

Reflections on the American War, Karzai, and Orientalism in Afghanistan

Written by Shah Mahmoud Hanifi

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SHAH MAHMOUD HANIFI, JAN 12 2015

The historical legacy of Hamid Karzai and the American presence in Afghanistan is one of a new dimension of violence perpetrated by official (overt and covert) US military actors and privatized mercenaries against Afghan civilians. Much of the official and sub-contracted US military activities in Afghanistan since 7 October 2001 have straddled the boundaries of legality. Here I refer to para-legal detentions and interrogations, 'renditions' to black sites, blimp and satellite surveillance, drone warfare, the use of weaponized uranium in munitions, etc. The spurious ethical and marginally legal basis of these new forms of US surveillance, bombing, and assassination in Afghanistan were legitimized by the hasty installation and fabricated inauguration (through the improvisation of the Bonn Conference and the crudely staged Loya Jirga) of Hamid Karzai in 2001, and the subsequent international recognition he received. Despite his own rhetoric to the contrary, Karzai was, and will likely forever be viewed by the majority of Afghans, as a product of US policy that represents the moral scars of corruption, subservience, and, most importantly in what is recognized to be an honor-bound society that values autonomy and independent action, shame.

Far more important than the person of Karzai is the vast web of patronage that was generated around him through the billions of US dollars that propped up his regime in the absence of any sustainable sources of local economic or political support. The broad network of clients and functionaries lured by these external resources include a number of perpetrators of crimes against the Afghan populace subsumed under the misleading designate of 'warlords', including, perhaps most notoriously, the recently deceased General Fahim. The American occupation and the Karzai regime it spawned depended in large measure upon Northern Alliance functionaries, such as Fahim and Abdullah Abdullah of recent electoral infamy. This reality highlights the intimate personal and structural association between American policymakers (such as Zalmay Khalilzad and Richard Holbrooke), Karzai, and the Northern Alliance that was established before, but especially during, the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Under the stewardship of the Americans, the Northern Alliance, and Karzai, the population of Afghanistan experienced an unlimited war conducted through the ideology of ethnicity. Largely because the concept of ethnicity is an academic product, a small circle of American and Afghan academics who have fetishized Pashtuns are deeply implicated in and partially responsible for the ethnicization of the Afghan conflict. In 2001, and with American support, Persian-speaking Tajiks, represented in large measure by the Northern Alliance, took control of Kabul and the Afghan state structure. The Americans believed that by capping the preponderantly Tajik Northern Alliance government in Kabul with a pliant expatriate Pashtun figurehead in Karzai and a few US-trained high-profile technocrats with Pashtun cultural credentials, that the Pashtun population of Afghanistan would consent to the foreign military occupation of the country. This belief, and the construction of Karzai's political persona around it, was woefully misinformed and misguided. Underneath the artificial veneer that is perhaps best represented by Karzai's wardrobe, what has in fact transpired is a war between American-sponsored, highly urbanized, Persian-speaking Tajiks against Pashto-speaking Pashtuns in the rural east and southeast of Afghanistan and in the tribal territories of Pakistan. Uzbek, Hazara, and other communities have also been militarily mobilized in what remains a hyper-ethnicized war between urban Tajiks and rural Pashtuns perpetuated by US resources, policies, and ideologies. The US obsession with ethnic determinants and motivations for understanding and engaging Afghanistan was institutionalized in the context of the Pashtunistan 'crisis' that structured Afghanistan's geo-political positioning

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during the Cold War. Domestically in the US, Pashtunistan generated an ethnic reading of Afghanistan in a variety of integrated ways, including the substantial US engagement of the country at the federal level through the Helmand Valley Development Project, corporate initiatives such as that between Pan Am and Ariana Airlines, and academically through programs between the University of Wyoming and Columbia University and Kabul University, all of which were intellectually and ideologically framed by the notion of Pashtun ethno-nationalism.

In practice, the ill-conceived US Global War on Terror has been locally translated in Afghanistan as an ethnic war, while being simultaneously internationally marketed as a struggle for human rights, particularly women's rights. However, this shallow reasoning has compounded the catastrophe of a global hegemon using the most sophisticated technology and seemingly unlimited resources on what is essentially a pre-industrial society to prosecute a war ill-reasoned and mis-publicized to be for largely Persian-speaking urban women and against largely Pashto-speaking rural men. The detrimental logic and the execution of this absurd policy of exterminating hinterlands to save cities has created and intensified divisions between ethnic groups, urban and rural populations, genders and generations, that will collectively form the disaggregating and destabilizing residue of the American presence and Karzai's regime in Afghanistan.

The American war in Afghanistan has involved intellectual, emotional, and political fantasies about ethnicity, gender, and tribal societies, as well as multiple experimental military technologies such as retinal scanning and other forms of genetic profiling. In and beyond Afghanistan, the US Global War on Terror has been politically and intellectually predicated on what Edward Said identified as Orientalism, which highlights a fundamental misreading of cultural, historical, racial, and civilizational boundaries as being impermeable, rather than porous as they clearly are. This is especially the case in Afghanistan, where prevalent Persian (Dari dialect, as opposed to Iranian Farsi) and Pashto (various dialects) diglossia destabilizes an imagined exclusivity and rigidity of ethnic and other identities in Afghanistan, and continues to befuddle American military and political personnel generally and their teams of local and imported translators. Regarding the thousands of translators scooped up by American capital, as a group they tend to be differently comfortable with one or two of the multiple languages (Persian, Pashto, and English [at least]) that are typically involved when occupation forces engage the Afghan population, and, as widely noted by the media in the early years of the war, the systemic unevenness of linguistic competencies resulted in perpetual mis-translations that continue to cripple US cultural and kinetic operations in the country.

