portion of territory mainly through armed force, although they might have some degree of political legitimacy due to their local roots and their ability to provide security. Warlords, on the other hand, are distinguished by their military capabilities, i.e. they are seen as legitimate and effective military leaders by the military class (militiamen and their 'officers') and control either directly or indirectly some territory. Yet, while they exercise political power, they rarely enjoy much in the way of political legitimacy. Although strongmen and warlords can often resemble each other, the former lack the military capabilities of the latter. Because military leadership skills are scarce, warlords often develop networks of strongmen subordinated to them, to whom in exchange they offer services centred on their ability to win battles and to manage relatively large military organisations. Commanders, on the other hand, are more radically different from the previous categories. They differ from warlords in that their legitimacy is not purely military, but derives also from their attachment to a political project and the recognition offered by a political leadership. Although most leaders of armed men in Afghanistan call themselves commanders, the term will be used here only to refer to those whose role was institutionalised through the genuine appointment by a superior authority rather then being self-proclaimed.

The revolt in Herat and the emergence of local leaders

Ideologues first gained a foothold in Herat during the 1979 revolt, led by notables and landlords, against the proposed reforms of the communist government. Initially, the most important components were the Nationalist and Maoist officers of the city garrison (17th Infantry Div.), who

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[3] On the importance of 'control[ing] the symbols of legitimacy' in order to obtain social cohesion and loyalty, see Gellner (1995), pp. 165-6.

[4] Geertz (1964), part V.

[5] Ibid, part VI.

[6] This distinction between weakly organised/bureaucratised polities and strongly organised ones is similar to that established by Duverger (1976) between committee-based parties and section- or cell-based parties (pp. 71-77).

had mutinied and joined the rebels, followed later by civilian activists. A few months after the repression of the revolt, partisan warfare by small armed groups emerged in the countryside. On a provincial level the leadership of the insurgency in the early days was a mixed bag of local notables, outlaws, tribal leaders, members of the intelligentsia, students and former soldiers or officers. Over the summer of 1979 Islamist agents started contacting the rebel commanders, offering them support in exchange for their allegiance. As weaponry started flowing in, slowly at first, then in ever larger quantities, the tenuous hold of the HDK government over the countryside started to collapse. By the end of 1980/beginning of 1981 the HDK controlled only the towns and a few villages around them. As fighting intensified, some charismatic figures, who commanded hundreds of armed followers, began to emerge in the *Jihadi* movement.[7]

When the Islamists of *Jami'at-i Islami* started gaining a foothold, they were essentially concentrated in two groups, the Afzali front and the Niazi front. *Hizb-i Islami*, the other main Islamist faction, had activists on the ground, carrying out recruitment and propaganda work, but few educated militants among the commanders.

These groups were surrounded by a large mass of ideologically indifferent actors, who were by no means a homogenous group. Attempting to explain the rapid decline of much of the *jihadi* movement into banditry after 1989, B. Rubin argued that the movement started to corrode when, following the Soviet withdrawal, external help was progressively reduced.[8] However, the prominent role played by outlaws was already one striking feature of the Herat revolt. Even Gul Mohammad Tehsan, who became the first leader of the revolt and WHO was a *khan* from Tehsan village, had a criminal past[9]. Several of the most prominent commanders of the 1979-1980 period had a criminal record dating back to King Zahir Shah's time, especially those operating around Herat city. One of the first groups to be formed in Enjil district was, for example, that of Shir Agha, who had served several terms in prison. Others included Kamal Gulbagaz, who became *Jami'at*'s first general commander of the western part of Herat province, Sayyed Ahmad and Daoud Khan, who were to become the province's most powerful militia commanders, as well as several others.[10] Criminal elements were aided by the fact that they already controlled small gangs of followers and that they had experience with life underground. Used to a life on the edge, the former outlaws appear, not unsurprisingly, to have been the most reckless leaders but this was exactly their main competitive strength. Their recklessness earned them the reputation of brave field commanders, a quality often appreciated by fighters who are asked to risk their lives. One of their motivations appears to have been to seek reinsertion into society through participation in the *jihad*. Seeking revenge appears to have been another, as is highlighted by their ruthless executions of government supporters. It is also possible that the criminal elements had longstanding contacts with the major landlords, who used them to mobilise the "mob" in support of their own interests.[11] It is worth noting that by Afghan standards, the surroundings of Herat

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[7] This paragraph is based on interviews with former commanders in Herat and the surrounding villages, September-October 2005.

[8] Rubin (1999).

[9] Gul Mohammad was killed in mid-1979 following a clash with government forces.

[10] Interview with former commander in Enjil, Herat, September 2005. See also Dorronsoro (2005), p. 100.

[11] For the debate on bandits and landlords, see Blok (1972); Brown (1990). In a later edition of his celebrated "bandits", Hobsbawm (1981) conceded that traditionally in peasant societies there have been bandits who serve the landlords as well as those who ally with the oppressed.

city are characterised by the presence of much greater than average landholdings and therefore by a proportionally greater influence of the propertied classes.

Landlords and notables also played a direct, although local, role in the insurgency, and they were widely considered less exploitative than the new strongmen. Moreover, the notables had resources and established relationships with the population which made it easier for them to exercise political leadership, but they rarely had military charisma. Several of them would later emerge as local strongmen, whereas the former outlaws often emerged as warlords.

Both products of the development of a modern state in Afghanistan, former officers and party activists found the role of commander much more natural than landlords and notables did. The officers just tried to reproduce the organisational model that had been taught to them at the military academia. The activists, often students or recently graduated professionals, tried to reproduce models derived from the Marxist revolutionary literature, such as Che Guevara's 'foci', or Lenin's bureaucratised party model. The activists contributed to the struggle a greater degree of commitment and the readiness to make sacrifices in the struggle, including accepting the imposition of organisational discipline. They were also motivated to treat the civilian population better, in order to achieve long-term political aims such as establishing an Islamic state.[12]

