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**GENESIS OF A 'PRINCE':
THE RISE OF ISMAIL KHAN IN
WESTERN AFGHANISTAN,
1979 – 1992**

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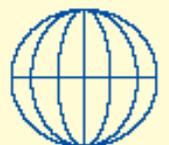
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‘a prince wishing to keep his state is
very often forced to do evil’
N. Machiavelli, The Prince

Following the March 1979 uprising in Herat, the western region of Afghanistan was until the early 1980s characterised by the extreme politico-military fragmentation of the resistance against the pro-Soviet government and the Soviet army.¹ In the absence of a widely influential insurgent ‘organisation’, the resistance consisted of a host of competing commanders, very loosely organised around various ‘parties’, the more developed of which had only a handful of cadres capable of operating throughout the region. Despite the formal allegiance of the large majority of the local leaders of the insurgency to one or other party, most of them looked more like warlords or strongmen and were not bothered by too many ideological or political concerns. However, by the time the government of Dr. Najibullah collapsed in April 1992 much of the resistance had been unified under the leadership of Mohammed Ismail. He was widely known as Ismail Khan and had proclaimed himself *Amir* with the endorsement of *Jamiat-i Islami*, the most influential resistance party in that region. Deprived of the help of modern political organisations, both because of circumstances and of his own choice, Ismail Khan expanded his control over the region through the development of a polity based on the traditional model of an Islamic Emirate.² The process leading to Ismail Khan’s transformation into a ‘prince’ (*Amir*) has the potential to tell us a lot about the dynamics of state-building in Afghanistan.

This paper will discuss the role played by political and military legitimacy (warlordism), ideology, coercion and repression, techniques of political consolidation, diplomacy and political manipulation in the rise of Ismail Khan. In order to understand Ismail Khan’s rise to ‘princedom’ in a very competitive environment and to identify its main features, we shall look at it through the lens of Niccoló Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*. In his work, looking at the challenges facing the statesmen of Renaissance Italy, an environment only relatively friendlier than Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, Machiavelli identified a number of characteristics as defining the chances of success for an aspiring ‘Prince’. For the purposes of this paper, we shall group these

¹ There were two strong Soviet garrisons in Herat city and in Shindand.

² While there is no agreed definition of Emirate or even of princedom, suffice it to describe it here as a pre-modern polity, with many of the features which characterise a state, such as a monopoly of armed force, a monopoly over the dispensation of justice, an at least embryonic administrative structure capable of delivering some services, and a degree of international recognition (*de facto* if not formal). Since full international recognition is hard to achieve for new states in the current international context, the modern day version of the traditional Emirate/Princedom is unlikely to fully satisfy the requirements of statehood and hence will remain a proto-state.

characteristics or ‘virtues’ in three groups and will discuss them separately: virtues of ruthlessness and deceit, virtues of institutionalisation and legitimacy, virtues of diplomacy.

Machiavelli’s main argument was that in order to secure political survival (seen as a supreme goal) the Prince should not shy away from ruthlessness and deceit if he wanted to survive politically. By saying that the Prince should inspire fear, but not hatred, and that cruelty might be necessary to prevent worse disorders from arising, he clearly meant that not only might the Prince have to dispose of unsavoury characters, but ‘without cruelty he would never hold his army united or disposed to its duties’. The impact of cruelty has to be minimised (‘injuries ought to be done all at one time, so that, being tasted less, they offend less’) but cannot be avoided. In comparison, his celebrated approval of divide and rule tactics (‘endeavour with every art to divide the forces of the enemy’) does not look very controversial. These tactics, however, were for Machiavelli to be limited as much as possible to what Cohen et al. called ‘primitive accumulation of power’.³ Machiavelli saw the need to guarantee the effectiveness of the army as linked to the fact that only victories and successes can be trusted to bring legitimacy, which after the initial consolidation of power was to be the main concern of the Prince. He recommended relying on popular support rather than on that of the ‘nobles’, because the latter ‘would consider themselves equals to the prince, and because of this he can neither rule nor manage them to his liking’. His understanding of the intricacies of legitimisation was subtle enough for him to advise the prince to avoid using allied troops, because they are controlled by leaders who may turn against their employers and in any case any glory they earn would not be attributed to the Prince. He also understood the importance of public relations in legitimisation and advised the Prince to ‘appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright’, although he then proceeded to caution him to be ready to ‘do evil’ if needed. At the same time, Machiavelli was also aware of the importance of institutionalisation and highlighted the need to strengthen the principality ‘with good laws’ and ‘abstain from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women’. He knew enough to resist patronage politics: excessive ‘liberality’ should be avoided, as it ‘rewards few’, ‘offends many’ and it might not be sustainable.⁴ Machiavelli was of course very conscious of the importance of diplomatic skills in state-making, recommending the selection of wise advisors and being of the opinion that deceit is acceptable when the alternative is to be placed at a disadvantage.

The beginnings: one insurgent among many

The revolt of Herat, known as the revolt of 24 Hoot, was a messy affair. It started as a mobilisation of rural communities under the leadership of traditional notables and landlords, who were offended by land reform and other reform initiatives proclaimed by the new communist government, and ended in a bloodbath.. Rural crowds marched on Herat, where they were joined by urban plebs. Soon, most of the city garrison (17th Infantry Div.) mutinied under the leadership of a group of Maoist and nationalist officers,⁵ killed two Soviet advisers⁶ and joined the rebels.

³ The expression was previously used among others by Cohen et al. (1981) and Tilly (1990). On the importance of power as opposed to capital in a context of statelessness, see Gellner (1989), pp. 146-8.

⁴ All from *Il Principe* except last, from *Dell’Arte della Guerra*, libro VI.

⁵ The mutiny appears to have been organised under the leadership of SAMA (*Sazman-e Enqelabi-ye Mardom-e Afghanistan*, Revolutionary Organisation of the Afghan People) and *Rehai*, one of the main splinter groups in which

The revolt was ruthlessly repressed with the intervention of a column from Kandahar's garrison and air bombardment. That an armoured column of just 300,⁷ admittedly with heavy air support, managed to wrest back control of the city bears witness to the very low level of organisation of the rebels. It appears that the control of the officers of the local garrison over the troops also disintegrated rapidly. The revolt, however, appears to have enjoyed large scale popular support.⁸ As far as it has been possible to establish, the leaders of the garrison uprising were Sardar Jagran and Rasul Baloch,⁹ who went on to lead the 'officers' front' after the revolt had been crushed. The officers formed a group of maybe sixty insurgents in a remote area, two nights and twodays walk away from Herat. Due to their isolation, none of these officers played much of a role in the first year of the insurgency. The officers' group disintegrated after Rasul Baloch, who had taken them to his home area, was killed in an accident and contrasts emerged between two other leading figures of the front, Arbab Mohammad and Captain Mohammed Ismail 'Khan'. The front disintegrated as a result and the officers dispersed. Ismail withdrew to Iran for some time,¹⁰ hosted by a group of Kuchi nomads. There he established contact for the first time with a representative of *Jamiat-i Islami*, who happened to be visiting the nomads' camp.¹¹

