

# Afghanistan: US Sponsored Al Qaeda “Freedom Fighters” Were Used to Railroad the Formation of a Secular Socialist Government

Dr. Najibullah: A Sketch of a Man and a Country

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*Featured image: Mohammad Najibullah, Former President of Afghanistan*

*When in 1978 the 31-year old Afghan Communist politician-activist, **Mohammad Najibullah**, arrived in Tehran, “exiled” to neighboring Iran as Afghanistan’s Ambassador, I had just left Iran where I had worked throughout the year of 1977. Najibullah’s political party, the **People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)** had come to power in Kabul in April, 1978 in what is known as the Saur Revolution, the name of the month in the Afghan calendar when the Communist Revolution took place. Far from united, the PDPA was divided into two factions: the more revolutionary faction (Khalq-People’s) that first took power in Kabul in that crucial year of 1978 (crucial in both Afghanistan and Iran), preferred to have the charismatic Najibullah of the Parcham faction (Banner) of the PDPA far from the halls of power.*

Moreover, the entire country was divided, much of it opposed to the Communist revolution. The chief resistance forces were the also divided, the U.S.-supported Mujahideen. One might conclude that the Afghan War was a proxy war, between the USSR and the USA, the USA to control these two contiguous countries near the top of the world, Iran and Afghanistan, both bordering the Islamic part of the Soviet Union; the Soviet Union to defend itself from incursions into its Islamic republics in Central Asia.

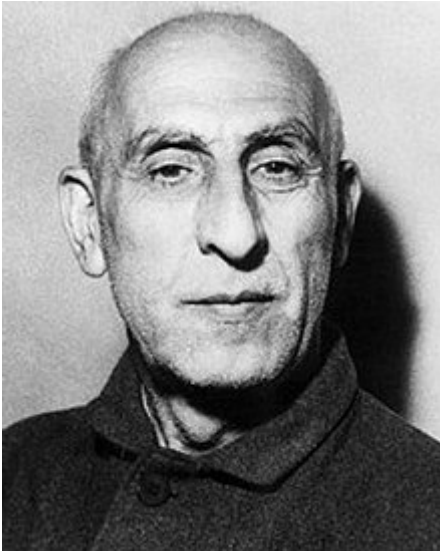
As subsequent history would show, Najibullah’s approach to resolving the civil war in Afghanistan was quite different from that of the PDPA faction heading the government which favored more rapid steps toward the realization of the socialist revolution. However, for the observer today, Najibullah’s more political National Reconciliation policy (which failed) between the government and the Mujahideen opposition and the clergy is a key to understanding not only contemporary Afghanistan but also Afghan-Soviet relations in general and the withdrawal of Soviet troops ordered by Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev** in 1989: the significance of the 10-year Soviet military presence in Afghanistan should not be underestimated.

Since 1979 the 110,000 Soviet troops had guaranteed the relative stability of the Afghan Communist PDPA government. Though **the U.S.-backed Mujahideen guerrillas** already controlled many parts of the country, they were unable to defeat government forces and dislodge the PDPA government in Kabul as long as Soviet troops were present. The Soviet

leadership had to know that that stability would quickly break down when its last soldiers departed.

Things had begun changing with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in Moscow in 1986. Though Soviet-controlled Afghanistan was a dangerous place to be, one of Gorbachev's gravest mistakes was to pull his troops out of Afghanistan in 1989, leaving Najibullah and his government to face the growing firepower of the Mujahideen ... and the threat of U.S. intervention. The then President Najibullah understood this quite well and did all in his power to convince Soviet authorities to leave their troops in place.

## IRAN



Premier Mohammad Mossadegh  
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The Islamic Revolution in neighboring Iran—also in crucial 1978-79—resulted in the overthrow of the U.S.-supported Pahlavi dynasty at that time under **Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi**. The Iranian Revolution was a violent and widely popular overthrow of a ferocious U.S.-inspired regime installed after the CIA-organized overthrow of the democratically elected government led by **Premier Mohammad Mossadegh** on August 19, 1953. The initial success of the leftist forces in Iran's Islamic revolution must have been an inspiration to Najibullah.

The oil boom in Iran of the 1970s had accelerated the gap between the rich and poor in both city and provinces. I had never seen such display of wealth as in the palatial mansions at the top of the city of Tehran where some the world's richest people lived and whose excrements literally trickled down the stinking open sewage ditches running along the streets downhill to the poorest neighborhoods in the lower city ...symbolic of the enormous disparity between rich and poor.

To be sure, as has been said time and again, inequality truly kills. Example: life expectancy in 1970 in pre-revolutionary Iran was 58%; today, 70%. In neighboring Syria, it was 70% in 1970. Moreover, adding to the widespread hate for the Shahinshah's regime was the presence of tens of thousands of unpopular skilled foreign workers and foreign entrepreneurs like the one I was associated with in search of lucrative contracts in fields ranging from infrastructure construction to heavy industry, mining and even the production

of tiles at which Persians were masters. Most Iranians were angered by the fact that the Shah's family was the foremost beneficiary of the income generated by oil so that the line between state earnings and family earnings blurred. No one should believe that the last Pahlavi Shah was a benefactor of the Iranian people; he was a tyrant and, in effect, a U.S. puppet, a key part of U.S. efforts to control the entire region.