After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the end of 1979, massive support programmes to the insurgency from the US and a number of Arab countries started in earnest. The Pakistani authorities assumed the role of hub in the distribution of supplies to opposition parties based in Peshawar. The parties, in turn, were in charge of distributing the supplies to the insurgents throughout Afghanistan. Under pressure from both the Pakistani authorities and most likely from other foreign patrons too, the main priority of the Peshawar-based parties was to increase the tempo of military operations as quickly as possible, without paying much attention to building solid structures inside the country. Since in 1978-79 these parties had a limited number of activists in their ranks,[13] the only viable option was to recruit existing strongmen and warlords inside Afghanistan who would be attracted by the offer of weapons and other supplies. In exchange, the new 'recruits' had to abide by certain 'rules', which varied from party to party. The fact that the seven opposition parties authorised by the Pakistanis eagerly competed with each other in order to expand their constituency in Afghanistan compounded the problem. By the early 1980s even the two Islamist parties based in Peshawar (*Jami'at and Hizb-i Islami*)[14] had a following inside Afghanistan that was largely composed of strongmen and warlords, with relatively few genuine 'commanders' who were ideologically motivated and who had some political consciousness. As both the 'commanders' and the strongmen depended largely on the same sources of supply and the latter were a much larger group, the genuinely Islamist component of the *jihad* found itself at a distinct disadvantage. More importantly, the attitude of the party HQs in Pakistan strengthened the local strongmen, who could consolidate their own patronage networks, making the task of the actual Islamist commanders much more difficult.

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[12] Interviews with former commanders and government officials, Herat, September-October 2005.

[13] Estimated at 1,100 in the late 1970s by Harrison (1989), p. 10.

[14] The other five parties were a mix of traditionalist and fundamentalist organisations.

The triumph of patrimonialism and patronage

A further consolidation of non-ideological actors derived both from the policy of the Kabul government to recruit them into its own militias and from the creation of a large patrimonial polity with one of them at its head in the person of Mohammad Ismail Khan.

Ismail Khan's power base was his patrimonial network rather than a party or ideology. He never showed any interest whatsoever in the development of political party structures as a way to mobilise and manage the *jihad*. He also disliked the intelligentsia that provided the backbone of the Afzali and Niazi fronts. By contrast, he set out to use district warlords and strongmen as the building blocks of his polity and his experience as an army officer to consolidate his hold. He tried to complement this structure by co-opting the clergy to staff a judicial system and an embryonic administration. Establishing control over strongmen and warlords proved troublesome and Ismail Khan had to resort to a variety of 'Machiavellian tactics' to consolidate his power,[15] including the creation of a small disciplined army. He skilfully used the ideology of *jihad* to justify his polity-building efforts, claiming that the cause of *jihad* required the disciplining and restraining of unruly strongmen who were antagonising the population. Finally, he positioned himself to intercept most of the logistical support coming from Pakistan and to use it as leverage in his relations with other military leaders in the region.

The main weakness of Ismail Khan's polity was that it was vulnerable to competition from the government itself, which was in a position to offer more support to strongmen. In the long run, the powerful strongmen operating around Herat abandoned him for the government, which formed them into "tribal" militias. The Kabul government had already started experimenting with "tribal" militias (as opposed to party-controlled ones) in 1980. However, the importance of these militias in the strategy of Kabul grew exponentially in the second half of the 1980s.[16] Herat province was one of the main areas of implementation of this policy, in part because its flat territory conferred an advantage to regular troops accompanied by armour but also because Ismail Khan's policies drove many strongmen into the arms of the state. However, he was far from being the only one attacking other commanders. Indeed, in a district such as Kohsan, where Ismail's influence was very limited, as many as 100 commanders were killed in infighting during the *jihad*. Some other commanders, such as Mirhamza in Koshk-e Kohne, also stood out for putting pressure on their rivals and sometimes forcing them to make deals with the government. However, because they lacked the strength to maintain such pressure, their rivals had no real need to join the government permanently and opted instead for temporary truces.[17]

Ismail Khan's military pressure resulted in the collapse of the other main opposition groups in the west. Some of these had been quite strong in the early 1980s, for example *Hizb-i Islami,* the clergy-dominated *Jami'at al Ulema* and an alliance of traditionalists and fundamentalists called *Harakat-e Enqelab*. Because of their relative isolation compared to *Jami'at* which controlled most of the access routes to the province, they soon had difficulties in handling both the government troops and the *Jami'atis*. Many of their key commanders joined the government or

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[15] See Giustozzi (2006a).
[16] For more details on this see Giustozzi (2000), pp. 198-231.
[17] Interview with former Barakzai strongman, Herat, September 2005; interviews with former government officials, Herat, September 2005. See also Giustozzi (2000), pp. 208-209.

were killed. *Harakat* and *Jami'at al Ulema* were virtually wiped out. Among the commanders of *Hizb*, only Ghasauddin in Shindand managed to hold on, helped by the existence of mountainous hideouts just south of the town. He too was under pressure, though, and even had to ally with the local Maoists against *Jami'at*. Ismail Khan might or might not have realised that he was pushing these commanders towards the government, but the consequences proved dangerous for him too. The allegiance of some of these commanders to the government was uncertain and former officials of HDK felt that they were "playing games".[18] Yet their support for the government, as uncertain as it was, was key to weakening the *Jihad* movement. The government used the defection of key Tajik strongmen in the early 1980s to consolidate their hold over the key districts of Enjil and Karokh and the road leading east from Herat, which greatly disrupted the flow of supplies to *Jami'at*.[19] With the defection in 1983 of Ghulam Rasul, the most important commander of *Hizb-i Islami* in the vicinity of Herat and a Barakzai from Guzara, a trend also began which saw several Pashtun tribes shift their support towards the government.[20]

As the competitive power of non-*Jami'ati* commanders was fading away, it became increasingly a priority for Ismail Khan to consolidate his control over *Jami'at* itself. He started targeting undisciplined and independent minded *Jami'atis*, but his task was now more difficult than ever. Not only did Ismail Khan's pressure continue to offer an incentive to side with Kabul, but the example of the growing number of strongmen from other parties who were now thriving within the ranks of the pro-government militias started to prove contagious. The first major defection from Jami'at occurred in 1986, following a major Soviet-Afghan offensive. First Daoud Ziarjom, a Noorzai leader who operated in Zindajan and Enjil, joined the militias. His firepower started increasing rapidly and soon he would have 7,000 men in arms. He was now able to put his traditional Alizai rivals, led by Sayyed Ahmad,[21] Amir of Guzara for *Jami'at*, under increasing pressure. The government assigned Guzara district to Daoud's militias and endorsed an offensive against Sayyid Ahmad, who was also on bad terms with Ismail Khan. Sayyid Ahmad did not want to take orders from Ismail Khan, who refused to supply him at a time when Daoud's militias were advancing towards his headquarters. As a result, some months after Daoud' defection, Sayyid Ahmad also defected, taking with him almost all his sub-commanders except two. The loss of Sayyid Ahmad's 1,000 *mujahidin* was a major blow to the Emirate, which never recovered the control of western Guzara. Like Sayyd Ahmad, several other lesser commanders joined the government because Daoud was becoming too strong for them. Although many of his former fellow *Jami'atis* would later describe him as a bandit, up to that point Sayyid Ahmad had fought bitterly against government troops, as well as against other commanders, losing as many as 1,500 men in the process. Not long before defecting, Sayyid Ahmad's men had occupied a regimental garrison of the government in Malan village, and then killed most of the 100