The surviving leaders of the civilian revolt moved to the countryside and after a few months' gap started organising small armed groups to fight against the government, which was back in firm control. The resistance was still relatively united at this stage, at least in the sense that there was no internecine fighting and some occasional cooperation. None of its leaders exercised a significant degree of territorial control and all operated underground, so that there was little to compete for. As the hold of the central government started weakening between the second half of 1979 and the first half of 1980, the local population started following the local notables into the insurgency, although the most prominent and effective military leaders relied on smaller groups of fighters personally loyal to them. As the population became increasingly armed after 1980, they would mainly participate in the defence of the base areas in the villages, whereas the full-time fighters would have the monopoly over offensive operations.¹²

In the early months of the insurgency (summer 1979), the rebels lacked weapons and equipment and therefore could not match the regular army, in however bad a shape it might have been. The equipment of the 17th Division had mostly fallen in the hands of the rebel officers, but much had been lost during the repression and ammunition must soon have run short. Soon, however, the shape of the resistance in Herat started being determined by the intervention of the parties based in Pakistan. The first emissaries appeared in western Afghanistan in the summer of 1979 and belonged to the two main Islamist groups, *Hizb-i Islami* and *Jamiat-i Islami*, but during 1980 a

the Maoist current *Shula-i Jawid* had divided itself. SAMA itself had a strong Maoist component within its ranks. Interview with former member of SAMA, Kabul, May 2006.

⁶ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 18 November 1989. According to the official record of Soviet casualties in Afghanistan, released after the war, a total of 5 advisers were killed in Afghanistan in 1979. See Lyakhovskii (1995), appendix 14. This count, however, might well exclude any loss incurred among the families of the advisers, which reportedly did occur.

⁷ This figure is confirmed in several interviews. See also Dorrnsoro (2005), p. 100.

⁸ This description of the revolt of Herat is based on Dorrnsoro (2005) and interviews carried in Herat, September-October 2005.

⁹ They might correspond to Sardar Khan and Ghulam Rasul Khan, identified as the leaders of the uprising by Gilles Dorrnsoro, although the ranks do not correspond. See Dorrnsoro (2005), p. 99.

¹⁰ Interview with Zahir Azimi, Kabul, October 2005.

¹¹ Interview with former member of SAMA, Kabul, May 2006.

¹² Greshnov (2004).

number of other groups would do the same, mainly including *Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami*, *Mahaz-i Milli* and several Shiite groups. They all started contacting the rebel commanders, offering them support in exchange for their allegiance. Strengthened by external support, during 1980 an increasing number of villages fell under the control of the insurgents, until by the last few months of the year or the beginning of 1981 most district authorities were effectively besieged in the towns, protected by small police contingents and a growing number of regular army troops and pro-government militias. With territorial control came also the first disputes among commanders, sometimes even among those aligned with the same party, leading to a greater politico-military fragmentation. On the other hand, as the *jihad* movement expanded, some commanders emerged as bigger players, who might sometimes be aptly described as warlords. This was mainly because of their bravery on the battlefield, their ruthlessness and their ability to gather men around them, as well as to secure the resources to maintain relatively large armed groups, which at this stage were beginning in a few cases to count on a few hundred armed men.¹³ Ideologically committed commanders also existed in the ranks of the resistance, but accounted for a relatively marginal share of the *jihad* movement, probably in the range of 10-15%.¹⁴ The party activists, often students or recently graduated professionals, certainly had a greater degree of commitment and the readiness to make greater sacrifices in the struggle. They were also motivated to treat the civilian population better in order to achieve long-term political aims, such as establishing an Islamic state in the case of the Islamists.¹⁵

To various degrees, the warlords, strongmen and notables who accounted for the largest part of the insurgency did not have the potential to produce an effective and united leadership of the resistance, because they were competing first and foremost with each other for territorial control and because in the absence of a strong ideological commitment they had little common ground as far as medium and long-term aims were concerned. Ideology had only played a short-lived role in their original mobilisation, without leaving much trace and without leading to more than a superficial politicisation.¹⁶ Attempts were nonetheless made, not least because some of the political organisations based in Pakistan favoured the appointment of regional leaders. *Jamiat* being the most influential organisation in western Afghanistan, its regional leaders (*amirs*) were supposed to have the greatest impact. The first choice was Kamal Gulbagaz, one of the leaders of the 24 Hoot revolt, an illiterate former gang leader who was renowned for his personal bravery, but had no organisational skills. His leadership was far from being universally accepted, as shown by the fact that he was soon assassinated by another of the main warlords of Herat, Mir Ali Khan Jamju who, following Gulbagaz' death, was chosen to replace him as the bravest of the powerful warlords.¹⁷ This system of succession, based on the election of the bravest commander regardless of other qualities or considerations, clearly left much to be desired, since it encouraged assassination as a way of resolving disputes with the Amir, but it was the result of the extreme lack of sophistication among the majority of the military class of Herat. Unsurprisingly, Ali Khan himself did not live long.

¹³ For a discussion of warlords and warlordism in a wider context see Giustozzi (2005).

¹⁴ See Giustozzi (forthcoming).

¹⁵ This paragraph is based on interviews with former commanders and government officials in Herat and the surrounding villages, September-October 2005.

¹⁶ For a discussion of this aspect see Giustozzi (forthcoming).

¹⁷ Interviews with former insurgents, Herat, September-October 2005.

Having enlisted the support of *Jamiat-i Islami*, Ismail Khan returned to Afghanistan from Iran in 1979, setting up a small group of 15 horse-riding guerrillas in Gulran district, not far from the border. Although he appears to have maintained his contacts with SAMA for many months, this group was unable to provide any logistical support in western Afghanistan, so that Ismail appears to have been increasingly drawn towards a more organic relationship with *Jamiat*. Unable to grow in such a remote and comparatively quiet area, by early 1980 Ismail Khan was approaching the strongmen in control of the areas surrounding Herat, asking to be allowed to take his small band of 15 to their area. Commanders from Enjil, an area of intense fighting against the government, decided to allow him to settle his base in a local village. There is some controversy among informants about the next development, i.e. exactly when Ismail Khan was selected as provincial leader of *Jamiat-i Islami*. According to one version (which is, however, inconsistent with other aspects of the story) by the end of 1980 Ismail Khan had already impressed the local commanders so much with his organisational skills and other qualities that they decided to appoint him, although not before having offered the post to another former officer, Alauddin Khan, who had refused it and was then appointed Ismail Khan's deputy.¹⁸ A more consistent version has it that in 1981-82, Mir Ali Khan Jamju, then general military commander of *Jamiat* in Herat, following the emergence of his obvious limitations as leader, had asked to be replaced and offered the post to Alauddin Khan, who refused. He then proceeded to offer it to the other prominent former officer in *Jamiat's* ranks, Ismail Khan. Ali Khan had been chosen because of his reputation as a brave commander¹⁹ and the fact that he offered two other former officers to take over suggests that his failures were related to his inability to organise the struggle and manage a larger organisation than his own group of a few hundred men. In any case, Ismail Khan refused his offer too, arguing that with just 15 under his command, he would have been unable to exercise real authority. At this point Ali Khan promised to place his own men under Ismail Khan's direct authority, an offer, which Ismail Khan accepted, becoming Amir of *Jamiat-i Islami* in Herat province. From this point on Ismail Khan's strength would have been growing significantly.²⁰