I was in Tehran during most of 1977 as an interpreter for a newly formed Italian company before being named its Iranian representative. Though I understand zilch about the business world I came to love Iran and its people and considered the proposed job an excellent short-term opportunity to learn the country. In that capacity I witnessed some of the demonstrations against the Shah that commenced in October 1977 since the hotel I lived in was in the lower town near Tehran University and foreign embassies, the area where major demonstrations took place. Marxist groups, primarily the Communist Tudeh Party and Fedaeen guerrillas, had been weakened considerably by the Shah's repression. Despite this the leftist guerrillas played an important role in the final February 1979 overthrow of the Shah, delivering the coup de grace to the U.S. installed regime. Many of the most powerful guerrilla groups—the Mujahideen—were leftist but also Islamist even though they opposed the reactionary influence of the clergy.

Together with armed guerrilla of the People's Fedaeen, remaining elements of the Tudeh Party, plus various Islamist groups and the powerful organization of the Bazaarists, the revolutionary movement developed from the general unrest in the country, widespread poverty and the terror of the notorious secret police, SAVAK. As protests grew in intensity in late 1977, I watched as people surrounded trucks carrying young army troops some of whom threw down their guns and jumped down to join the crowds. In other places instead a more hardened military opened fire and reports circulated of thousands of victims. At that point the company I was to work for collapsed and like many foreign entrepreneurs abandoned Iran.

I too returned to Rome from where I tried to follow events in Iran. The revolution itself emerged from the widespread civil resistance. Between August and December 1978 strikes and demonstrations paralyzed the country. The Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979. Invited back to Iran by the transitional government, **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini** was greeted on his return to Tehran by millions of Iranians. Shortly after, the royal reign ended definitively when rebels overwhelmed troops loyal to the exiled Shah, bringing Khomeini to power. Iran voted in a national referendum to become an Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979.

At that time I knew little about the events underway in neighboring Afghanistan. I first became acquainted with the name Najibullah, when he headed the Communist Party in Kabul in the 1980s. With the support of the Soviet Union, he became President of Afghanistan in 1987... by the way the only period in my memory when any semblance of order existed in chaotic Afghanistan. Dr. Najibullah must have learned much from the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

## **KABUL**

Though divided by internal conflict among the tribal peoples and by foreign intervention for centuries, Afghanistan had made some progress toward modernization by the 1950s and 60s, toward a more liberal and westernized lifestyle, but obligated to cater to the conservative factions. Exotic and Oriental Kabul at that time was an "in" place for the

international elite who frequented Afghanistan to visit the soaring mountains of the Hindi Kush, the huge central area of Afghanistan, in a way truly the top of the world. After the assassination of his father, **Mohammad Zahir Shah** succeeded to the throne and reigned (not ruled) as monarch from 1933 to 1973. In 1964, he had promulgated a liberal constitution that produced few lasting reforms, but instead permitted the growth of unofficial extremist parties of both left and right. Because of the turbulence at home, the king went into exile in Italy in 1973 and lived in the Rome suburbs near my residence. I tried to get an interview with him but never got past his secretary-watch dog; he had allegedly survived an assassination attempt in 1991 so was extremely stingy with interviews.

Though officially neutral during the Cold War, Afghanistan was courted by both the USA and the Soviet Union: machinery and weapons from the USSR and financial aid from the USA. Progress was halted in the 1970s by a series of bloody coups and civil wars. One will be surprised that despite modernization, the average life expectancy for Afghans born in 1960 was 31.

**Dr. Najib** as **Najibullah** was called because he had a degree in medicine from Kabul University became the President of Afghanistan in 1987 at the age of 40. Born in 1947 in Gardiz, the son of a prominent Pashtun family, he joined the Parcham faction of the PDPA in 1965 at the age of 18, became an activist and was twice jailed for his militancy. His faction of the Communist PDPA was in disagreement with the Khalq over the proper path to Communism in Afghanistan, the Khalq favoring more rapid steps toward the realization of Socialism than the Parcham.

Since his return from exile in 1980, the longest and most important part of which was in Moscow, Dr. Najib headed the dreaded **Khad**, the secret police, during which time he personally acquired a reputation for brutality: torture and execution of the opposition was the norm, as it was in Iran, as in most of the world today. He had the close support—if not control—of the KGB. His Khad was modeled on the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB), was militarized, grew in size to the point it allegedly had 300,000 troops, and was considered effective in the pacification of wide parts of the country.