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[18] A typical example is that of Sher Agha, the first important defection in Herat. A commander of the *Jami'at al Ulema* in Enjil district, he sided with the government in 1981. He had been one of the key players in the revolt of Herat and was probably the main non-Jami'ati commander around Herat at that time. Even former officials of HDK described him after the war as a "cowboy" and a "bandit", but there is no doubt that he was an aggressive fighter and that he gave a significant contribution in expanding government control in around Enjil, in particular the eastern part of the district (interviews with former government officials, Herat, September 2005. See also Giustozzi (2000), pp. 208-209).

[19] Interviews with religious figure and former government official, Herat, September 2005; interviews with former commanders, Karokh, 5 December 2004; interviews with former government officials, Herat, September 2005.

[20] Interview with former member of the Afzali Front, Herat, September, 2005; interviews with former government officials, Herat, September 2005.

[21] On Daoud and Sayyid Ahmad see also Greshnov (2004), Shebarshin (1992) and Kulakov, (2003), pp. 84-5.

prisoners. Two years after having joined the government, his militias had grown to 3,000. By the end of the war, they numbered almost 8,000. Thanks to government patronage he could turn what had been a relatively narrow circle of full-time fighters supported by part-time village militias into a large permanent force.[22] As an established militia leader who had proved himself, he began absorbing or tutoring new defectors to the government side. His operations soon encompassed neighbouring districts like Enjil and Pashtun Zarghoun, despite Ismail Khan's efforts to disrupt him. As the defecting *mujahidin* selected new commanders, Sayyid Ahmad used his government-provided patronage resources to absorb them into his structure. When in 1988 Ismail Khan forced him to choose between defecting back to the opposition or casting his lot with Kabul once and for all, he chose the government.[23]

Another Pashtun tribe that largely joined the government was that of the Barakzais. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the contagion was spreading to those opposition commanders who had been very close to the Islamists and who enjoyed a reputation of great commitment to the *jihad*, such as Ghulam Yahya Shiaoshan in east Guzara. However, the protocol that he signed with the government was not a very demanding one, basically just asking him not to fire on the aircraft which were landing at the neighbouring airport.[24]

Whilst in numerical terms the formation of militias was a resounding success, it did have some very negative side effects for the government. The *mujahidin* went over to the government side to escape Ismail Khan's attempts to discipline them. Therefore, they were not at all inclined to accept similar restraints from the government's side. On paper, they were supposed to be absorbed gradually into the state system, have their militiamen trained and indoctrinated, protect civilians and allow the building of schools for the population; but the reality was different. The government's strategy to woo the commanders away from the *jihad* was exactly the opposite of Ismail Khan's. Instead of enforcing strict control over the distribution of weapons, ammunition and other supplies, it distributed them very generously, allowing the militia commanders to expand their ranks many times over whilst at the same time forcing them into a condition of dependence. The main militia commanders even received tanks, armoured troop transports, field rocket launchers and mortars. Not only that, but the government could offer these commanders a legitimacy derived from the conferring of official ranks. Sayyid Ahmad, for example, earned officer rank as a commander of a regiment, which was then upgraded twice. At the end of his life he was a general and was expecting a decree allowing him to form a division. He was also given membership of Parliament. With the large amount of cash he received, the "taxes" that his militiamen extracted from lorry drivers in exchange for their safe passage and his own resources (he was wealthy even before the war began), he bought a guesthouse in Kabul and a Mercedes.[25]

In addition to this, the commanders were allowed virtually free rein in running their dominions. They were not allowed to misbehave outside their area of competence and could be harshly punished, including execution, for doing so. However, within their domain they were lords and Sayyid Ahmad was a good example of this. He was also allowed by the government to run business activities, which included the ownership of the only cement factory in the province and

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[22] Greshnov (2004).
[23] Lyakhovskii (1995), pp. 412-14.
[24] Interviews with former government officials, Herat, September 2005.
[25] Laurinchikas (1987), p.153; Shebarshin (1992), p. 200.

he enjoyed virtually unlimited powers within his region. Disputes were regulated by him personally or by his second in command. Criminals were brought to the *qazi* and, when condemned, delivered to government prisons. A military attorney followed the trials in the militia courts, but in fact the government accepted all verdicts without complaint. Only those prisoners charged with political crimes were tried by the National Security Court. These conditions were not a special favour to Ahmad, but were explicitly provided for in the 1989 law on local autonomy, although he might have been granted them some time in advance. This system could almost be described as "proto-feudalism". It has also been alleged that the government encouraged the "retribalisation" of the local groups, i.e. the rediscovery of tribal/ethnic links that had faded away, or had never been very important, in order to bolster their strength.[26]

Although the government had conceded much to him, Sayyid Ahmad did his best to keep Kabul's influence away. For instance he refused to allow political work to be carried out among his units and therefore his relationships with the regular troops were tense. On one occasion Ahmad was menaced with a pistol by a regular officer who wanted his bodyguards to deposit their weapons before entering Herat, as was stipulated in the regulations. Ahmad backed down but some time afterwards the officer was assassinated.[27]

Another potentially worrying development for the central state was the fact that the militias soon started to develop a kind of self-awareness, based on shared interests. In 1989, when Ismail Khan's forces probed the resistance of the militias in charge of protecting Herat, most of the other militias rushed to their support and repelled the attack. When not directly threatened, however, the militias would often engage in infighting. On occasion they even enlisted Ismail Khan for support against internal rivals. [28] However, most militias stayed loyal to the state until the end. Some of their commanders would entertain relations with Ismail Khan, but mainly in order to deflect his anger.