The term *amir*, an Arabic word used in Persian, describes well the characteristics of the job. Military leadership was clearly the main feature of the historical *amirs* in the Islamic world, but the term also implied something beyond that, to mean a ruler. The *amirs* of Herat, initially including Ismail Khan too, were essentially warlords elected to political leadership to fill a vacuum. A major source of turmoil was the difficult transition from warlord to political leader, which Ismail Khan's predecessors never managed successfully. The rest of this paper will analyse the reasons for Ismail Khan's success.

The virtues of ruthlessness and deceit

Ismail Khan's cunning had already been demonstrated when he managed to obtain command of Ali Khan's large formation of *mujahidin*. The next important step in his rise was the death of Ali Khan who was assassinated in 1984 by Ghaffar Tufan, allegedly instigated by Ismail Khan

¹⁸ This version of events is the one accepted by Dorronsoro (2005), p. 126.

¹⁹ Interview with Abdul Salam Qazizada, Herat, 27 September 2005.

²⁰ This section is based on interviews with former commanders of Ismail Khan, of the militias and of other *jihadi* groups, as well as government officials and officers of the regular army, Herat, September-October 2005.

himself. Ali Khan's brother was certainly of this opinion, since he switched to the government side after the assassination.²¹ With Ali Khan's death most of his men remained under the exclusive control of Ismail Khan, who thus became one of the most prominent warlords of the region.

Even before Ali Khan's death, however, Ismail Khan had moved to consolidate his hold over the *jihadi* movement in a number of ways. Ismail Khan's approach to waging a successful *jihad* differed from that of the Islamists, whom he never liked and often even fought, in part perhaps because of his leftist/nationalist background. The outset of the war likely pushed him toward the right on the political spectrum, turning him in something more of a conservative Muslim, but never an ideological Islamist. While he appears to have agreed with the ideological groups that politics should have priority over military matters, his own interpretation of what this implied turned out to be a mix of traditional Islamic views on political power and tempered militarism. He held a personalistic and patrimonial view of politics, which in practice translated into the belief in his own key role in leading the *jihad*. Certainly, he never showed any interest whatsoever in the development of political party structures as a way to mobilise and manage the *jihad*, which is the model of *Hizb-i Islami*. Probably because of his military background, he also disliked the civilian *intelligentsia*, which provided the backbone of Islamist fronts such as the Afzali and Niazi. One of his most famous statements runs 'one obedient non-educated person is better than 100 disobedient intellectuals'.²²

Rather than relying on modern forms of political organisation, he set out to use district warlords and strongmen as the building blocks of his organisation, relying on his experience as an army officer to consolidate the structure and discipline them. He tried to build a system based on discipline imposed from above (as opposed to self-discipline), complemented by elements derived from traditional Afghan political culture as a way to create a civilian administration to support the military effort. The combination of his military background and his suspicion of political parties had turned him into a warlord by the early 1980s, but his political ambition pushed him towards rising above that role. However, his plan to discipline warlords and strongmen and mould them into a hierarchical organisation faced major obstacles, not least because the reliance of the political leaders based in Peshawar on warlords and strongmen had strengthened them. They had different interests from becoming mere cannon fodder for the noble aim of *jihad* or for Ismail Khan's own glory and often bitterly resisted his attempts to control them. The situation was compounded by the fact that, from 1982 onwards, he had to compete with the Afghan state to gain the support of the military class which had emerged with the war, i.e. mainly district warlords and strongmen.²³ Ismail Khan's recipe was to create a centralised military organisation with himself at the head, in order to shift the balance of power away from the local strongmen.

He adopted the model of the regular army, with which he was familiar, and sold it to the strongmen by arguing that fighting around Herat effectively required disciplined military units, which could be manoeuvred on the battlefield and take part in large scale military operations. He

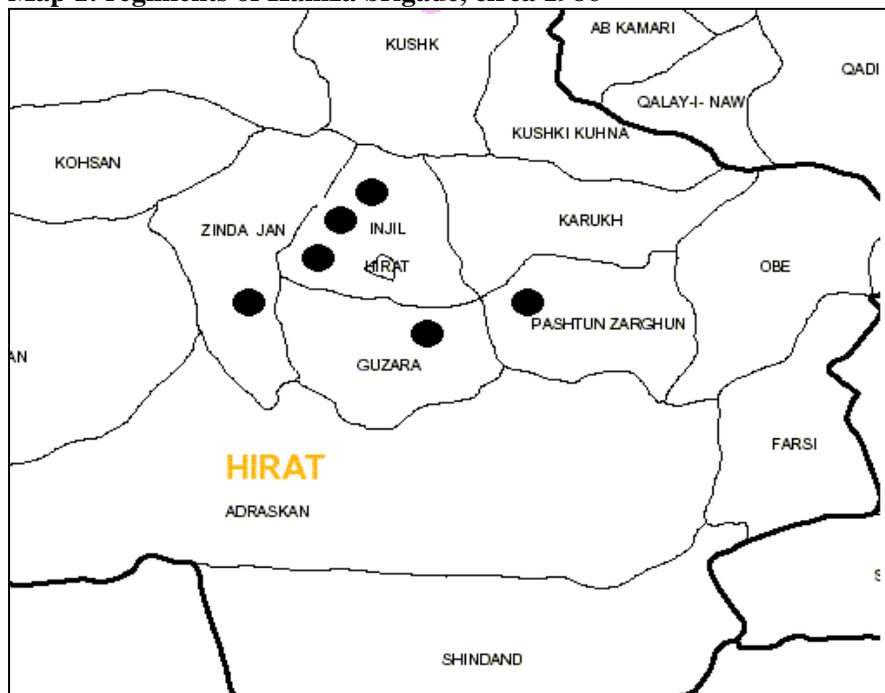
²¹ Interview with member of the Afzali Front, Herat, 26 September 2005.

²² Interview with Zahir Azimi, October 2005.

