

US Plans to Support and Finance the Afghan Mujahideen from Early 1979

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It was surely no coincidence, as the Jimmy Carter administration was looking on in horror at “the loss of Iran” in early 1979, that Washington rapidly moved to increase its presence in the Middle East and surrounding regions. A principal area of focus for the Americans was Afghanistan, which shares a 570 mile border with resource rich Iran to the west.

The exit of Iran from US auspices, due to a sustained popular revolt, constituted one of the Cold War’s defining episodes; it was a heavy blow to US supremacy and has influenced American foreign policy ever since.

The Iranian revolution was also “a great, unexpected benefit for the Soviets as the United States lost its primary ally in the Persian gulf area”, writes former CIA boss Robert Gates as “A major US ally in a critical region of the world virtually overnight had become an implacable enemy”. The US-backed Shah monarch, having presided over Iran in often brutal fashion for a quarter of a century, was forced to flee the capital Tehran on 16 January 1979.

It was during this time, “at the beginning of 1979” Gates wrote in his 1996 book ‘From the Shadows’, that Carter’s cabinet “began looking at the possibility of covert assistance to the insurgents opposing the pro-Soviet, Marxist government of President Taraki” in Kabul, Afghanistan (1). US plans to intervene covertly in Afghanistan were, therefore, developing almost a year before the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For a long time, it was claimed in official circles and the media that US support for the Afghan mujahideen (militant extremists) commenced in 1980, that is following the Russian military intervention, which is far from the truth.

The Carter White House was deeply concerned, that as Moscow was consolidating its relationship with the Soviet-friendly government in Kabul from late 1978, the Kremlin would thereafter develop ties to the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Revolts could then spread east to neighbouring Pakistan, possibly leading to the fall of the Zia-ul-Haq military dictatorship supported by the Americans.

This would result in further weakening of US power while potentially strengthening the Soviet position, and perhaps even preventing or delaying the USSR's later collapse. Before long, president Carter was describing Soviet actions regarding Afghanistan as "the greatest threat to world peace since World War II". (2)

Afghanistan's communist president Nur Muhammad Taraki, a long-time leader of the People's Democratic Party (PDPA), assumed office in late April 1978. In doing so Taraki's PDPA had ousted and liquidated the pro-Western strongman, Mohammed Daoud Khan, who was in power since 1973.

The US Embassy in Kabul acknowledged they could find no evidence of Russian involvement behind Taraki's rise to power (3). As early as 30 April 1978 Harold Saunders, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, stated in a secret memorandum that "we need to take into account the mix of nationalism and Communism in the new leadership [of Afghanistan], and seek to avoid driving the new regime into a closer embrace with the Soviet Union than it might wish". (4)

Once the 60-year-old Taraki had claimed the presidency, it was within Moscow's interests to pursue relations with the Marxist government there, as Afghanistan shared a border with the Soviet states of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

On 5 December 1978, Taraki and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed a 20 year friendship and co-operation treaty in the Kremlin (5). This landmark deal involved mutual economic, military and technical aid, tying the two countries irrevocably together. With Soviet influence growing on Afghan soil, the Washington Post reported on 6 December 1978 that American and British planners are "worried about the impact on troubled Iran to the west, as well as on the other Persian Gulf states whose oil is vital to the West".

US governments had traditionally paid little attention to Afghanistan, until the late 1970s that is. Now everything was changing. In the spring of 1979, the CIA was surveying Afghanistan as a replacement for its essential TACKSMAN signals intelligence (SIGINT) collection facilities (6), which had been located in Iran. These CIA TACKSMAN sites conducted large-scale intelligence operations through interception of radar, weapons systems, communications systems, etc. By using this advanced technology the CIA was able, for example, to secretly monitor Soviet missile test activity.