In sum, the patronage-based relationship established by the state may not have always worked in the way that the HDK leadership had expected or hoped, but it appears to have been solid enough, as long as financial resources were available to fund it. Together with Ismail Khan's patrimonial/personalistic polity, which was the main alternative source of patronage, it left little space for ideological opposition to grow.

The failure of the revolutionaries

At the outset of *jihad* in western Afghanistan, the plight of the ideological groups was far from appearing hopeless. Although the ideologically motivated cadres were a small minority in the *jihad* movement, they still numbered in the few hundreds, not such an insignificant number for a single province. One key weakness, already evident at that time, was their division into at least

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[26] Asia Watch (1991), p. 41; Dorronsoro (1994), p. 459-464. On artificial re-tribalisation through patronage see also Giustozzi (2006b).
[27] 'Otchet o sostoyanii territorial'nykh voisk v pr. Gerat, 8.11.87 g.'; 'Otchet o komandirovke v pr. Gerat 8-10 noyabrya 1987 g.'
[28] GRU radio interception of discussion between Ismail Khan and Fazel Ahmad Saidi, 25 October 1988, in Lyakhovskii (1995), p. 412.

three rival groups, *Jami'at*, *Hizb* and the alliance of Maoists[29] and nationalists. However, even taken separately, at least two of these three groups, *Jami'at* and the Maoists/nationalists, had enough cadres to organise a relatively large-scale movement throughout the province. The largest of the three groups initially, the Maoist/SAMA alliance, counted on a few hundreds of activists and succeeded in remaining allied throughout the *jihad* period, avoiding the threat of factionalism and sectarianism. Nonetheless, as a group they ended up playing a limited role.[30] After leading the military revolt of March 1979, their participation in the *jihadi* movement took place in a disorganised fashion, by joining the local fronts as individuals and by working under the different strongmen. In some cases they ended up wielding quite significant weight and influence, most noteworthy with Shir Agha's band in Enjil. The fronts more strongly influenced by SAMA and the Maoists became known as the "teachers' or engineers' fronts". However, as the Islamist parties began to establish a presence in the region and struggled to impose their own ideologised interpretation of *jihad*, they started pushing their new affiliates to get rid of the Maoists in the movement. At the same time, some strongmen had grown suspicious of the ambitions of these educated cadres, who were trying to 'interfere' with the conduct of the *jihad*. The Maoists rapidly became a target. Shir Agha turned on them and killed most of the Maoist members of his group and elsewhere the Maoists were either killed or forced to flee. In Shindand, where their presence was strongest, they regrouped and concentrated their forces in a mountainous area. This group, which was 300-400 strong at its peak, was starved of supplies and never managed to recapture the lost ground. They failed to identify or attract a constituency beyond their own old sympathisers and were often accused of a "lack of piety", like the members of the *Hizb-i Demokratik-i Khalq* (HDK) in government. As a result, they played only a marginal role and were barely able to survive.[31]

The Islamist militants, centred on *Hizb-i Islami*, the Niazi front and, most of all, the Afzali front, shared some common ideas and attitudes with regard to what shape the resistance should take but they also had significant differences. Contrary to what happened in other parts of Afghanistan, *Hizb-i Islami* was not a very competitive force in Herat, despite the fact that its activists were in fact the first ones to arrive and start recruiting in 1979-1980. The strategy adopted by *Hizb-i Islami* differed from that of the romantic style guerrillas of the Niazi and Afzali fronts, in that it was centred on the party rather than on individual commanders. Yet the party leadership prioritised the region surrounding Kabul and few trained and indoctrinated cadres ever made their way to Herat.

Both the Afzali and Niazi fronts were led by *Jami'atis* and were named after two "martyrs" of the 1970s confrontation between the *Jawanan-e Muslimun* and Daoud's government.[32] Both fronts were established relatively early (1979-1980) but experienced different evolutions. They both

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[29] The Afghan Maoist movement was well past its peak in the late 1970s and was extremely fragmented into a myriad of competing groups, but survived as an informal network. See Emadi (2001).

[30] Single individuals on the other hand played a much bigger role, as in the case of Ismail Khan and Alauddin Khan, but at the price of severing their links with the group.

[31] Interview with Najib Arya, from Shindand, September 2005.

[32] Ghulam Niazi was a theologician and teacher, executed under Daoud, while Hafizullah Afzali was a student who was killed during 1975. The outlook of the front was not too different from the Afzali front, with which they maintained good relations throughout, but there were minor political differences, as the Niazi front was close to Said Nurullah Emad, a *Jami'ati* based in Peshawar, and the Afzalis were closer to Ahmad Shah Massud, the commander of Panjshir Valley.

resembled classic guerrilla groups, as opposed to the local strongmen who accounted for most of the anti-government resistance in Herat and elsewhere in Afghanistan. They were based in remote areas, away from villages, which they only visited occasionally to gather supplies and information. They both received funding from abroad, mainly from private sources in the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia, channelled to Afghanistan through the *Makhtab al-Khidimat al Mujahidin al Arab*, a radical Arab organisation. There were strings attached to this aid. With it, foreign volunteers came to fight in their ranks, mainly Arabs, while a network of Islamic *madarras* influenced by conservative Islamic groups was established. The local *Ulemas* were hostile to this foreign presence and preferred to support either Ismail Khan, the biggest leader of the resistance in Herat from the early 1980s onwards,[33] or the *Jami'at al Ulema*, who had refused Saudi aid and its conditions.[34]

The Niazi front[35] always remained largely marginal and always numbered fewer than 300 armed men under five commanders, distributed across three districts (see map 1). The overall commander was Sayyed Ahmad Gattalli, but the front was effectively led by a *shura* which would consult all the commanders and take decisions collectively. After experiencing some growth in the early stages of the insurgency, the Niazi front stabilised. No new commanders were recruited, nor did the leaders have any strategy to expand their influence, apart from behaving exemplarily towards the civilian population in the hope that their influence would spread. Among the commanders of the front, Qazi Kashmiri, based in Enjil, was the only one who received a significant amount of support from *Jami'at*, most likely because of his strategic position in one of the most bitterly contested districts. The Front did not really have a separate political identity, as shown by the fact that it dissolved after the end of the *jihad* in 1992, with individual members taking different paths.[36]

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[33] See Giustozzi (2006a) for a detailed analysis of Ismail Khan and is system.

