

# US Covert Operations in Afghanistan, Support for Extremists

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*The retired American **General Stanley McChrystal**, who previously oversaw US-NATO military operations in Afghanistan, said a decade ago that Washington had a “frighteningly simplistic view” of Afghanistan. McChrystal admitted, “We didn’t know enough and we still don’t know enough. Most of us, me included, had a very superficial understanding of the situation and history”.*

It was a stark disclosure by a top level commander, and considering the decades-long involvement of the US in Afghanistan. On 3 July 1979, president **Jimmy Carter** had officially authorised clandestine CIA aid to the Afghan mujahideen insurgency.

Months prior to July 1979, US government plans were already formulating to bolster the mujahideen – nascent militant extremists – through funding, arms and psychological warfare. Former CIA director **Robert Gates** wrote,

“The Carter administration began looking at the possibility of covert assistance to the insurgents opposing the pro-Soviet, Marxist government of President Taraki at the beginning of 1979. On March 5, 1979, the CIA sent several covert action options relating to Afghanistan to the SCC [Special Co-ordination Committee]... The SCC met the next day [6 March 1979] and requested new options for covert action”. (1)

The SCC was under the US National Security Council, a main body used by the president regarding military and foreign policy decision making. We can recall that Carter’s White House was reeling at this time, in early 1979, due to the exit of Iran from US control, following a revolution in the oil rich state and that Iran borders Afghanistan. Gates outlined that further discussions took place in meetings, such as on 30 March and 6 April 1979, relating to proposals about sanctioning covert US operations in Afghanistan (2). The ambition was of “sucking the Soviets into a Vietnam quagmire”, a quote attributed by Gates to Walter Slocombe, a US Department of Defense official, who made the remark on 30 March 1979 at an SCC conference.

In April 1979, US advisers were meeting “rebel representatives” hostile to Kremlin policy in Afghanistan (3). This was revealed by CIA and State Department documents, which were

discovered by Iranian students in November 1979, during their takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran. Also in April 1979 the US Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, was asking Pakistani military personnel to identify an opposition group in Afghanistan, which would most efficiently utilise American aid. In May 1979, a CIA official met with the Afghan mujahideen commander, **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar**, according to an ex-Pakistani military member in 1988, who said he introduced them. (4)

The official story is that US support for the mujahideen began following the Soviets' Christmas 1979 invasion of Afghanistan; as one can see, this is completely inaccurate. The USSR's leader **Leonid Brezhnev**, in power since October 1964, was worried most of all about US penetration in Afghanistan. The then Soviet states of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan all shared frontiers with Afghanistan, enhancing the latter's strategic importance in Russian eyes. From mid-1979, the Kremlin along with Soviet Russia's largest selling daily, the Moscow-based Pravda newspaper, were publicly announcing a CIA presence in Afghanistan, amid other outside influences in the country.

Focusing on this subject professor A. Z. Hilali of Pakistan, a political scientist and author, observed that,

“Pravda accused Pakistan, China and the United States of fomenting unrest in Afghanistan. The Soviets made repeated charges of interference by Pakistan and China, and claimed that the US itself was interfering in Afghanistan through the CIA”. (5)

The accusations put forward by Moscow turned out to be true. Pakistan, bitter at the Soviets for their ongoing support of India, was ruled at the time by the military autocracy of **Zia-ul-Haq**. General Zia was ideologically opposed to communism, and **he declared from early on his desire that Pakistan should assist the Afghan insurgents**. General Zia was backed to an extent by president Carter; but he enjoyed greater support from Carter's right-wing successor in 1981, Ronald Reagan of the Republican Party.

China was among those countries inciting the revolts in Afghanistan (6). Beijing was unhappy at Moscow's growing links to China's neighbours, Mongolia, India and Vietnam. Furthermore, Afghanistan shares a border with China too, but it was still a dubious strategy that Beijing was pursuing. Gates, at this period a US National Security Council staff member, purported the following, “We learned on April 4 [1979] that the Chinese had informed the Afghans that they might supply arms to the Afghan mujahedin” (7). It should be stressed, however, that Beijing encouraged rebellion in Afghanistan only *after* US covert operations had commenced there, and Chinese funding to the insurgents amounted to a fraction of Washington's outlay.

