



Conference on Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Future of Afghanistan

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Presentation

I would like to thank the Masood Foundation and Gonville and Caius College for organizing this timely conference focusing on Commander Ahmad Shah Masood and the future of Afghanistan.

Today, more than ever, understanding the vision and the hope Commander Masood inspired among the Afghan population is critical to the future of Afghanistan.

In this regard, let me also pay tribute to Sandy Gall's new biography of Masood, "Afghan Napoleon." It reveals much that we can learn from Masood for the future of Afghanistan — particularly pages 239 to 268 of the book that, for the first time, publishes recently released, translated Masood diaries recording Masood's personal commentary on democracy in Afghanistan, good governance, moral and social issues, as well as on military affairs.

First, however, let us briefly survey some bleak recent history of Afghanistan and the ongoing wars of Afghanistan.

During the half century leading up to the 1978 KGB-backed Afghan communist coup, a rudimentary pluralistic constitutional democracy, an increasingly inclusive civil society, and a free enterprise economy were slowly, unevenly, but undeniably developing in Afghanistan. This process emerged alongside Afghan Jirga and shura council traditions bringing the country's diverse ethnic and religious groups together to consult and reach decisions. Unfortunately for Afghanistan, the constitution created and implemented in 2004 after the first

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Taliban period established a centralized, compact, pyramidal concentration of power that guaranteed a dysfunctional, very corrupt central government. One of the more positive decentralizing parts of the constitution, district council elections, for the first time in Afghan history, was ignored by both the Karzai and Ghani Administrations.

To make matters worse, the Soviet Union and the Pakistani- Taliban extremist Islamist military invasions of Afghanistan from the early 1970s up to the present have exported into Afghanistan totalitarian political systems completely alien to Afghan history, culture and traditions. As a result, the population of Afghanistan today remains trapped inside an unremitting cauldron of war.

The 1979 Soviet invasion to preserve Moscow's tottering PDPA proxy regime in Kabul accelerated Pakistan's export of its own proxy extremist Jihadist- driven political Islamism into Afghanistan. Both the Soviet Union and Pakistan armed and empowered previously fringe elements of Afghan society. Pakistan, military initially sponsored the most anti-traditionalist, brutal Afghan extremist, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In 1994, it switched proxies, creating the Taliban whose chief qualifications for leaders and most rank and file was graduation from extremist jihadist madrassas inside Pakistan, and usually ongoing residence with their families inside Pakistan, not Afghanistan. Saudi clerics and Osama bin Laden helped oversee and finance the madrassas. After the PDPA regime collapsed, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Osama bin Ladin trained, armed and sent into Afghanistan more tens of thousands of Pakistanis, Arab and other foreign fanatical fighters espousing radical jihad inside Afghanistan and globally.

Before his murder in 2001, Commander Masood had been the foremost Afghan commander in effectively resisting Soviet Communist and Pakistani extremist jihadist interventions in Afghanistan. No other resistance leader controlled as much population and territory as Masood did during the Soviet- Afghan War. Between 1996 and September 2001, only Masood's United Front was defending Afghanistan against the first Pakistani-Taliban invasion.

During a 2001 conversation with Masood in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, two months before his assassination, he estimated that a 25,000 Pakistan-led force faced him on the front lines. Pakistani generals in Kunduz directed the annual offensives against his defenses in Northeast Afghanistan. Thousands of Pakistani regular army and religious militias fought alongside Taliban foot soldiers, Osama bin Ladin's two Arab brigades, foreign Chechen, Uzbek and other foreign fanatics. Masood summed up that the Soviets had invaded from the North, now the Pakistanis are invading from the South. That reminded me of a mournful joke former Afghan General Rahmatullah Safi cracked during one meeting in Peshawar in 1991 – "First we were invaded by our enemies; then we were invaded by our friends!"

