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Khalilzad and the Gangs of Afghanistan

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Hamid Karzai is the grandson of Khair Mohammed of the village of Karz, not far from Kandahar. He was an indigent member of the Popalzai tribe with a large family who migrated to Kandahar seeking a better life. Normally, when a Pashtun is of noble stock he's known by a patronym, but more humble tribal members do not have that privilege. Therefore, perforce they resort to descriptive names like Karzai, Pashto for "born in Karz."

Not finding adequate employment opportunities in Kandahar, Khair Mohammed moved his family to Kabul. There he prospered because Kabul lacked hotels, so the nobility of Kandahar visiting Kabul were invited to stay at Khair Mohammed's modest home. They provided him with money to buy provisions for their stay with him, and Karzai's grandmother cooked their food and took care of their laundry.

Soon, Khair Mohammed came to the attention of the government as an ideal source of intelligence about the situation in Kandahar, garnered from the conversations of his paying Kandahari guests. His loyal service to the government resulted in his being given a deputy-head post in one of the government departments. He became known as "Mueen Khairo Jan," a term of contempt, for the Kandaharis had realized the extent of his perfidy.

Karzai's father, Ahad Karzai, benefited from Mueen Khairo Jan's connections and was admitted to the lower social circles of the Afghan royal family. He became one of the numerous court jesters. However, Ahad was dimwitted and insolent enough once to crack a joke at the expense of a minor royal family member. He was rewarded by being crowned with a crystal ashtray and, bleeding profusely, dismissed – obviously Ahad Karzai did not appreciate the fact that a royal appointment to the Afghan parliament didn't raise him to the status of someone who could poke fun at even

minor royalty. His son, the British-ennobled Sir Hamid Karzai, seems to suffer from the same predilection to the *folie de grandeur* that afflicts *parvenus* and predisposes them to inappropriate behavior and comments. His public clash with U.S. President George Bush regarding Iran is just one of the more well-known examples of Hamid "Jan" Karzai's public *faux pas*.

During the Soviet occupation, Ahad Karzai joined "the usual suspects" in Peshawar. Where there was money to be made, the Karzais were bound to congregate.

While some of Ahad Karzai's sons were sent to America to invest the family's dubiously obtained fortune, Hamid, the constant butt of Karzai family jokes, was thought to be ill-suited to life in the United States, and left to pursue family interests in Peshawar, attached to the mercurial Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, one of the minor jihadi leaders.

In an article last year, *The Economist* wondered how an inept individual like Hamid Karzai had managed to obtain the post of president of Afghanistan. The answer is found in the development of the relationship between Zalmay Khalilzad and Hamid Karzai.

The symbiotic relationship between the ambitious hyphenated American, Khalilzad, and the nominal Pashtun hustler, Karzai, began when Khalilzad obtained an adjunct position at the State Department, as adviser on Afghan affairs, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. At the time, both Mr. Ks were in their twenties.

Khalilzad, lacking name recognition or connections in Afghanistan, needed the local knowledge and connections of the Karzai clan. The Karzai family, for its part, thought Khalilzad's contacts at the State Department and elsewhere could be useful in furthering the cause of their erstwhile benefactor, Zahir Shah, and consequently themselves.

A study of the character profiles of both Khalilzad and Karzai leaves little doubt that both individuals have always been motivated by self-interest, irrespective of either Afghan or American national interests. This destructive nexus, aided and abetted by other unprincipled hyphenated Americans and ruthless Afghan mujahedeen warlords, is largely responsible for the tragedies visited on both countries.

And legions of foreign Afghan affairs "experts," some with little knowledge of the country's culture, ethnicity, and history, pontificating in the written and broadcast media, played supporting roles. Unfortunately, this tidal wave of "informed opinion," some ignorant and others tendentious, served to stifle any debate about the wisdom of the West's policy regarding Afghanistan and its consequences.

How Khalilzad ascended to the upper echelons of policymaking in the course of the two Bush presidencies is well documented. It only needs to be noted that, in addition to his neocon affiliations, his alleged expertise about the Muslim world in general, and Afghanistan in particular, were major determining factors in his advancement. Otherwise, his career may well have followed a similar path to that of his fellow American University of Beirut's Afghan alumni – nothing

spectacular.

What is less known is Khalilzad's ambitious career goals in Afghanistan. For as it became increasingly obvious that, after the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the Najib regime would fall, Khalilzad reportedly suggested to the "Peshawar Seven" that, after the fall of Najib's communist regime, he should lead the successor regime in Afghanistan. This surprising proposal by Khalilzad was given a Bronx cheer by the mujahedeen leaders based in Pakistan, all of them quarreling about, and vying for, the same position in Kabul. This episode may explain why Khalilzad acquired the "King Zal" sobriquet in Washington.