[34] Interviews with former members of the Afzali front, Herat, September-October 2005.

[35] The paragraph is based on interviews with Sayyid Ahmad's brother and his lieutenant, Herat, October 2005; interview with former members of the Afzali Front, Herat September and October 2005; former commander of Enjil, September 2005; interview with Qazi Nazir, village of Guzara, October 2005; Interview with former government official, Herat, September 2005; interview with former government official from Gulran, September 2005; interview with Zahir Azimi, Kabul, October 2005.

[36] Two of them were candidates at the *Wolesi Jirga* elections of September 2005.

Map 1: location of the commanders of the Niazi Front
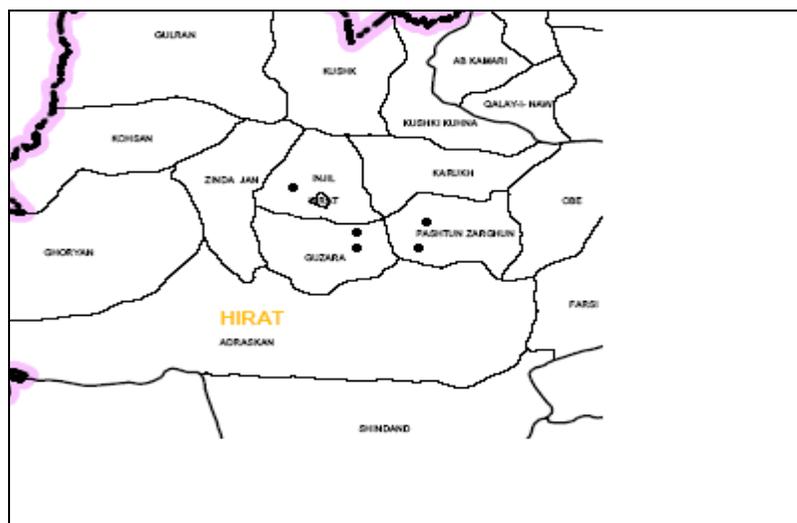
The Afzali Front,[37] on the contrary, grew into a much larger military-political structure. Led by a brother of Hafizullah Afzali, Saifullah, a fresh chemistry graduate from the university of Kabul, the front was launched after Saifullah's release from prison in 1979. Initially, its operations were concentrated within Herat city, where they had started with a small group of about ten. In the city Saifullah achieved a leadership role among the urban guerrillas but from 1980 onwards he created committees throughout the province, starting with Ghuryan and Zendajan. By the end of the *jihad* the front had grown to almost 2,000 guerrillas divided into more than 50 committees, mostly in Herat province but also in Ghor and Baghdis.[38]

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[37] Information about the Afzali front has been gathered through interviews with former government official from Obeh, October 2005; Barakzai tribal leader, Herat, September 2005; former government official, village in Zendajan, September 2005; brother and lieutenant of Sayyid Ahmad, Herat, October 2005; former members of the Afzali Front, Herat, September and October 2005; former government officials, Herat September 2005; former commander of Enjil, September 2005; Haji Ibrahim, former Amir of Koshke Kohne, October 2005; former commander of *Hizb-i Wahdat*, Herat, September 2005.

[38] See note 37 for sources.

Map 2: locations of main commanders of the Afzali front
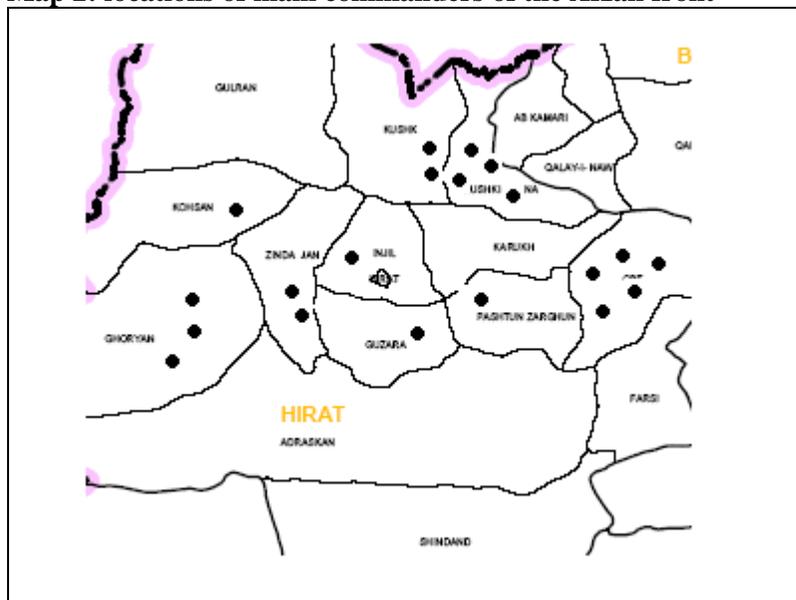
As shown in map 2, the Afzali front was widely spread, but had little presence in the immediate vicinity of Herat. This was a major weakness in terms of attracting external support. The front had strict policies in terms of dealing with the local population and with prisoners. There was no taxation but only voluntary contributions, and looting and other abuses against civilians were prohibited. Both sources within other *jihadi* fronts and the supporters of the communist regime agree that these guerrillas were well behaved and did not execute prisoners of war, a practice widely adopted among the other commanders. As was the case with the Niazi front, they believed in the romantic idea that the guerrillas should offer the example of a higher moral standard, which would eventually allow them to offset the superior military strength of their adversaries.[39]

The leadership of the Afzali front had to be extremely cautious when recruiting new members and appointing commanders to implement their policies. Given the geographical spread of the front and the scarcity of modern means of communication, it would have been extremely difficult for Safiullah and other leaders to supervise the behaviour of their remote commanders. Thus, they needed to be trustworthy, ideologically motivated people. One consequence of this was that the front counted an inordinately high number of university and high school graduates among its commanders. According to one estimate 80% of the front's commanders were educated, while 70% of the 10-12 members of the Executive Committee had university degrees. Priority was always given to the educated in terms of appointments and only when no such candidates were available would others be chosen after careful scrutiny. Although former members of the front tend to deny that ideological compliance was an issue in recruitment, stating that all that was needed was a "clean background", it appears obvious that some degree of closeness to political Islam was necessary. Although a Maoist was recruited to manage the front's health committee, it is unlikely that non-ideologically aligned individuals would have been allowed to become commanders.[40]

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[39] See note 37 for sources.
[40] See also Loseby (2002), p. 197.