## **MOSCOW**

In an attempt to give the Afghan story a personal touch, I have added this curious historical coincidence. I moved to The Netherlands in 1978 where I broke into Dutch journalism with articles about Iran. As a result of published articles in the press and my stay in Tehran I somehow became an advisor to a prominent TV producer who at the time was working on a series of specials on Iran. Since I had studied Turkish at Munich University and had become interested in the Soviet Central Asian republics, the former Russian Turkestan, especially Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan which border northern Afghanistan, I proposed a series of colorful reportages on landmarks in the Central Asian republics such as Samarkand and Bokhara. So in late spring of 1978, armed with a stack of Dutch TV credentials I set out for Moscow. The plan was to interest Soviet television in a cooperative effort.



Najibullah giving a decoration to a Soviet serviceman (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

I finally met with a person at the Ostankino TV center and presented the idea of a cooperative production of Soviet and Dutch television about Soviet Central Asia. In retrospect I came to understand that Moscow TV people must have thought I was insane: an American representing Dutch television proposes a joint TV production about the vast area bordering with Afghanistan and the Soviet-backed Communist government in Kabul in a struggle with a U.S.-backed opposition. Ludicrous. Moreover, and unbeknownst to me, Najibullah was also present in Moscow lobbying for a Soviet intervention in his country to bolster the Communist government in Kabul while I was proposing a TV production about areas between Moscow and Afghanistan. Soviet TV people were not interested and I instead cut a ridiculous figure, while Dr. Najib's contacts were extremely interested in his proposals and in him personally. His major sponsor was the powerful KGB, a relationship which lasted until the bitter end of his life. The documentary series I proposed was about the lands over which Soviet tanks and armored cars would pass not many months ahead on their way to Afghanistan, accompanied also by the young Afghan political figure, Mohammad Najibullah.

## **KABUL**

Once back in Kabul, Dr. Najib became the director of Khad, the secret police, which operated under Soviet control. Not only an intelligence organization, it was a military force. It had tanks, armored vehicles and helicopters. A state within the state, Khad was charged with both counter-intelligence activities and intelligence gathering to eliminate active and potential opponents and counterrevolutionaries. Dr. Najib might have taken his cue from **Felix Dzerzhinsky**, the founder of the Soviet Cheka, the predecessor of the KGB. On how to combat counter-revolutionaries, Dzerzhinsky said in 1918:

“Don't think that I seek forms of revolutionary justice; we are not now in need of justice. It is war now—face to face, a fight to the finish. Life or death.”

That was also the belief of **Che Guevara** decades later. And that must have been the guideline for Mohammad Najibullah, who reigned with an iron fist over Khad from 1980 until he became head of the party and President of Afghanistan in 1987.

Once in power, Dr. Najib undertook his National Reconciliation policies. He eliminated the word Communist and references to Marxism from a new Constitution in 1990, labeled Afghanistan an Islamic Republic (as in Iran), introduced a multiparty system, freedom of speech and an independent judiciary. Yet the Mujahideen—which controlled wide parts of the country—refused to join in. With U.S. and western support the fanatical Taliban (religious students) emerged and conquered the country. When in 1992 they took Kabul, Dr. Najib found refuge in the United Nations compound where he lived until 1996. On September 27 the Taliban took Najibullah from his refuge, castrated him, dragged him behind a car over Kabul streets, finished him with a gunshot and hung his body from a traffic post.

In conclusion, some results of the Thirty Years War in Afghanistan are clear: the USA dream of control of these lands at the top of the world, in Afghanistan and Iran, was shattered. I tend to think of Iran and Afghanistan together. Twenty-five years of oppression and exploitation were too much for Iranians who rose up, made a revolution, and ousted America. Russia too lost something in Iran while Ayatollah Khomeini ruled; now that has been overcome and Russia and Iran are today allies ... against aggressive Yankee imperialism. Iran was thus lost to the USA but Afghanistan seemed and perhaps in the minds of some

Neocons continues to be a promising alternative. No oil but lots of poppies and valuable land and location. Soviet Russia had dreamed of a Soviet-friendly progressive Afghanistan to protect and secure its vast Islamic regions extending from the Caucuses to the Far East. It failed to quell the ruly, untamable Afghans as Americans cannot still today. Though U.S.-supported Mujahideen could not defeat in battle the Soviet-supported government in Kabul in the 1980s, it at least convinced the Russians to abandon a lost mission and to leave, a lesson that the USA has continued to learn and unlearn for 16 years. On the flimsiest of excuses it too invaded indomitable Afghanistan in 2001 after 11 September ... and is still there flailing at windmills, unable to completely abandon another lost war.

Dr. Najib is gone. The dream of a Communist Afghanistan is gone. The Soviet Union itself is gone. But a defeated America still hangs on in a tiny portion of the complex country of Afghanistan.

***Gaither Stewart** is a veteran journalist, his dispatches on politics, literature, and culture, have been published (and translated) on many leading online and print venues.*

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