During this year's second Pakistani-Taliban invasion, Pakistan's military organized, supplied and led a 70,000 attacking force into and through Afghanistan. Up to forty percent were Pakistani army and religious militia melded into Taliban formations. The senior and mid-level Taliban leaders had operated from their protected bases in Pakistan against Afghan and NATO forces in Afghanistan during the previous 20 years. They included the longtime al-Qaeda connected Haqqani Network, whom American Chief of Staff, Admiral Mullen, had in 2011 publicly charged "acts as a veritable arm of the ISI," the military intelligence section of the Pakistani army.

During our Dushanbe meeting, Masood observed that Pakistan lacks adequate internal cohesion and military and economic capabilities to hold on to Afghanistan through its Taliban proxy. I personally believe he was right. Afghanistan's population of 35 million is too large and diverse, the country's rugged terrain (the size of Texas) too expansive to control from Pakistan's heartland in the Indus Valley. Moreover, like the Soviet Union's PDPA communist proxy, the Taliban are too small in number and too alien to Afghanistan's moderate culture and religion to survive, long term.

In his letter of invitation, Ali Nazari left it up to me "to comment on an aspect of your choice" during my presentation today. I was an American diplomat when I met Commander Masood. Unlike a journalist or aid worker, my engagement with him, other Afghans, also the British Foreign Office, Pakistanis, Saudis, the UN, not to mention Congress, also fell into a diplomatic framework. But, I would add as things turned out: with a heavy emphasis on resuming military and economic assistance to Masood and other Mujahidin.

The reason for this was that the ISI had effectively cut off the more powerful moderate mujahidin commanders --like Tajiks Ahmad Shah Masood and Ismail Khan in the north, Ghilzai Pashtun Abdul Haq in the East and Durrani Pashtun Haji Latif in the South during the Soviet withdrawal. Their powerful resistance fronts had been the most formidable against the Soviets. After the Soviet departure, they became the most threatening obstacles to ISI plans to place its radical Islamist proxy, Hekmatyar, later the Taliban, on the Afghan throne in Kabul.

When American Special Envoy, I played a diplomatic middleman role arranging for Masood, also Abdul Haq, to send their own delegations abroad to establish direct ties with foreign governments. Ahmed Zia led Masood's delegation to meet with Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Chief, Turki al-Faisal. The UN Afghan peace plan viewed ex-king Zahir Shah in Rome as a key player. I arranged for Masood to send a delegation to Rome to ensure that his views and position were an integral part of the peace process. Haq was already a strong supporter of the U.N. plan envisioning a Zahir Shah-led Loya Jirga peace initiative.

I never missed an opportunity to badger Pakistani officials to resume weapons and ammunition supplies to moderate commanders. Pressuring ISI to send more military supplies to Masood in particular, and not to undermine him, became one of my major preoccupations. Masood's military formations were only 60 miles north of Kabul. They would be critical to a successful Mujahidin attack to capture Kabul.

I also ensured that U.S. aid programs were addressing the needs of Masood's Shura-i-Nazar (Council of the North) health, education and agricultural programs. I initiated a U.S. assistance road project to connect Masood's supply depot near Chitral, Gharm Chesma, with Zebak across the Afghan-Pakistani border in Badakhstan. By late 1991 Masood could eschew the donkeys and use vehicles carrying weapons and food bought in Pakistan to a point nearer to the Anjuman Pass on the northern rim of the Panjshir Valley.

In the time remaining, let me give you two scenarios I witnessed that reflected Commander Masood's drawing on Afghan inter-ethnic, broad based Afghan traditions to resist Soviet and Pakistani imposition of foreign political systems alien to Afghan culture.

The first was the Afghan national commander Shura formed in 1990. For over a year after the Soviet February 1989 withdrawal, many Mujahidin supporters in the West worried that the

lack of Mujahidin political-military progress was strengthening the communist Najib regime that the Soviets had left behind in Kabul. In Washington interagency meetings, I and others advocated the creation of an inter-ethnic National Commanders Shura to restore Mujahidin momentum. The recommendation was approved by Washington agencies. The ISI and Prince Turki reluctantly stated their support. The Mujahidin were divided along moderate and extremist lines. Most extremists, including Hekmatyar, refused to join. That helped the shura to get off ground. The ISI injected several poison pill extremist proxies into the shura, including Jalahidin Haqqani.