Saifullah took care to keep on good relations with the Iranians, which allowed him to maintain a remote base there. In terms of supplies, his main source was Said Nurullah Emadi, one of the leaders of Jami'at in Peshawar. Emadi, however, targeted his supplies for Afzali's committee in Zindajan, where he was seeking to contrast the growing influence of Ismail Khan, whom he considered ideologically suspect.[41] Yet the support and supplies they received was never enough to remotely match the assistance received by Ismail Khan. This was clearly a major factor in preventing the Afzali front from growing, but in turn was the result of Ismail Khan's smarter and more ruthless political manoeuvring in Peshawar. Moreover, Saifullah was sharing his resources with allied commanders of *Jami'at* and other parties, without requesting any commitment in return. This was probably a move intended to increase goodwill towards him, but which did in fact weaken his leverage over them.[42]

The main strength of the Afzali front was its internal solidarity and the high number of politically conscious cadres in its ranks. One consequence of this was that when Saifullah was assassinated in Iran in 1988, at the age of 33, the front survived rather seamlessly, with his brother Azizollah replacing him as a leader. The front was also able to carry out social activities, in such fields as sport, culture and Quran reading and even built schools for refugees in Iran. It had an organisational structure which included a committee in charge of supplies, one in charge of finance and one in charge of logistics. It had a support committee in Iran, which used to raise funds for the activities of the front, and over time it even created a judicial system within the areas it controlled. At least to a certain extent, it was able to move fighters from one committee to the other. [43]

A key point is that the expansion of the front was slow (growing at an average pace of 150 fighters a year) especially when compared to the front's rival and main strategic alternative, the Emirate of Ismail Khan. The slow expansion was not a matter of military inefficiency or shyness. Sources within HDK often acknowledge that the Afzali front was the most effective opposition they faced in Herat province. The front reportedly lost 1,100 men during *jihad*, that is over a third of all those it recruited, which shows a high degree of military activism relative to other *jihadi* groups.[44] The causes of the front's slow growth were clearly outside the military realm. The competition of non-ideological local strongmen, who relied on patronage to develop and maintain a following, effectively undermined the chances of the Islamists to conquer a large constituency. As argued by W. Reno, the adoption of personalist, patronage-based recruitment tactics drive out ideological alternatives, or at the very least make life difficult for them.[45] The paradox was that these strongmen were sponsored not only by the government, which in fact only started doing so relatively late, but first and foremost by the same party leadership of the Islamist fronts.

The relationship of the Islamists with the strongmen was an uneasy one. According to his own supporters, in mid-1979 Saifullah was actually offered the position of Amir by a gathering of commanders, but he refused it. The official explanation for such refusal was that he would not have been able to secure supplies for all the *Jami'atis* of Herat, but some sources allege that this

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[41] Dubuis (1989), p. 225.
[42] See note 37 for sources.
[43] See note 37 for sources.
[44] See note 37 for sources.
[45] Reno (2005).
[46] See note 29 for sources.

was not the real motivation. Saifullah's ideological approach was not understood by most of the commanders, who were more interested in exacting revenge on any alleged supporter of the government and who exploited the population with little restraint. Kamal Gulbagaz, the first Amir of *Jami'at* in Herat, was openly opposed to Saifullah, who in turn criticised him for his bad behavior. When Ali Khan was appointed Amir in mid-1979, Saifullah warned him to reform his ways, which was probably taken as a threat and certainly compromised the relationship between Saifullah and the other main *Jami'ati* commanders. Saifullah remained close to a number of commanders who did not adhere to his group, such as Latif in Sendajan, Fazel Ahmad Ghorq in Ghuryan, Ghulam Yahya Shiaoshan in Guzara, Sayyid Ahmad in Guzara and several commanders of other parties, especially the Shiite ones but also including some of *Hizb-i Islami*. Some of these commanders were certainly not noted for their good behaviour, but Saifullah had to compromise as he needed their complicity in order to operate around Herat, where his front was weak. However, the hostility of the majority of commanders, including Ismail Khan, whose Emirate he always refused to join, must certainly have slowed the advance of the front. More importantly, the occupation of territory by the strongmen did not leave much space for the Islamist guerrillas to grow.

Contrary to what happened in other parts of Afghanistan, *Hizb-i Islami* was not a very competitive force in Herat.[47] Since its activists were the first ones to arrive and start recruiting in 1979-1980 and since the party was endowed with plentiful supplies coming from Pakistan and Iran, *Hizb-i Islami* was doing well in the early days of *jihad*, attracting big commanders and giving them the means to expand their fighting force. According to a story told by a commander of *Mahaz-i Milli*, he was once invited to visit a base of *Hizb-i Islami* and saw more newly delivered weapons there than he had ever seen before. Quite a few of these commanders could expand their force to a few thousand men, especially those who doubled up as Pashtun tribal leaders, since they could easily mobilise along tribal lines. Although it would later be suggested that *Hizb-Islami* was a Pashtun party, this was never true and certainly not in Herat. It is the case, however, that where both Tajiks and Pashtuns lived, the party tended to succeed in recruiting Pashtuns while Tajiks tended to opt for *Jami'at*. A prime example of this is the Kohsan district, where the few Tajiks supported *Jami'a* whilst the Achekzai and Mirzai tribes supported *Hizb-i Islami*. In Shindand the situation was similar, with Tajiks and a minority of Pashtuns supporting *Jami'at*, whilst *Hizb* recruited exclusively among Pashtuns. In Karokh, however, where *Hizb-i Islami* was the predominant party, its membership was largely Tajik, as it was in all districts around Herat city. Initially, these Tajiks had simply followed the local strongman, Qarim, into *Hizb-i Islami*, but over time they seem to have developed a sense of *Hizbi* identity. Even today, long after *Hizb-i Islami* had been rooted out of the district as an organised presence, they reject domination by *Jami'at* on the ground that 'we are *Hizbis*'. Although *Hizb-i Islami* sometimes exploited ethnic tension to recruit locally, this was not always the case. Arbab Qarim, one of their main commanders, was a Baloch leading an essentially Tajik base in Karokh district.