²³ On the government's attitude towards strongmen and warlords see Giustozzi (2000).

even enlisted the support of higher rank former army officer to develop his military system.²⁴ What he named the *Hamza* regiment, later to be upgraded to brigade and then to division status, was drawn from existing *mujahidin* units, which kept their commanders. The idea was that such units would progressively merge into the larger structure. In theory, the *Hamza* brigade was supposed to count on several regiments (*ghunds*, six at its peak), whose bases were distributed as shown in map 1. Unlike other *mujahidin*, those serving in the *Hamza* were paid, although not much. Those not married received just enough to eat, while family heads received much more. War invalids received benefits, as well as the families of martyrs.²⁵

Map 1: regiments of Hamza brigade, circa 1986



In fact, only the first regiment in Hamza Qurlus of Enjil, led by Alauddin Khan,²⁶ really operated as a unit and was able to field several hundred men in a coordinated fashion. The other regiments existed in theory more than in practice. At best, they would operate at the *kundak* (battalion) level, around 200 men.²⁷ Often, even that was impossible. For example, the regiment of Pashtun Zargoun under Qazi Mohammad was composed of *mujahidin* based throughout the whole eastern half of Herat province, especially Pashtun Zarghoun, Obeh and Farsi, making it effectively impossible to carry out large scale operations, not least because the government controlled the only main road. Often, *Hamza's* role in fighting in areas remote from Herat, such as Baghdis, Ghor and Farah would be limited to the despatch of Alauddin Khan to lead the fighting as the operational commander and representative of the Emirate.²⁸ In fact, the resistance around Herat never reached the stage where a disciplined army able to field thousands of men would have been

²⁴ Such as Colonel Mohammad Hassan. See Dubuis (1989), p. 149.

²⁵ Dubuis (1989), p. 158.

²⁶ Alauddin Khan was promoted to commander of the *Hamza* brigade after four years and replaced as *ghund* commander by Abdul Ajan.

²⁷ On this topic see also Roy (1990), p. 181-182.

²⁸ Mojaddidi (1993), p. 113.

useful. Very few major armed clashes took place during the *jihad* period. The largest, the battle of Zindajan in 1991, was initiated by the government. From the *jihadi* side, the only major operations were an offensive in 1986/87 against the outer ring of Herat city's defences and an attack on Shindand in 1989. The celebrated attack on Shindand airport in 1985 was just a commando raid.²⁹ The next largest operation, involving a few hundred men, was a large scale ambush in Gulagao (Adraskan district) against a Soviet column, resulting in the death of some Soviet soldiers. Almost all the remaining engagements were fought by small groups of *mujahidin*, mostly under a single commander (20-50 men).³⁰

Confronting the regular army on its own terms, not to mention the Soviet Army, would have cost heavy casualties and brought little reward. In practice, the main impact of the creation of the *Hamza* brigade was felt in the relations with other insurgent groups. With the creation, even partial, of the *Hamza* brigade, Ismail Khan had greatly increased his ability to move armed men away from their villages and deploy them around the region, as well as manoeuvre them on the battlefield. Even if an additional few hundred disciplined men did not alter the balance of strength between the Emirate and the government, they would have a much greater impact in the confrontation between Ismail Khan and those commanders who were reluctant to accept orders from him. One example of Ismail Khan using the new strength provided by the *Hamza* brigade was in Ghuryan district, where he used it to force a small local strongman Awlya to obey orders and attack another such strongman, Ghulam Farouq. The deployment of *Hamza* units against other *jihadi* commanders took place in Obeh too, where the target was Gulabuddin, a commander of the Afzali front, against whom a local commander of Ismail Khan, Qazi Obeidullah, had long been fighting. In this case, however, Gulabuddin could not be defeated until after the fall of Najibullah. Much of the value of the *Hamza* brigade was of course that of a deterrent against reluctant subordinate commanders who had to be disciplined. The abusive tendencies of many commanders had created a situation of anarchy and chaos, which in the judgement of Ismail Khan and others would eventually have discredited the cause of jihad and favoured the enemy. An iron fist was needed to address the situation.³¹

As Ismail Khan tried to impose his own rules on the warlords and strongmen of the Emirate, opposition to him grew progressively stronger. By 1986/87, as military pressure from the government side was increasing, Ismail Khan's attitude towards releasing supplies to strongmen and commanders reluctant to obey his orders was driving quite a few of them over the edge. As the relationship worsened, Ismail Khan would resort to extreme means to weaken or eliminate the internal opposition. There are relatively few reports of Ismail Khan's infighting with hostile warlords. Whenever possible, he seems to have opted to 'do injuries all at one time'. In practice, this seem to have resulted in the fact that many prominent strongmen and commanders were physically eliminated. Despite many allegations against Ismail Khan, it is of course impossible to establish who effectively ordered the killings. In any case, it is clear that commanders opposed to Ismail Khan displayed a strong tendency to die soon and violently (see table 1). Of the main strongmen active in Herat under *Jamiat-i Islami* in the early years of *jihad*, only Ghulam Yahya Shiaoshan survived the war, a high casualty rate compared to other provinces. It is unlikely that

²⁹ During the attack, several old Il-28 bombers of the Afghan Air Force were destroyed and the fact received widespread coverage in the world press.

³⁰ Interview with Zahir Azimi, October 2005.

³¹ Interviews with former insurgents and government officials, Herat, September-October 2005.

the government's efforts to eliminate resistance commanders are to blame for this mortality, as most of those who fell were not particularly dangerous to the government. Moreover, several are known to have been killed by fellow commanders. One case in which doubt exists is Saifullah Afzali's, who might have been targeted by the government security as well. However, in this case too the willingness and ability of KhAD to carry out such an operation within Iran is dubious.³²

Table 1: *Jamiati* commanders in whose death Ismail Khan (IK) was allegedly involved

Name of commander	Area of activity	Fate	Ismail Khan's involvement
Kamal Gulbagaz	Enjil	ambushed by Mir Ali Khan Jamju	allegedly instigated by IK
Ali Khan	Enjil	killed by Ghaffar Tufan	allegedly instigated by IK
Saifullah Afzali	Herat province	killed in Iran	allegedly organised by IK
Fazel Ahmad Ghorq	Ghuryan	assassinated	allegedly ordered by IK
Ghulam Farouq	Ghuryan	killed by Awlya	allegedly instigated by IK
Awlya	Ghuryan	assassinated	allegedly ordered by IK
Ghaffar Tufan	Enjil	killed by Shir Agha	allegedly instigated by IK
Latif Karim	Zendajan	killed by a relative in big massacre	allegedly instigated by IK
Sher Ahmad	Zendajan	killed during Zendajan battle, allegedly shot from behind	allegedly on instigation of IK
Sayyed Ahmad	Guzara	killed while praying at mosque	allegedly jointly organised by IK and Daoud's militia

Sources: interviews with former insurgents, Herat, September-October 2005.