It seems most unlikely that China's past leader **Mao Zedong** would have interfered in Afghanistan, regardless of his differences with the Soviets. Mao at age 82 had died not long before in 1976, after more than 25 years in office. Mao had been recognised as a reliable friend of Moscow. He even warned the Russians in a frantic telegram, on 21 June 1941, that Nazi Germany would attack the Soviet Union within a matter of hours. (8)

Regarding US support for anti-communist elements in China itself, the 53-year-old Mao said in July 1947, “We made mistakes in our work during the previous period... It was the first time for us to deal with the US imperialists. We didn't have much experience. As a result we were taken in. With this experience we won't be cheated again” (9). Chinese author He Di wrote, “Mao described the past 100 years of Sino-American relations as a history of

American manipulation of China. The United States was depicted as the head of an imperialist camp and all reactionary forces after the Second World War, and as attempting to colonize China. In short, the United States became the main threat to China's security in Mao's mind". (10)

President Brezhnev was insistent that the decision to send the Red Army into Afghanistan was the correct one. In January 1980 he tried to ease the concerns of **Anatoly Dobrynin**, the long-time Soviet ambassador to America, who was worried Russian-American relations would now plummet. Brezhnev said unrealistically to Dobrynin, "Do not worry Anatoly, we will end this war in 3 or 4 weeks" (11). A Russian military presence in Afghanistan would last for 9 years, until the final troop withdrawal concluded on 15 February 1989.

US covert actions in Afghanistan draws a parallel with the outright American-led invasion of that country, starting with aerial bombing raids on 7 October 2001. US ground forces then landed in Afghanistan from 18 October 2001, a little over a month following the 9/11 attacks. CIA personnel were present on Afghan soil on 26 September 2001, a mere 15 days after 9/11. (12)

Bush administration plans to invade Afghanistan dated to at least mid-July 2001, about 8 weeks before 9/11 (13); but almost certainly earlier than this; perhaps to March 2001 when, early that month, vice-president Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force was developing maps to highlight Iraq's oil to be exploited by the US (14). Iraq is separated from Afghanistan by just one country, Iran. A US attack on Afghanistan would, presumably, have been launched regardless of the 9/11 atrocities. Most probably some time in 2002, after a propaganda campaign to subdue the public, such as preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The hated Taliban of today had, in its opening years, been looked upon favourably by the powers-that-be in America (15). It was felt with the Taliban as the new dominant force in Afghanistan by 1996, that the militants could be amenable to US goals in the region. By the summer of 2001, the Taliban was not proving dependable enough. Afghanistan consequently lacked the qualifications to become a US client state and oil and gas corridor.

The Taliban are in some ways descendants of the Afghan mujahideen; the Taliban was founded in autumn 1994 by the Afghan-born guerrilla fighters, **Mohammed Omar and Abdul Ghani Baradar** (Baradar is the current Taliban chief). At different times in the 1980s, Omar and Baradar comprised part of the US-funded mujahideen in opposition to the Soviet Army, in the hope of toppling the Kremlin-sponsored outfit in Kabul. Omar, who died of tuberculosis in 2013, and Baradar were closely acquainted with **Osama Bin Laden**, who was born in 1957 into a millionaire family in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (16) (17)

From the early 1980s, Bin Laden was in Afghanistan for extensive periods, and he was on the same side as the extremists propped up by the US and its allies, such as the oil dictatorship of Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden provided significant aid and arms to his mujahideen comrades. He sometimes participated in the fighting, such as at the Battle of Jaji in the spring of 1987. In August 1988, Bin Laden was one of the founders of the jihadist organisation Al Qaeda, along with other militants like his mentor **Abdullah Yusuf Azzam**, who was killed late the following year (1989) in a car bomb attack in Peshawar, Pakistan. The elusive Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's boss over this past decade, was also among the group's original founders.