Hizb-i Islami did not maintain good relations with other parties, especially with *Jami'at-i Islami*. As late as 2005, former members of *Hizb-i Islami* were stating their preference for the old communists over the *Jami'atis*. Open fighting was common, although the relationship was better with fellow Islamists, that is the Niazi and Afzali fronts. Sayyid Eshaq Dejlu, a member of the

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[47] Information about *Hizb-i Islami* has been gathered through interviews with former commanders of different parties and former government officials in Herat, December 2004, May and September-October 2005.

central council of *Hizb-i Islami*, was close to Sayid Nurullah Emad of *Jami'at* and the two men were instrumental in bringing the different Islamist groups closer, especially after the end of the *jihad*.[48]

The party-based strategy adopted by *Hizb-i Islami* was inspired by Lenin's idea of a hierarchic, bureaucratised party being at the centre of the military effort. Accordingly, commanders were required to distribute the weapons that they received to their colleagues who were less strategically well placed for receiving supplies, and anecdotal evidence suggests that that happened, at least to a certain extent. Another consequence is that communication structures and the creation of a network of cadres were privileged compared to the establishment of fighting groups led by qualified individuals. At least in Herat, the educated cadres of *Hizb-i Islami*, led by Dejlu, who was based in Peshawar, were rarely commanders, but instead maintained contact with other groups, delivered directives and indoctrinated fighters. In this way *Hizb-i Islami* had the opportunity to prioritise certain areas rather than others, which explains why its major groups were located along the main routes to Herat (see Map 3). On the other hand, its commanders were expected to behave more like soldiers in an army, with little autonomy apart from the obvious constraints linked to poor communication. However, informants report that there were problems between the travelling cadres of the party and the commanders, who were suspicious of attempts to interfere with their authority. *Hizb-i Islami* had no qualms in accepting strongmen and warlords into its ranks and indeed they formed the majority, along with tribal leaders, scions of spiritual families and others. This mixed bunch of mainly illiterate individuals[49] were often commanders only in name and behaved more like the average strongman, in particular with regard to their behaviour towards the population. Even several years after the war, an important commander like Mirhamza could not return to his home area in the northern part of the district of Kohsk-e Kohna, because the population hated him.[50] The party was not even completely successful in preventing infighting among its own commanders. The most extreme example was that of Mohammad Daoud in Obeh district, who was assassinated by Juma Gul because of a personal rivalry, possibly stemming from the fact that the former was a loyalist who stayed too close to the party line for the latter's taste.[51] It appears that *Hizb-i Islami*'s mujahidin too were instructed to respect the local population and avoid indiscriminate killing[52], but the party was much less successful in enforcing its rules than either the Niazi and Afzali fronts or Ismail Khan. In some cases, such as Shindand under the leadership of Ghasauddin, they even cooperated with their sworn enemies of SAMA and Rehai[53] against *Jami'at-i Islami*.[54]

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[48] See note 37 for sources.

[49] Arbab Qarim was illiterate, Mohammad Daoud had only primary education,

[50] His cousin was assassinated there in 2004.

[51] According to informants, Daoud was a well-behaved commander, liked by the population.

[52] For example one case was reported from Karokh district, where Arbab Qarim once managed to seize the district authorities, but instead of executing them, as was the practice in those days, merely forced them to quit the district.

[53] In other parts of Afghanistan and particularly around Kabul, *Hizb-i Islami* was rather bent on the extermination of the Maoists.

[54] See note 37 for sources.

Map 3: Commanders - big, medium and small of *Hizb-i Islami*
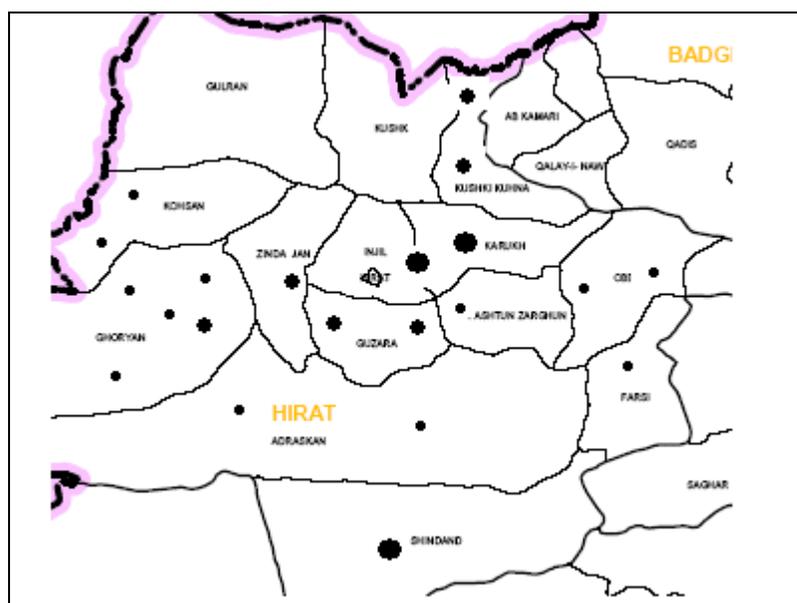
In the end, this attempt to co-opt strongmen and warlords into a party structure and to direct them did not serve *Hizb-i Islami* well. After gaining strong positions in the early days of *jihad*, the system showed its limitations in the medium and long term. Later on, even the plentiful supplies from Pakistan could not prevent them from losing ground. Military strength was not matched by political influence and the ability to use field commanders as its leadership wished fell far short of what was needed in order to have a real impact on the battlefield. The political leader of *Hizb-i Islami* in Herat was Gunish, a cadre from Badakhshan who happened to be living in Herat when the war started. He was loyal to the party but had little local influence. Moreover, iIts large, mostly tribally based, military formations were not well motivated to fight, except in self-defence. One major consequence of the low quality of the party membership and of an excessively thin layer of cadres was that it made the party very vulnerable to government infiltration. Many commanders of *Hizb-i Islami* joined government militias from 1982 onwards, as a result of *Jami'at*'s increasing military pressure over them, but also of increasingly appealing offers by the government. By 1990 all the leading ones had done so: Ghulam Rasul, Arbab Qarim and Juma Gul. After a long period of decline, the party had its best chance to emerge as the main player in Herat province in 1992-1993, when the government of Dr. Najibullah dissolved and the very large militia establishment at Herat to a large extent joined the party. In October 1992 the party, allied with the former militiamen, many of whom had been commanders of *Hizb-i Islami* before joining the government, tried to take on Ismail Khan and launched a concentric attack on Herat. This attack faltered, mainly due to the lack of fighting spirit of the ideologically indifferent rank and file. Ismail Khan's counter-attack eliminated the military strength of *Hizb-i Islami* in Herat once and for all.[55]

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[55] See note 37 for sources.