Through his position of *amir*, as well his role of sole supplier of weapons and ammunition and his control of the *Hamza*, Ismail Khan was definitely in a better position than anybody else to manipulate strongmen and turn them against each other. In this way, he certainly eliminated some strongmen whose existence was a liability for the struggle against the government and the Soviet Army. Ghaffar Tufan, for example, had a terrible reputation and had been carrying out executions on a very large scale until his death. Some of the strongmen whom Ismail Khan eliminated had already joined the government militias, so that again this could be seen as a service to the cause of *jihad*. Among them the most prominent one was Sayyed Ahmad.³³

Sometimes, Ismail Khan would successfully use divide and rule tactics against fronts and commanders who did not accept his leadership, as in the case of the Popolzai front in Zendajan.

³² Interviews with former insurgents, Herat, September-October 2005.

³³ Interviews with former insurgents and warlords, Herat, September-October 2005.

Ismail Khan would deliver supplies to some of the front's commanders, but not others, stirring conflict within it and eventually ensuring that the front disintegrated.³⁴

It is also clear that 'excessive generosity' was not part of Ismail Khan's character. One of the most common complaints against Ismail Khan from the Emirate's commanders was that he was hoarding supplies and only distributed a comparatively small part of them. Other commanders who had weapons to distribute, such as Saifullah Afzali and several others who would receive weapons from Pakistan and Iran, had been distributing weapons on the basis of a more or less fair share, especially before Ismail Khan received the monopoly over supplies from *Jamiat*. Ismail, on the other hand, partly with the justification of having to cater for the "crack troops" of the *Hamza*, was keeping a much larger share for himself than the number of *mujahidin* under his direct command would have warranted. Rather than buy the friendship of fellow commanders by giving them a fair share of what he had, Ismail opted for subjecting them to his own control through the targeted distribution of supplies. Commanders who did not obey Ismail's orders would be starved of weapons and ammunition and, over time, be marginalised from the *jihad*. The supplies withheld from "bad commanders" could then be used to reward the "good" (or compliant) ones. Moreover, by hoarding supplies Ismail Khan was able to divert them to areas of particularly intense fighting or particular strategic concern, although this does not seem to have been an overriding concern of his.³⁵

By Afghan standards, Ismail Khan did relatively well in the use of fear and cruelty to maintain discipline among his own militiamen and in preventing 'disorders to arise'. While he was mostly quite effective in instilling fear in his potential enemies, he often did not manage to prevent fear from leading to hatred, which in turn pushed many strongmen to oppose him and/or switch sides. By 1991, at the peak of his power, his influence was still far from having reached every corner of Herat and several independent strongmen controlled much of the province (see map 2 and map 3). Some switched to other *jihadi* parties. This was particularly the case with some Pashtun tribal strongmen, who were attracted towards the royalist parties, such as *Mahaz-i Milli* or *Nejat-i Islami*. These parties had little to offer, but since Ismail Khan would not supply these commanders anyway, this option became more attractive. One of the defectors was Haji Faiza of Ghuryan, who left *Jamiat* to join *Mahaz*. He was later assassinated, once again allegedly on Ismail's order. Weak commanders and strongmen operating in remote areas had little choice but to accept Ismail Khan's impositions. The former would not have been able to resist the *Hamza*, while the latter would not have had a chance to attract funding and supplies. On the other hand, none of the powerful strongmen operating around Herat accepted his system and most of them ended up collaborating with Ismail Khan's main competitor, that is the government, which invested large resources in the formation of 'tribal' militias.³⁶

³⁴ Interview with former warlord of Herat, September 2005.

³⁵ Interviews with former insurgents and warlords, Herat, September-October 2005.

³⁶ For more on this topic see Giustozzi (forthcoming).

strategy based on the ideology of *jihad* was Ismail Khan's alliance with the clergy, which was apparent in the extent to which he recruited the clergy into his Emirate as a proto-bureaucracy. Much of his administration (and not just the judiciary) was staffed by *mullahs*, whereas the role of the lay intelligentsia was marginal. The price to pay was the relative inefficiency of the administration, due to the lack of specialisation of its staff.³⁹

Ismail Khan realised the importance of 'sound laws' too. A strong current of opinion among the clergy in particular seems to have argued that it was necessary to re-establish a judicial system in the areas that had escaped state control, in order to contain abuses against the population. These ranged from excessive taxation⁴⁰ to murder and rape. Moreover, many religiously trained judges were readily available among the ranks of the resistance. As a result, starting in 1982/83, a rudimentary judicial system started once again being established in the areas controlled by the Emirate of Ismail Khan. It applied *shariat* (Islamic law) and it was decided that prisoners would be executed if it was established that they had killed somebody. The judiciary was allegedly independent of the military-political authorities. Ismail Khan could attend a trial and express his opinion, but could not reverse the decisions of the judges, a clear attempt to show how devout he was, but also a form of institutionalisation.⁴¹ A Judicial Committee was created to manage the new institution, initially led by Qazi Obeidullah, who after about one year was replaced by Qazi Gul Ahmad. The latter in turn only lasted 6-7 months before being killed. Qazi Nazir then replaced him and stayed in the job until the end of *jihad*. The demand for such an institution was so strong that even commanders outside the Emirate had to accept it, albeit grudgingly. Only in 1986/87, when the government greatly expanded its control over Herat province and cut off the different *mujahidin* groups from each other, were separate judicial structures created. Especially at the beginning, the quality of the judiciary appears to have left much to be desired, although many would have argued that the system was still better than nothing. The quality of the administration of justice improved slowly over time and played a key role in reducing the number of abuses against the population, as well as the number of summary executions. The problem was not just that the quality of the judges was on average not very good, but also that the commanders would object to their rulings. For example, in 1983/84 Qazi Nazir risked being killed by commander Sufi Abdul Ghaffar, who was upset by his accusation of collaborating with the enemy, and was only rescued by Ali Khan. In this context, the role of the *Hamza* brigade as a relatively centralised military force was of course of major importance in putting pressure on commanders to comply. Since, effectively, operational units of the *Hamza* brigade were concentrated around Herat city, the ability of Ismail Khan to enforce his system was limited to this area. The outlying districts were much less affected. Apart from the judicial system, councils of *Ulema* were also established at the provincial level and in each district, in order to resolve disputes which the councils of commanders were unable to handle. Given the high level of internecine conflict among commanders in Herat, it would seem that these councils were not very effective, although they appear to have done better in some districts than in others.⁴²

³⁹ It can be argued that the key difference between a pre-modern and a modern state is actually the role of the intelligentsia. Compared to the clergy, the intelligentsia is characterised by a much higher degree of specialisation in a large number of narrow fields, whereas the clergy was uniformly trained in a single specialisation (religion), but due to its literacy was often employed by rulers in the service of the state.

⁴⁰ The Ulema had authorised the collection of Zakat tax, that is 10% of harvest, but many commanders went much beyond that.

⁴¹ Dubuis (1989), p. 171.