ISI preferred to use its money and weapons to control individual commanders. In contrast, the National Commanders Shura brought commanders together. Everyone knew the ISI support for the shura was fungible. It could pull the plug at any moment. The more numerous moderate commanders and Afghan civilian leaders were enthusiastic, including the dynamic Pashtun Commander Abdul Haq. Haq became the administrative sparkplug for the shura in Peshawar. Masood and Ismail Khan also joined.

Each National Commanders Shura meeting was held inside Afghanistan. Only Afghan commanders participated in the deliberations at shura meetings. Foreigners -Western, Pakistani and Arabs- were parked in separate tent enclaves away from the actual meeting sites. The shura organizers conducted three major conferences in 1990. The second, in June, 1990, attracted over 300 commanders representing Pashtun and non-Pashtun areas of the country. They gathered at a fortified Haqqani base in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. Scud missiles exploding outside the base demonstrated the Najib regime's displeasure.

The National Commanders Shura was the first genuine all- Afghan inter-ethnic national institution to appear since the 1978 Afghan communist coup. The U.S., Pakistan and Prince Turki provided donations to support the shura. Masood, as the largest northern commander, choose the site of the third and most important shura that met in October 1990 in Shah Selim in southern Badakhshan, north of Chitral, across the Pakistani border. The five-day conference was scheduled for October 9- 14, 1990.

Masood's friend, Masood Khalili, phoned me in Peshawar from Shah Selim two days before the shura started. He invited me to come as his guest and stay with other observers outside the commanders' meeting area. I answered it was an Afghan conference. Foreigners should stay away. I flew to Saudi Arabia for consultations with Prince Turki.

Masood played the convener role at the head of the circle of commanders seated on the ground during the shura. The conferees put together a 1991 military strategy. It was an "out- in" one, emphasizing the capture of regime military bases and territory around Afghanistan's periphery, then closing in on Kabul. That scenario gradually unfolded from early 1991 to Masood's capture of Kabul in April 1992.

Masood was in high spirits when he phoned me in Riyadh after the shura disbanded. He outlined, without detail, the shura's consensus on military and political issues. He forecasted significant military progress during 1991.

The 1991 Shah Selim strategy worked. The city of Khost south of Kabul fell on March 31, 1991. The provincial capital of Ziranj in the far west was overrun in May. Masood's forces

swept through the north, capturing eight regime bases in June and July. He now occupied 300 miles of border with the Soviet Union.

ISI worried that the shura had created forces that threatened its extremist agenda for Afghanistan. It activated its poison pills in the National Commanders Shura. Haqqani was one of them. ISI used money and military supplies to lure some key commanders away. By the end of 1991, the National Commanders Shura had disintegrated. But, it had already accomplished its mission by then.

Masood personally benefitted from the Shah Selim Shura. It underscored his advocacy of solidarity among Afghan commanders of all ethnicities and regions, in opposition to Pakistan's glaring favoritism for extremist Pashtuns, in particular Hekmatyar. Masood's reputation within the Afghan population and among many commanders continued to grow. All watched as Hekmatyar and Masood prepared for the race to Kabul. Masood got there first. I was in Washington following events when Masood's youngest brother, Wali, phoned from London on April 17, 1992 announcing that Masood was at the moment entering Kabul at the head of a line of 100 tanks.

I refer you to Sandy Gall's book "Afghan Napoleon" for a lively first-hand account of that story.

My last meeting with Masood took place at his rear headquarters in Dushanbe, two months before his tragic death on September 9, 2001, and only two days before al-Qaeda's attack on America. The Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan. From June 23-24, 2001, Abdul Haq and I held discussions with Masood on an Afghan peace settlement in Dushanbe. Masood warmly greeted us in his living room after our long and dusty drive from Tashkent. He was dressed in a crisp tan military uniform, black military boots, with his pakool hat slightly tilted back on his head. The longer and deeper crevices on his face, grayish skin and streaks of white in his hair and beard did not take away from his familiar enthusiasm to talk and exchange views. A young Amrulla Saleh was the interpreter.