Partially through affiliation with organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace, American academics, such as Barnett Rubin, have been influential among US policymakers, such as Richard Holbrooke, and American anthropologists of Afghanistan, such as Thomas Barfield, have had particular influence among US military officers, such as David Petraeus. Nowhere is the militarization of academic knowledge more evident than in the US Army's controversial Human Terrain System that was designed to provide a 'cultural reading' of the (Muslim terrorist) adversary. As a rather hastily designed military unit that essentially targets other cultures and cultural traits, the Human Terrain System (HTS) has been roundly criticized by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) that is the largest academic organization most immediately affected by the HTS.

Despite the AAA's formal disciplinary disapproval of the HTS program, and the critical work of a select few anthropologists, such as Roberto Gonzalez and David Price, the penetration of national security imperatives and US Department of Defense resources into the American academy has nevertheless been deep and transformative. Under the increasingly broad budgetary rubric of national security, a number of university programs were explicitly designed for the training of intelligence officers and operatives at a diverse set of small, medium, and large universities, including Mercyherst, James Madison, and Ohio State, respectively. These programs are a direct reflection of how the American war in Afghanistan that involves unprecedented levels of violence will leave a lasting impact on the US academy, public sphere, and the national political economy to which American academics and public intellectuals routinely consent. Hyper-militarization is evident in a wide range of programs across a broad spectrum of US universities that have, by and large, enthusiastically boarded the national security-intelligence funding train conducted by corporate war profiteers, such as the high profile Boeing Corporation and the less widely known BAE Systems, that collectively produce the tracks leading to the unending war and experimental testing ground that Afghanistan under the Karzai regime was for America.

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Despite apparently limitless printed texts, electronically broadcast statements, visual materials, and statistical information that Americans and their Afghan collaborators publish, pronounce, and circulate, the overwhelming majority of Afghans will culturally inter Karzai and the American presence in their country by oral narratives and shared memories of pain, suffering, deprivation, and violence. Via the charade of militarized elections in an active war zone, Ashraf Ghani has replaced Karzai in the American cocoon that has been created in Kabul. Ghani fits the necessary profile of being a corporate-compliant, long-time US resident, English-speaking Pashtun willing to politically embrace and elevate a 'reformed warlord' such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose brutal human rights violations at Dasht-e Layli and elsewhere are well known.

Academically, Afghanistan remains a human library that has yet to be read. Unfortunately, the metaphorical phrase that comes to mind here is that the Americans have been burning the books they should be reading in Afghanistan, and Karzai served as the kind of librarian who isn't familiar with the collection s/he is charged with knowing. More to the point, ordinary Afghans have suffered and been victimized in at least three inter-related ways by the Americanized Karzai condominium regime. First and most fundamentally, by faulty militarized and ethnicized knowledge about their culture and country generated by American academics and policymakers who have uncritically inherited from the British imperial experience in the region that has been used to justify wanton killing, displacement, and large-scale degradation of the built and natural environments. Secondly and necessarily engrained in and generative of the first point, through the censorship, propaganda, and profit that sustains the production and circulation of highly defective and fundamentally uncontested Orientalized knowledge about Afghanistan in the US academy, public sphere, and political and corporate arenas. Thirdly and most locally significant and dangerous, by the transmission and adoption of a combined militarized capitalist and Orientalist mindset by a few influential cliques of local and expatriate Afghan elites who cling to various forms of false consciousness and dependency.

Nowhere is this more evident than the new head of state as of late 2014, Ashraf Ghani. Ghani is a Kabuli who speaks Pashto and has Western training. He was educated at Kabul University, the American University in Beirut, and Columbia University. Ghani's 1984 doctoral thesis from Columbia and his academic network positioned him as a Marxist anthropologist, but for unknown reasons Ghani made an ideological 180-degree turn and left progressive university life for a corporate career with the World Bank, which ultimately propelled him into service for the Karzai regime as Finance Minister from 2002-2004. Ghani became head of state after a highly improvised and precisely managed 'election' that would be both comical and theatrical were it not tragically real, and he now serves — ironically, given his leftist background — as what anthropologists term a "native informant" for the US and its version of coercive corporate capitalism in Kabul. Having undergone the Orientalist transformation of discovering himself through the eyes of the West, in his short tenure Ghani has already decreed that his tribal name of Ahmadzay (that appears as a last name on his Master's Thesis from AUB, a document that resembles his Doctoral Thesis from Columbia under the last name Ghani) no longer be used in any official or public context. To continue an anthropological reading of this Orientalized situation, if rejecting local nomenclature practices was not enough disparagement of 'native self', Ghani has also quite stunningly rejected local history by insisting that Afghanistan has 'overcome its past'. If Orientalism identifies analytical problems as culture, power, and representation historically intersect in the context of colonialism and empire, perhaps most troubling are the equally if not more widely circulated declarations of the new 'First Lady' of Afghanistan, the cosmopolitan Arab Rula Ghani, who has declared from her international feminist platform that she hopes all Afghan men 'become like her husband.' With a new head of state rejecting local Pashtun tribal culture and Afghan national history, and his wife rejecting social distinction and diversity in Afghanistan, Orientalism has here reached its metaphorical zenith. The lens of Orientalism allows us to see the weight of historical and cultural gravity in the country will always leave Ghani teetering tenuously on terminal political precipices in Afghanistan.

About the author:

Shah Mahmoud Hanifi teaches courses on the history and anthropology of the Middle East and South Asia at

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James Madison University in Virginia, USA. He has published on the colonial political economy of Afghanistan, Orientalism in Afghanistan, and the Pashto language. His recent publications can be found [here](#).