⁴² Interviews with former insurgents and local notables, Herat, September-October 2005.

The judiciary was possibly the most important element of the administration set up by Ismail Khan within the Emirate, but certainly not the only one. At the time of his appointment as *Amir*, he had inherited existing councils of commanders at both the provincial and district level, but was quick to leave his mark on the organisation of the Emirate, expanding it into something much more structured than before. The figure of the *Amir* had been established in the early days of the resistance, both at the provincial and district level. These *Amirs* were meant to concentrate political and military powers in the hand of a single man, reproducing at the local level the model adopted for the provincial emirate, but, lacking strong personalities, most of these *Amirs* never emerged as strong leaders. Under Ismail Khan, the leadership of the Emirate claimed the right to appoint *Amirs* in each district, whereas initially the local commanders had elected them.⁴³

The administration of the Emirate developed over time, but at its peak it included 12 committees (see table 2). Inevitably, the most important committee was the military one, not because of its (modest) role in planning military operations, but because it was in charge of military supplies. Unsurprisingly, Ismail Khan was at the head of it, although Alauddin Khan also had the right to distribute supplies after he had become commander of the *Hamza* Division. The control over military supplies was, even more than the *Hamza* brigade/division, a key tool of control over the commanders. Indeed, it was the only tool of control as far as remote districts, well beyond the reach of the *Hamza*, were concerned. Although the appointment of Ismail Khan as *Amir* was a key development in his path to power, his success in securing a near monopoly over weapon and ammunition supplies was probably even more important, particularly in the long term. Reportedly, the cost of delivering weapons to Herat was as high as the cost of the weapons themselves, assuming they had been paid for rather than received for free.⁴⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the head of the provincial administration, acting as a sort of “prime minister”, was the same man in charge of propaganda Haji Mir Khalek,⁴⁵ a fact that highlights the awareness of the importance of maintaining the right image.⁴⁶ Although Ismail Khan did target his propaganda effort at the population rather than at the military class, his success was limited due to the support handed to opposing strongmen both by the Peshawar parties and by the government. The ‘vertical’ patronage structures thus created by the strongmen proved relatively impermeable to Ismail Khan’s propaganda effort, even when some sympathy for the cause might have existed. Even today the population of different parts of Herat province maintain different attitudes towards the Emirate, depending on who was controlling that area at the time of *Jihad*.⁴⁷

At the district level the administration existed in a simplified form, with just four committees, that is finance, culture and propaganda, intelligence and justice.⁴⁸ The system supported itself with money coming from different sources. According to sources within the Emirate, a quarter of the funds came from the headquarters of *Jamiat* in Pakistan, another quarter from taxes and the rest from international support organisations.⁴⁹ The administration even included a rather efficient postal service, able to deliver letters abroad, used by Ismail Khan to maintain contacts with his subordinates. Every day he would receive many letters from the districts and every

⁴³ Interviews with former amirs from the districts, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁴⁴ Dubuis (1989), p. 95.

⁴⁵ Dubuis (1989), p. 158.

⁴⁶ Interviews with former insurgents, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁴⁷ Personal communication with locals, May and September-October 2005.

⁴⁸ Kulakov (2003), pp. 141-142.

⁴⁹ Dubuis (1989), p. 159. This excludes delivery of weapons and ammunition.

commander used his own personal stamp.⁵⁰ In the second half of the 1980s Ismail Khan's emirate started creating schools for children as a replacement for Islamic *madarras*, even if in these schools the stress was more on indoctrination than on education.⁵¹

Table 2: Administrative committees of the Emirate and their heads

Committee	Head
Military	Ismail Khan
Political	Khairkhwa, succeeded by Eng. Zia
Cultural/propaganda	Haji Mir Khalek
Local administration	Agha Morshed
Vice and virtue	Mawlawi Hafteh Mohammad
Judiciary	Qazi Obeidullah (1 year), succeeded by Qazi Gul Ahmad (killed after 6-7 months), succeeded by Qazi Nazir
Intelligence	Ismail Khan
Education	Nur Ahmad
Investigation	Moallim Abdul Karim
Council of the Ulema	Mawlawi Mullah Mohmand
Communications	Gul Mohammad
Health	Dr. Noor Gul

Source: interview with Qazi Nazir, village of Guzara district, October 2005.

The virtues of diplomacy

From the very beginning, Ismail Khan showed that he was more politically savvy than his detractors would like to admit, and certainly savvier than any of his rivals in western Afghanistan. He always refused to ally with groups which shared the same stated aims, that is waging *jihad* till victory, be they other *Jamiatis*, *Hizbis*, Shiite commanders or independent strongmen, lest they could one day threaten his claim to personal rule. He used advisors sparingly but, at least as long as *jihad* lasted, was careful in selecting them. Alauddin Khan, Qazi Nazir and a few others served him well.

He also clearly understood very early the importance of lobbying the upper hierarchy of *Jamiat* as a source of legitimisation and more importantly of supplies, even if his loyalty to the party was

⁵⁰ Danziger (1988), p. 149

⁵¹ Dubuis (1989), p. 161-2, 165. The curriculum included Persian, arithmetics, drawing, Koran, religious rites and jihad. In areas away from the war, *Jamiat* claimed that 60% of boys and 5% of girls attended school. While *Jamiat* claimed to be favourable to girls attending, parents were generally opposed.

quite weak in practice.⁵² It appears that Ismail travelled to Iran in 1979-80 mainly intending to see the leader of *Jamiat* Rabbani. He was one of the first commanders from the west, if not the first, to do so. The decisive meeting, however, took place a year later in Pakistan, where Ismail Khan had travelled with a group of other commanders to meet the leadership of *Jamiat* and decide who should be in charge of the supplies. Having secured Rabbani's support, Ismail Khan was selected and therefore gained privileged access to 'capital'.⁵³ As a result, when he was chosen as *Amir* later during the same year, he was the first *Amir* of Herat to accumulate both a military-political leadership role and control over supplies.⁵⁴ He now had in his hands a much greater power than previous *Amirs* and he moved to make as profitable a use of it as possible.

As argued by W. Reno,⁵⁵ one key feature of successful strongmen is their ability to establish relations with components of the central state. In this regard, Ismail Khan initially had difficulties. This was due to his ability and willingness to manipulate the *jihadi* ideology as a source of legitimisation, which reduced both his need to find entries in the central state to ensure his own survival and his chances of doing so. However, he seems to have realised with time that Kabul's tactics were cornering him, particularly from 1986 onwards. At its peak in 1991, the process of turning *mujahidin* into pro-government militiamen had resulted in 84 groups crossing sides in Herat, for a total of 70,000 men on paper. Officials serving in Herat at that time estimate that at least 40,000 militiamen were actually fighting on the government side, a figure confirmed by sources close to Ismail Khan and Russian sources too.⁵⁶ These militias had the upper hand in the area around Herat city and the main highways (see map 4). By contrast, at its peak Ismail Khan's structure had no more than 2,000 core fighters,⁵⁷ plus as many as another 13,000⁵⁸ more loosely connected to his structure. Moreover, these were spread much wider than the militias. Only about 6,000 were based around the city. After 1986, Ismail Khan appears to have recognised the need to work with elements within the Afghan state. His success in this field was favoured by a dramatic and unforeseen change in the international environment.