It is a widely accepted view now that the Bonn Accord was a hastily drawn-up document, meant to give a semblance of order to the situation precipitated by the Northern Alliance's power grab in Kabul. Although John Simpson of the BBC was the first to walk into a deserted capital, the Northern Alliance claimed to have "liberated" Afghanistan from Taliban rule. They behaved as if U.S. ground and air forces had been minor factors in bringing about a change of regime in Kabul.

At Bonn, the international community, as represented by the UN, conferred legitimacy on the *fait accompli* presented by the Northern Alliance. The only concession that its members were willing to make was to have the hapless Karzai as the nominal Pashtun leader of the transitional authority. Nevertheless, Khalilzad bragged that he was, and would remain, the king-maker in Afghanistan. Subsequent events were to prove this not to be an empty boast, and one with disastrous consequences.

The situation facing the international community when the Taliban regime was toppled was analogous to the situation facing the Allies when France was liberated and the Vichy government collapsed. At that time, the French Communist Party, as well as criminal gangs in the guise of the *Milice*, had infiltrated all the organs of state – the government in Paris, announced and headed by Charles de Gaulle, was nominally in charge of France. It took great statesmanship and deft handling by de Gaulle and a handful of his supporters to finesse the ouster of the French Communists and members of the *Milice* from the ranks of "power ministries" and marginalize them in French society. The period between the signing of the Bonn Accord and the installation of a transitional government in Kabul should have been used to effect a similar process, distancing the Afghan mujahedeen warlords and their criminal gangs from the levers of power.

Unfortunately, the various *loya jirgas*, or "grand assemblies," attended and choreographed by Khalilzad as George Bush's special representative, instead of bringing forth the required apolitical, technocratic regime in order to begin the country's physical and social reconstruction, only served to entrench the *status quo* set in Bonn. Whether Khalilzad was outmaneuvered by the Northern Alliance or he was ordering things so that he would have a long-term position as "the power behind the throne," is a moot point.

However, his subsequent appointment to the U.S. ambassador post in Kabul, his eagerness to hold patently sham elections in order to have Karzai "elected" president, and the nature of his relationship with Karzai provide food for thought. It is perhaps worth noting here that, of all those who were involved in the shabby shenanigans misnamed a "peace process," only Lakhdar Brahimi,

the UN secretary-general's special representative in Afghanistan, has had the decency and integrity to admit that the international community has failed the Afghan people.

The Afghan government is now widely described as being made up of various competing mafia groups. Initially, it was dominated by the Northern Alliance mafia. With the advent of Khalilzad's "vice-royalty" in Kabul, there was an influx of the "hyphenated American mafia" – people who rushed to Kabul either just to make a fast buck or to hold government posts both to enrich themselves and gain the status they lacked. In initiating and promoting this process, I suppose Khalilzad hoped to rule Afghanistan by acting as "the decider" in the turf battles that would inevitably occur between the competing mobs. In essence, Khalilzad fashioned himself *capo di tutti capi*, a position that suited both his temperament and his love of power.

The relationship between Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Kabul, and Karzai, the Afghan president, was described in graphic and cringe-making detail in a *New Yorker* piece. And though it accurately portrayed the Afghan "leader" as a servile and ridiculous moron whose every action was being choreographed by the American plenipotentiary, it was a gratuitous insult to Afghan national pride.

While I'm sure that King Zal enjoyed reading the piece, in the spirit of "Look at me, Ma, I'm on top of the world," his petty arrogance and stupidity did immense harm to the image of the United States in Afghanistan.

Fortunately, he was recalled from Kabul soon thereafter, and his hopes of a sinecure as America's viceroy in Kabul, irrespective of which political party ran Washington, were dashed. Unsurprisingly, even the manner of his departure lacked grace: he encouraged Karzai and others to write pleading letters to President Bush, begging him to leave Khalilzad at his Kabul post. And his drawn-out departure from Kabul was marked by metaphorical heel marks leading from the gates of the U.S. embassy to the doors of his departing plane.

With the departure of Don Khalilzad, the hapless Karzai was left to fend for himself, with only the British as his main source of military and political support. But with the British military failure in Helmand, and an understandable reluctance by many NATO allies to expend blood and treasure to ensure the survival of a kleptocratic regime, Karzai's mantle of power began to look increasingly threadbare. Consequently, Karzai's erstwhile supporters and opponents regrouped to ensure their own future, and the misnamed National Front was formed last year. As predicted by the perspicacious Gen. Eikenberry some time ago, and substantiated by subsequent events, the regime is imploding.

So what policy choices are available to the international community to ensure a positive outcome of the Afghan "project"?

Before this question can be addressed, some "received wisdom" needs to be debunked.

Until quite recently, it was widely assumed that applying "hard power" to solve the Afghan problem would ultimately bear positive results. In fact it has had the opposite effect. Therefore, a giant step

forward was taken when it was admitted that there is no military solution to the Afghan problem. The British trumpeting of their preparations to "destroy the Taliban," thus "securing the back end of the country" and reordering things in Kabul so that it would "cut the mustard," and their subsequent rude awakening from such neo-imperial dreams, at least served this useful purpose.