Gates, who would be the CIA Director under George H. W. Bush, revealed that, "The senior intelligence community leadership, the SCC [Special Co-ordination Committee], and the Congress spent an extraordinary amount of time and effort in the spring of 1979 figuring out how to replace the TACKSMAN sites" (7). The CIA facilities in Iran were unexpectedly lost forever, with the success of that country's revolution. On 16 April 1979 the CIA Director, Stansfield Turner, said it would take 5 years to completely restore CIA capabilities. (8)

Veteran intelligence analyst Jeffrey T. Richelson observed that "the most important sites operated by the CIA during the Cold War were located in Iran, and known as TACKSMAN I and TACKSMAN II. The first site, a telemetry intercept station, was established in the late 1950s in an ancient hunting castle at Beshahr [a city in northern Iran], on the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea - with the objective of collecting signals from the Tyuratam test range [in Kazakhstan], which the CIA believed would become a major Soviet test facility". (9)

The second CIA TACKSMAN site, created in the mid-1960s, was based in north-eastern Iran, just 40 miles away from the country's second most populous city, Mashhad. At their most proficient, the TACKSMAN centres provided the CIA with around 85% of its entire intelligence data on the Russians' Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program.

Richelson continued, "President Jimmy Carter considered the [TACKSMAN] sites sufficiently important that he told his ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, that intelligence cooperation between the CIA and Iran should continue despite the Shah's poor human rights record" (10). Panicked by Iran's sudden independence, the Carter administration's strategy on Afghanistan was developing at a steady pace.

On 2 February 1979, the Washington Post reported an eyewitness statement outlining that at least 2,000 Afghan militants were undergoing training at former army bases in Pakistan, which shares a 1,640 mile frontier with Afghanistan (11). This training program, clearly aimed against the Afghan communists, was jointly co-ordinated by the CIA and ISI, the latter being Pakistan's premier intelligence agency.

On 5 March 1979 - nearly 10 months before the Soviet military offensive in Afghanistan had begun - the CIA Director Turner, a retired US Navy Admiral, dispatched several covert action options to the SCC on Afghanistan (12). The SCC was subordinated to the National Security Council (NSC), the principal forum used by the American president on foreign policy and military affairs.

Carter was acquainted with Turner since the mid-1940s, when they were in the same class together at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Carter appointed Turner as the CIA Director in March 1977.

Again on 5 March 1979, a CIA memorandum sent to Washington stated that "the insurgents had stepped up their activities against the government" in Kabul "and had achieved surprising successes" while "the Soviets were clearly concerned about the setbacks to the Afghan communist regime, and that the Soviet media was accusing the United States, Pakistan and Egypt of supporting the insurgents". (13)

On 6 March 1979, the SCC convened a meeting in Washington "and requested new options for covert action" on Afghanistan Gates wrote, who spent 26 years with the CIA and National Security Council.

In mid-March 1979, president Taraki was becoming increasingly concerned as an insurgent revolt erupted in western Afghanistan, the so-called Herat uprising, which was suppressed after a few days by communist forces. Yet the violence had left thousands dead. Taraki was facing resistance from many fundamentalist and Orthodox Muslims, because of his progressive programs, such as land reform measures and the introduction of education, literacy and equal rights for women. (14)

On 20 March 1979, Taraki requested the Soviet Union to intervene with ground forces in the country (15). The Kremlin refused, seeing no extensive US interference in Afghanistan at this point, though the Soviets did increase clandestine military assistance to Kabul. Soviet prime minister Alexei Kosygin said, "The entry of our troops into Afghanistan would outrage the international community, triggering a string of extremely negative consequences in many different areas".

In late March 1979 the CIA's Deputy Director, Frank C. Carlucci, was told by the CIA

Directorate of Operations (DO) that Pakistan would likely be interested in aiding the Afghan guerrillas. Pakistan's anti-communist ruler and US ally General Zia, who had taken power in July 1977, sent a senior Pakistani official to meet up with a CIA officer; whereby assistance was discussed for the Afghan mujahideen, including the provision of light weaponry and ammunition (16). Pakistan's position was that, should US support be withheld, they would not help the mujahideen for risk of incurring "Soviet wrath" on their own.

The implication is clear: without US involvement in Afghanistan, outside backing for the mujahideen would hardly have taken off the ground. Also at this time in March 1979, a high level delegate from Saudi Arabia raised the possibility of setbacks for the Soviets in Afghanistan, and said that his regime was considering officially proposing that Washington aid the insurgents (17). A CIA memo expounded that the Saudis could be expected to dispense with funding to the mujahideen, and encourage Pakistan to follow suit, all dependent on America pulling the strings.