⁵² After 1992, as ruler of western Afghanistan Ismail Khan would often refuse to cooperate with the Rabbani-led central government.

⁵³ Compared to Tilly's standard model of state formation, Afghanistan is a different case due to external intervention, which removed much of the need for securing sources of capital (see Tilly, 1985).

⁵⁴ Although farmers were taxed, this source of revenue played a rather marginal role in the jihad.

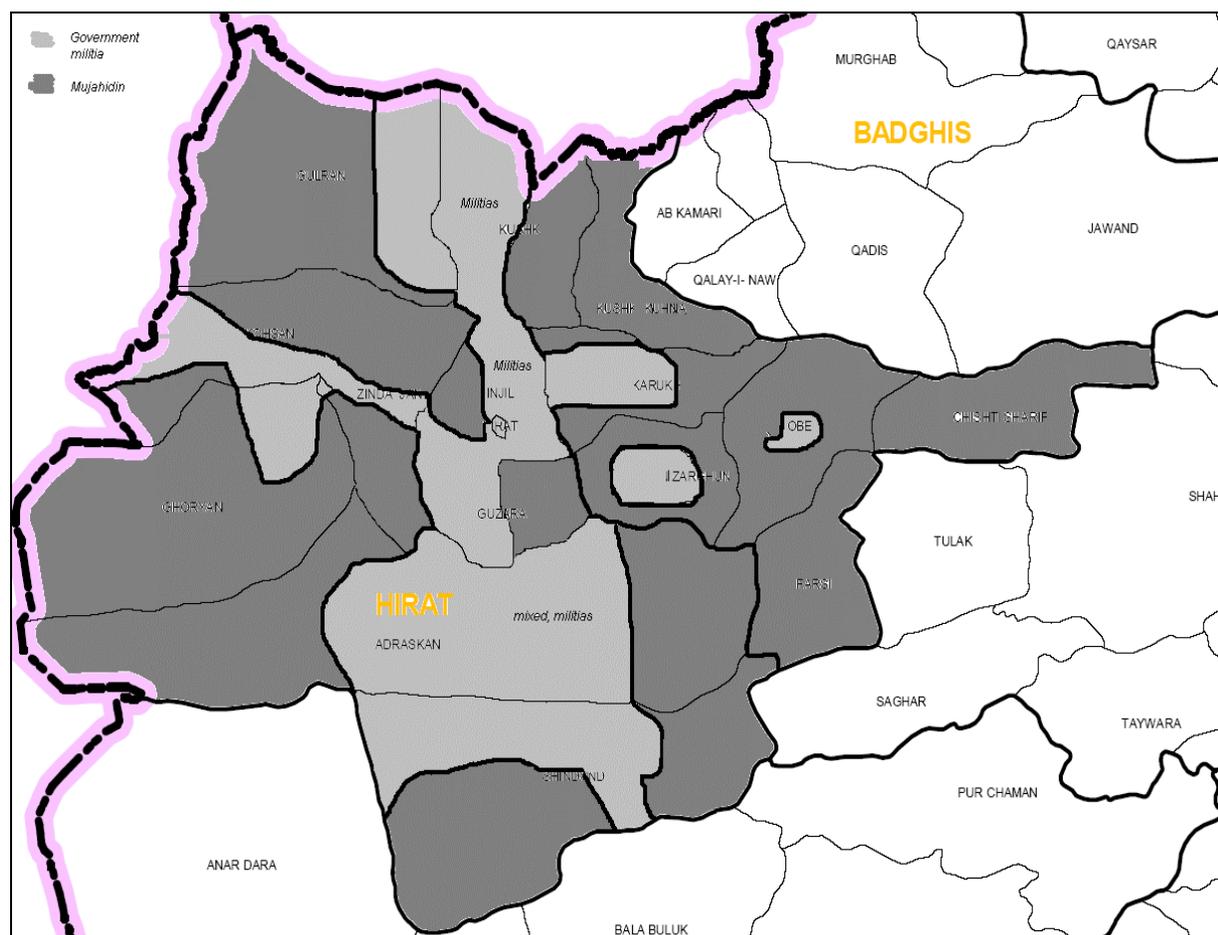
⁵⁵ Reno (2002), pp. 837-858.

⁵⁶ Interview with former government official in charge of recruiting militias, Herat, October 2005; Kulakov (2003), p. 83. Ismail Khan himself has been reported to have estimated the number of militiamen in Herat at 20,000 as early as 1987-1988. See Nojumi (2002), p. 76.

⁵⁷ Lyakhovskii (1995), p. 221; interview with Nuruddin Ahmadi, former member of the Afzali Front, October 2005.

⁵⁸ Grachev (1998).

Map 4: spread of the militias at its peak, 1991.



In May 1991 the communist regime mobilised its resources in Herat province and launched an offensive under the leadership of General Raouf Bigi against Ismail Khan's main remaining stronghold around Herat, the district of Zindajan. The pro-government forces succeeded in inflicting severe casualties to the *mujahidin* and in surrounding Ismail Khan. For the following ten months they besieged him in Zindajan, as the militias stopped their advance and sat guarding the besieged areas behind the protection of minefields. Finally, at the beginning of 1992, the siege was lifted and Ismail Khan could claim his greatest victory, even if little fighting had occurred at all after the first few days. Although the exact dynamic of the facts is as yet unknown, it is tempting to link the outcome of this offensive with the changes taking place in the Soviet Union, which was then approaching the end of its existence. As Russian president Yeltsin manoeuvred to sideline Soviet president Gorbachev, he also moved to take over foreign policy, appointing vice-president and Afghan veteran Rutskoï to manage Afghan policy. Considering Najibullah as a creature of the KGB and wanting to mark a difference from the Gorbachev era, the Yeltsin team moved to find new partners both within the Watan party and within the *mujahidin*.⁵⁹ This process might have affected developments in Herat. What is certain is that General Bigi was replaced, whilst the Zindajan offensive was still going on, by General Asif

⁵⁹ Gareev (1995).