Masood's ideas propounded at our meeting at Dushanbe in early 2001 reflected traditional Afghan political structures and culture. They might today be of value to Ahmad Shah, his son and his followers in the embattled Panjshir Valley. Then as now, father and son were contending with unrelenting Pakistani and Taliban military pressure. The father, in Dushanbe, looked beyond the Taliban defeat with a view to prepare for the post-war period. That entailed avoiding the mistakes of the Mujahidin in Kabul during 1992-1996 that damaged Afghan unity.

On political strategy, Masood supported a loya jirga initiative to be undertaken before the Taliban's defeat. He said: "That timing is right... The king should play a leading role."

Masood confidently predicted a defeat of the unpopular Taliban propped up by thousands of Pakistani troops and ISI sponsored Pakistani, al-Qaeda and other foreign radical militia groups. The current political vacuum could be filled with a "national political alternative" prepared to take over when the Taliban collapsed. Indeed, he had, the previous week, sent his political advisor, Yunus Qanuni, to Rome to learn the king's attentions. In this regard, he told us he was worried that Zahir Shah and his advisors might accept a Taliban proposal for bilateral discussions. Masood firmly warned that Zahir Shah- Taliban peace negotiations would be premature. Anti-Taliban Afghan political and military leaders representing all regions,

ethnicities and religions in Afghanistan should utilize the loya jirga to first form an interim government. The interim government would then be positioned to negotiate with the Taliban from a position of national unity.

Masood thought that the interim government had to be located inside Afghanistan. He complained that, in his experience, technocrats, such as a doctor to head the Health Ministry, would join the cabinet. Afterwards, the technocrats tended to spend most of their time outside Afghanistan. Some never showed up.

The interim government would generate anti-Taliban resistance around the country. After the overthrow of the Taliban, it would organize national elections to choose the new Afghan leadership.

Abdul Haq raised the possibility of reviving the countrywide National Commanders Shura. Masood responded that his United Front could be the base and expand nationwide. Regardless of whether it is the United Front or a new national commanders shura, Masood stated that only commanders who have bases in Afghanistan should be allowed into the military shura. He contrasted Ismael Khan and veteran Commander Haji Qadir, a Pashtun, with Hamid Karzai. Masood noted that Karzai had visited him to discuss coordination. He told Karzai that he should not operate anti-Taliban military activities in southern Afghanistan from his home in Quetta inside Pakistan. Masood volunteered to help Karzai work with Ismael Khan to move his military headquarters to Ghor Province. Masood said he would provide Karzai's commanders with sufficient arms and equipment.

During the Dushanbe discussions, Masood voluntarily acknowledged mistakes he had made when he served as Defense Minister. He intended not to repeat them. For example: no military shura commander should be allowed to create his own separate fiefdom. That would again lead to chaos, warlordism and civil war. Also, no military commander should be permitted to maintain foreigners, especially Arab extremists and drug smugglers, among his followers. Masood declared that he would issue a written commitment after the Taliban were defeated, for the sake of peace, stating that he would not take a position for himself in the post-Taliban government. Care must be taken to avoid the internal divisions that the Mujahidin government had to deal with after the Najib regime collapsed. He stressed the importance of having the broadly representative interim government in place to take power. Its main purpose would be to organize national elections.

Today, the Panjshir National Resistance Movement led by Ahmad Shah holds a relatively small area of Afghanistan's territory compared to Commander Masood's 2001 liberated area in the North. The son's forces are in a more precarious position than the fathers were. Some of the resistance movement's current leaders --Bismullah Khan, for example-- have experiences that span the political-military challenges both the father and son faced.

If Commander Masood were with us here today, he would deeply approve of his son's National Resistance Front's brave defiance against Pakistan-sponsored Taliban totalitarianism – just as he had done against Soviet communist and Taliban totalitarianism. And he would be proud that his son, the thousands of brave fighters with him in the Panjshir and Andarab Valleys, like all of us in this room, are celebrating his noble legacy in pursuit of Afghanistan's freedom.