Bin Laden had connections to both Saudi and Pakistani intelligence, which were in contact

with the CIA. He was acquainted with prominent figures like **General Hamid Gul**, a decorated tank commander and former director-general of Pakistan's Military Intelligence (MI). In March 1987, General Gul became the head of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the top secret service agency of Pakistan.

From 1987 to 1989, General Gul worked closely with the CIA and had a considerable role in providing support for the Afghan guerrillas fighting Russian soldiers, in return for American supplies and armaments. General Gul eventually became embittered against the US and their policies towards Pakistan, such as the implementation of harsh sanctions. Later on, he said the American plan for invading Afghanistan "pre-dated 9/11". (18)

By September 1996 the Taliban had captured about 75% of Afghan territory, and the Clinton White House did not object to their takeover. US State Department spokesperson **Glyn Davies** told the media, on 28 September 1996, that Washington saw "nothing objectionable" about the Taliban instituting draconian acts in Afghanistan (19). On 11 October 1996, the Daily Telegraph summarised the US government position regarding the Taliban, "America has quietly acquiesced in its conquest of Afghanistan".

There was close co-operation between the Taliban and Al Qaeda from the mid-1990s. This was not surprising as, mentioned earlier, its respective leaders Omar, Baradar and Bin Laden had known each other for years. In autumn 1996, Omar invited Bin Laden to live with him in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Through Bin Laden's agreement, Al Qaeda temporarily subordinated itself to the dominant Taliban.

In early 1997, the Taliban leadership sanctioned the opening of training camps in eastern Afghanistan, to be used by Al Qaeda. When Bin Laden personally took control of these camps, between 10,000 to 20,000 men underwent training there (20). Some months later, in December 1997 a senior Taliban delegation was flown over firstly to Texas (21). They spent several days in the town of Sugar Land, Texas, at the headquarters of UNOCAL, an American fossil fuel corporation.

UNOCAL executives were trying to persuade the Taliban to agree to the laying down of a pipeline through Afghanistan. The Taliban members also spent time in Nebraska and Washington (22). In the US capital they had discussions with the State Department, the principal subject again being pipeline construction. A well known journalist from Pakistan, Ahmed Rashid, wrote that UNOCAL dispensed with humanitarian aid to the Taliban.

The Bush family had business ties to the Bin Ladens whose patriarch, **Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden** (1908-1967), generated the family fortune mainly in the Saudi construction industry. In the late 1970s, George W. Bush established an oil company called Arbusto Energy, in which Osama bin Laden's eldest brother **Salem bin Laden** was an investor. He died in an airplane accident in Texas in 1988. Another shareholder in Bush's Arbusto Energy was **Khalid bin Mahfouz**, a Saudi Arabian billionaire accused on separate occasions of financing terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda (23). Mahfouz died in 2009 from a heart attack.

Journalist Cindy Rodriguez wrote in the Denver Post, "Several Bin Laden family members invested millions in the Carlyle Group, a private global equity firm based in Washington, DC. The company's senior advisor was Bush's father, former president George H. W. Bush. After news of the Bin Laden-Bush connection became public, the elder Bush stepped down from Carlyle" (24). In the immediate hours after 9/11, all flights in and out of America were

stopped, or almost all. Washington authorised aircraft to fly 140 Saudi nationals in America back to Saudi Arabia. Rodriguez writes that among them were “24 members of the Bin Laden family living in various cities in the US... They were never interrogated”. (25)

Had Osama bin Laden ever been captured alive in Afghanistan or elsewhere, he would surely have had tales to tell. Gary Berntsen, the CIA commanding officer in eastern Afghanistan, said that Washington allowed Bin Laden to get away in December 2001, a few weeks after the US invasion (26). Rodriguez noted that Berntsen was supported in this view by other commanders, and she asked “the more we learn about the ties between the Bush family and the Bin Ladens, questions like this one pop up: Did Bush really want to capture him?” It would seem not.

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## Notes

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