Delaware, who would in 1992 and later emerge as a key ally of *jihadi* commanders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud. With Delaware in charge, the offensive stopped and ended in the siege being lifted.⁶⁰

The battle of Zindajan was of crucial importance because it gave Ismail Khan the military legitimacy that he had never enjoyed before, convincing or forcing most of the military class to accept his leadership. He was able to present it as the result of his military leadership skills, rather than as the result of behind-the-curtain negotiations and of a changing international environment, thus enhancing his reputation as a leader.⁶¹

A number of other warlords in Herat had interaction with the government during the war, which shows how the relationship with the state is crucial to the success of warlords in a modern environment. Indeed, all the major warlords to emerge in Herat province did so with crucial help from the Afghan state. Daoud Jowian, the warlord of Enjil and Zendajan, as a *mujahid* maintained relations with fellow Noorzais tribesmen in Herat's administration, in particular Ghaffar Azad, the secretary general of *Hizb-e Demokratik-e Khalq* (HDK or the People's Democratic Party) in the city. After he joined the government, his relations were important in ensuring that he maintained his position as one of the two foremost militia commanders in Herat, despite his continuing contacts with the opposition and occasional cooperation with it against other pro-government militias. By 1989, he had already earned the rank of general.⁶² Sayyid Ahmad, Daoud's rival, was on the other hand in contact with fellow Alizais tribesmen working for the government, such as Faqir Ahmad, governor of the province for some time in the 1980s, Adam Ahmad of KhAD/WAD (security) and Gul Asad Jalali of the Ministry of Defence. Thanks to such contacts, Sayyid Ahmad was given the option to avoid annihilation at the hand of the much better armed Daoud. Once on the government side, his forces started expanding numerically and geographically, eventually having grown eight-fold by the time the *jihad* had ended. He was somewhat slower in earning higher ranks than Daoud, as he was still a colonel in 1989, but by 1990 he had become a general too.⁶³ Other strongmen had their own connections, mostly local ones. Several strongmen in Koshk-e Kohne, for example, received government support against rival strongmen because of a tribal connection. In Koshk, several had connections with Herat's governor Khaleqyar, who was born there.⁶⁴

Ismail Khan himself maintained contacts throughout the war at least with important militia commanders of the government, such as Daoud Khan.⁶⁵ However, under pressure because of the expansion of the militias, towards the end of the *jihad* he appears to have upgraded his contacts within the regime and once again demonstrated remarkable skills at manipulating his interlocutors. During the decisive last days of Najibullah's regime, a race to Herat developed between Ismail Khan and *Hizb-i Islami*. Juma Gul, a commander of *Hizb-i Islami* who had continued to 'play games' after he had formally joined the government, was well positioned to benefit from ongoing contacts between *Hizb-i Islami* and some HDK circles in Kabul. At the time

⁶⁰ Interviews with former government officials, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁶¹ Interviews with former commanders, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁶² Interviews with former militia commanders and government officials, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁶³ Interviews with former militia commanders and government officials, Herat, September-October 2005.

⁶⁴ Nojumi (2002), p. 76.

⁶⁵ Lyakhovskii (1995), p. 412-4.

of the fall of the regime, orders came from Kabul to surrender the city to him. Ismail Khan, however, appears to have done a better job of building relations within the regime, as in the end HDK officials in the city opted instead to hand power over to him.⁶⁶ Without such contacts, Ismail Khan would not have emerged after *jihad* as the unchallenged Amir of Herat, first because he would likely have been defeated in Zendajan, second because the militias, led by Juma Gul into an alliance with *Hizb-i Islami*, would have been in a much stronger position than him in Herat city. Whatever his allies in the HDK and the militias had been secretly promised, once firmly in control of Herat Ismail Khan moved quickly to sideline them.

Conclusion

The real dilemma faced by Ismail Khan (and anybody who like him tried to build a polity in a situation of conflict and insecurity) was between the need to secure legitimisation and the need to mobilise men to fight and achieve certain aims, which they might not have been ready to pursue at great risk to themselves. 'Doing evil' may therefore become a necessity in order to create the conditions for the survival of the polity, but at the same time it stands in some contradiction with the long-term existence of the polity. Resolving this dilemma is a matter of considerable political skill. It will remain a topic of discussion whether Ismail Khan was primarily concerned to fight *jihad* more effectively, or to increase his own personal power. It is likely that in his mind the two aims were intertwined. However ruthless he proved to be in eliminating his enemies and whoever else he considered to be a liability, there are clear indications that Ismail Khan's system enjoyed a degree of popular support., This was because his approach incorporated a higher degree of discipline and better behaviour from his fighters, although not quite as good as that of the ideologically purer Islamist fronts, whose impact however was much more modest. He was able to make up, at least in part, for his shortcomings in terms of military leadership by establishing a division of labour with Alauddin Khan. One of Ismail Khan's greatest strengths was his cynicism, that is his ability and willingness to manipulate an ideology in which he did not really believe (political Islam) as a factor of mobilisation, motivation and unity and as a justification for the imposition of discipline, but at the same time to ruthlessly and coldly manoeuvre in spite of all ideological barriers, constraints and taboos. Modernising somewhat Machiavelli's comments, we could say that the 'virtue' of cynicism was its role of interface between two incompatible worlds, that of ideology and that of rational leadership, whose meeting is essential to laying the foundations of the state. Neither ideologically and politically indifferent warlords nor pure ideologists succeeded in going very far in the context of 1980s Herat, as indeed in many other similar contexts. While ideology appears to be a necessary ingredient of state-making, it is also seems essential that state-makers who use it do not believe in it.

In terms of understanding the nature of political power and of the state, Ismail Khan's story reminds us of what Machiavelli argued long ago, that although military force is the main ingredient in it, it cannot suffice alone and that the state-maker needs other skills too, which are essentially political ones.⁶⁷ This is what differentiated Ismail Khan from the multitude of warlords and strongmen who existed in Herat during the time of *jihad* and it is what allowed him to rise above warlordism, which as such can only represent the earliest stage of state

⁶⁶ Interview with former government official from Obeh, Herat, October 2005, Herat.

⁶⁷ In this I differ from Tilly's more exclusive stress on war making and the monopoly of violence.

development. Although he was consciously managing processes such as legitimisation and institutionalisation and considered them an essential part of his polity-building, there were still some obvious limitations due to Ismail Khan's own personality and attitudes. Legitimation, for example, found a major obstacle in Ismail Khan's refusal to create a modern political organisation. He struggled to reach out to those large sections of the population living under the strongmen who were part of the patronage networks built by both the government and the opposition parties based in Pakistan. Institutionalisation, on the other hand, conflicted with Ismail's patrimonial approach. His attempt to institutionalise to a certain extent, whilst at the same time leaving enough room for his arbitrary rule, would play a key role in his later demise.

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Glossary

Afzali Front: a group within *Jamiat-i Islami*, active in western Afghanistan and mainly composed of Islamist cadres.

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.

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

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.

Mujahidin: fighters of jihad.

Nejat-i Islami (Islamic Front): one of the opposition parties involved in the jihad, based in Pakistan. Pro-monarchy.

Niazi Front: another group within *Jamiat-i Islami*, active in western Afghanistan and mainly composed of Islamist cadres.

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 Rehai 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.

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