Conclusion: bad insurgency drives out good

As argued in the introduction, from the perspective of polity-building and regardless of the wider considerations of foreign policy, ideological non-state actors are 'good' and non-ideological ones are 'bad'. Although patronage politics has a weak record of keeping states together, it proved successful, in Afghanistan as elsewhere, in weakening the insurgency.[56] This is because it drove out the 'good' insurgency which could have built a strong state in Afghanistan. By adopting the patronage model, whether of their own initiative or being forced to by circumstances, the political leadership of the *jihad* planted the seeds of the post-1992 failure. As a result of the marginalisation of ideological groups within the *jihad* movement, with the exception of some pockets mainly located around Kabul, the leadership of the Afghan *jihadi* movement was left primarily to non-ideological actors, be they warlords, strongmen or aspiring 'princes' such as Ismail Khan. While it is clear that this had a negative effect on the fighting potential of the *jihadi* movement, it is not possible to say for certain whether this would have ultimately prevented the *jihad* from ousting the communist government. Especially since the government collapsed independently of the actions of the *jihadis*, once the end of Soviet support deprived it of its main source of revenue. However, once that regime had collapsed, the dominant non-ideological character of the *jihad* had a very important impact on the attempts to maintain or re-establish a functioning state in Afghanistan. Without ideological glue, the various components of the *jihadi* movement proved unable to trust each other and commit themselves to a state-building project. The ideology of *jihad*, which had allowed a modest degree of cooperation and coordination until 1992, was merely oppositional and did not have a shared positive component, it was far from being a fully-fledged ideological system in the same way that revolutionary Islam was.[57] It then evaporated quickly after 1992, making legitimisation, loyalty-building and collective action extremely problematic. The lack of a strong organisational carrier for the ideology of *jihad* also contributed to its rapid evaporation. A strong and shared ideological worldview within the *jihadi* ranks was the missing ingredient in the recipe for polity building.

However, ingredients, as any cook knows, are not all that a recipe is about. Procedures are also important. An Afghan state might still have been re-established in 1992-93 if a realistic approach had been adopted by the main players. At the regional level, the consolidation of large polities still proved possible even without ideological tools, as demonstrated by the cases of Ismail Khan and Rashid Dostum,[58] but building a national polity was far beyond the potential of patrimonial structures. There might have been a chance to form a national government based on a feudal system, incorporating polities such as Ismail Khan's and Dostum's under a Kabul-based 'king', but the Rabbani-led administration, which was mostly in control of Kabul in 1992-1996, never renounced the centralised model of state which it inherited. Moreover, it tried to take over the other polities active on Afghan territory, without having either the strength or the legitimacy to do so.[59] The result was the disintegration of the Afghan state.

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[56] This applies, of course, to the counter-insurgency policies of the HDK regime, but also to the Pakistani role in managing the *jihad* movement, if it is true as alleged by many former commanders that the adoption of patronage politics by the Peshawar-based leadership was the result of Pakistani influence (based on interviews with former commanders, Kabul May 2006).

[57] On the ideology of jihad see Alamri (1990).

[58] On Dostum see Giustozzi (2005).

[59] For an account of the period, see Atseer (2005).

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Glossary

Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement): one of the main opposition parties involved in the jihad, based in Pakistan. Mostly pro-monarchy and conservative.

HDK (Hizb-e Demokratik-e Khalq, People's Democratic Party): the Marxist party which took power in April 1978 and led the wave of reforms which sparked the resistance and jihad movement in Afghanistan.

Hizb-i Islami (Islamic Party): one of the main opposition parties involved in the jihad, based in Pakistan. Radical islamist party.

Hizb-i Wahdat (Unity Party): the main Shiite/Hazara resistance party from 1988 onwards, active in Herat and elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Jami'at-i Islami (Islamic Society): one of the main opposition parties involved in the *jihad*, based in Pakistan. A relatively moderate Islamist party.

Jami'at al Ulema (Ulema Society): an insurgent group operating exclusively in western Afghanistan and led by the clergy. In the early 1980s it merged with *Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami*.

Jawanan-e Muslimun (Muslim Youth)*:* the first Islamist group to start operating in Afghanistan 91960s).

KhAD/WAD (Khedamat-e Etelea'at-e Dawlati/Wazirat-e Amniyat-e Dawlati, State Intelligence Agency/State Security Ministry): the security services of the HDK-run state.

Mahaz-i Milli (National Front): one of the main opposition parties involved in the *jihad*, based in Pakistan. Pro-monarchy.

Makhtab al-Khidimat al Mujahidin al Arab (Services Office of the Arab Mujahidin): radical Islamist group which was recruiting and supporting Arab fighters to travel to Afghanistan.

Mujahidin: fighters of *jihad*.

Qazi: Islamic judge.

SAMA (Sazman-e Enqelabi-ye Mardom-e Afghanistan, Revolutionary Organisation of the Afghan People): an alliance of leftist and nationalist groups which shared their hostility to Soviet influence in Afghanistan.

Sazman-e Reha-ye Afghanistan (Afghanistan Liberation Organisation): one of the factions in which the Afghan Maoist current, *Shula-i Jawed*, split during the 1970s.

Shula-i Jawed (The Eternal Flame): the newspaper around which the Afghan Maoist current gathered and from which gave it too the name.

Shura (Council): a type of traditional Afghan council.

Wolesi Jirga (People's House): Afghanistan's lower chamber of Parliament, established in 2005.

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Crisis States Partners

Colombia:
Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales (IEPRI), Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Bogotá)

India:
Developing Countries Research Centre (DCRC), University of Delhi

South Africa:
Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences, University of Cape Town

with collaborators in Uganda and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa

Research Components

🌀 Development as State-Making: Collapse, War and Reconstruction

🌀 Cities and Fragile States: Conflict, War and Reconstruction

🌀 Regional and Global Axes of Conflict

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