On 28 March 1979 Arnold Horelick, the US National Intelligence Officer covering the Soviet Union, wrote to CIA Director Turner in Langley, Virginia. Horelick felt that "the Soviets may well be prepared to intervene on behalf of the ruling group" in Afghanistan (18). He went on that should Washington offer aid to the insurgents, America could "turn the tables on the Soviets for their actions in Africa and Southeast Asia" and "encourage a polarization of Muslim and Arab sentiment against the USSR".

On 30 March 1979 the SCC chaired an "historic" meeting in Washington, Gates noted (19). At this conference Walter Slocombe, a US Department of Defense official, pondered a scenario of "sucking the Soviets into a Vietnam quagmire" in Afghanistan. David D. Newsom, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, said that it was official US policy to undermine the Soviet presence in Afghanistan; and to show Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and others that Washington was determined to lead the way, in reversing the perceived Soviet advance into US domains of interest.

American author Steve Galster, who spent considerable time in Afghanistan during the 1980s war, wrote that in March 1979, "At the White House, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned President Carter that the Soviet Union, with its hundreds of advisors in Afghanistan to assist in reforms and counterinsurgency operations, had territorial designs on Afghanistan and possibly the whole South Asia region. Brzezinski and others worried that the USSR might take advantage of its presence in Afghanistan - in order to influence events in neighboring Iran or Pakistan, two traditionally pro-American countries that for years had helped safeguard US interests in the region, namely access to oil and the containment of the Soviet Union". (20)

An Afghan insurgent commander travelling overseas contacted a CIA official, and asked him that the CIA provide some direct aid to the anti-communist militants (21). Turner reported this to Brzezinski, the influential US National Security Advisor.

From April 1979, accusations by the Kremlin and Soviet media were growing that the US, its allies and also China were instigating unrest in Afghanistan. These claims would prove accurate over time. Gates recalled how, "We learned on April 4 [1979] that the Chinese had informed the Afghans that they might supply arms to the Afghan mujahiden" (22). It is worth remembering at this time that there was a notable improvement in Sino-American relations, with president Carter having established full diplomatic ties with China.

On 6 April 1979, US strategy on Afghanistan was taking definite form, as another SCC conference was held in Washington late that morning. The following options were proposed: a limited propaganda campaign highlighting Soviet involvement in Afghanistan; indirect financial assistance to the guerrilla fighters; direct funding to Afghan émigré organisations to bolster their anti-communist activities; nonlethal material aid; weapons support; along with a variety of training and support options. (23)

Elsewhere during April 1979, US advisers were quietly meeting with “rebel representatives” opposed to Taraki’s Marxist government. (24)

Significantly, in May 1979 a CIA officer met with the Afghan mujahideen’s top commander, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a particularly radical figure in following years dubbed “the butcher of Kabul”. This meeting was convened by a Pakistani military member, who said in an interview in 1988 that he had introduced Hekmatyar to the CIA official. Hekmatyar received more US financial aid than any other mujahideen leader (25). Later, the Ronald Reagan administration “collected radical Islamists from around the world” prominent American analyst Noam Chomsky said, including “the most violent, crazed elements they could find – and tried to forge them into a military force in Afghanistan”. (26)

In early June 1979 Carlucci, Deputy Director of the CIA, observed the unstable conditions in Afghanistan which the US could capitalise on; and he outlined, at a morning CIA staff meeting, that covert action proposals on Afghanistan be brought to a swift conclusion (27). Turner replied to Carlucci that the closing decision rested with Brzezinski, upon a final SCC meeting where president Carter would be in attendance.

This conference “was finally held on July 3, 1979” Gates wrote, with Carter officially authorising CIA aid in order “to help the mujahedin covertly” (28). Carter’s directive of 3 July 1979 (Operation Cyclone) included sanctioning US backing for pro-mujahideen propaganda; along with other acts of psychological warfare, like the establishment of CIA radio access through third-country facilities to brainwash the Afghan population; the provision, either directly or indirectly, of support to the mujahideen, of either cash or “nonmilitary supplies”. (29)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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Featured image: Brzezinski visits Osama bin Laden and other Mujahideen fighters during training.

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