The shibboleth that "Afghanistan is a democracy" with "a constitution, an elected president, and an elected parliament" must be consigned to the dustbin of bad jokes. The Afghan people certainly don't believe it, nor do those foreign professionals whose careers have not depended on inventing and perpetuating the myth.

The claim, often forwarded by the supporters of the current Kabul setup, that there's no alternative to replace Karzai is nonsense. It is an artifice through which they hope to bamboozle the rest of the international community to help continue maintaining Karzai and their associated assets in place, despite the fact that these people are part of the problem as well as a bar to implementing a solution.

The unnatural prominence of the Karzai clan and the gallimaufry of self-styled politicians brings to mind the story of a ship that was hit and sunk during the Russian civil war. The captain, a competent and kindly man, was drowned, but the corrupt, cruel political officer survived. A member of the crew wondered aloud about the injustices of fate. His shipmate answered, "Well, comrade, you should know that gold sinks and sh*t floats!"

Extending this analogy to the current Afghan situation, in order to arrive at a solution to the deepening Afghan crisis, the international community will have to flush out the prevailing system and pan for Afghan "gold" to replace it – that is, of course, if it is tired of holding its nose and wants to stop thrashing about hopelessly in the Kabul cesspool while continuing to bleed men and material in Afghanistan.

But, some people would argue, these social flotsam have the support of their ethnic groups, so perforce one has to give due weight to their demands. This is hogwash. They no more represent their fellow Tajiks or Uzbeks than, say, Italian-American mobsters represent America's Italian community or Hispanic-American gangs represent America's Hispanic community – they represent no one but themselves and their gangs of cutthroats. In fact, their own ethnic groups would be happy to be rid of the lot of them, since they're raping and pillaging in their own community, but these inconvenient facts go unreported in the Western media, although the local **IWPR** reporters do write about it.

Moreover, the majority of Afghans, irrespective of ethnicity, are appalled that the international community accepts these people as their legitimate representatives – it is as if Al "Scarface" Capone, Charles "Lucky" Luciano, Jack "Legs" Diamond, Abe "Kid Twist" Reles, and their ilk had been deemed to be legitimate political representatives of their respective communities during the violent Prohibition era in America.

A final assumption that must be discarded, before moving on to consider the factors essential for a viable political solution, is the shibboleth that conflates NATO's future survival with that of its success or failure in Afghanistan. From the shrill and persistent vocalization of this meme, one

would think that the NATO acronym stands for North Afghanistan Treaty Organization!

NATO's "success" or "failure" in Afghanistan depends on how its mission is defined: if NATO's intent is to preserve the status quo in Kabul, then it will fail. On the other hand, if NATO's objective is to prevent the installation of an extremist regime in Kabul, then its mission has a chance of success, provided that it restricts military operations to the minimum necessary to keep things stable, until a political solution for the Afghan problem is found.

The identification and rectification of past factual errors and assumptions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for ending the violence in Afghanistan, because the current mess has both external and internal causes. Moreover, the external factors are more important and determinative of future events in Afghanistan than the internal factors.

The local actors on the Afghan scene are only pawns in a chess game between competing foreign interests. They are fully aware that their political and physical survival depends on pursuing their foreign masters' national interests. The recent violent death of a National Front leader, and the perceived mysterious circumstances surrounding his removal from the Afghan chessboard, has rattled members of the "charmed circle" in Kabul. This is no bad thing and should make them inclined to reasonableness in the future.

Members of the National Front have been agitating for some time for the convening of an international conference about Afghanistan. Forgoing an analysis of their reasons here, it can be taken as an article of faith, based on their past behavior, that their motivation is chicanery aimed at achieving personal ambitions, contrary to the best interests of Afghan society.

Given the catastrophic results of the Bonn conference, it would be unwise to hold such a conference again. Moreover, the UN, which would be the convener, has been totally discredited in Afghan eyes by the partisanship and behavior of its local staff.

Consequently, the most productive course of action would be for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to hold closed-door meetings in order to agree on a common approach to resolving the Afghan conflict that not only safeguards Afghan national interests but also satisfies the minimum requirements of the majority of the Security Council five.

On the meeting's agenda, Afghanistan's future international role should figure prominently. As I have argued elsewhere, the temperament of the Afghan population demands that Afghanistan play a neutral role in international affairs. If left alone, "malice toward none, charity toward all," along with fierce pride and jealously guarded independence, is as natural to Afghans as the air they breathe.

Consequently, the contentious matter of the deployment of foreign troops in Afghanistan must be addressed.

Unfortunately, the presence of Western forces on Afghan soil has become part of the Afghan problem and therefore can no longer be considered part of any future solution. Despite the

ridiculous claims of a deluded Afghan ex-minister while in Canada, the Afghan civilian population neither appreciates nor forgives being bombarded, even by mistakenly dropped "friendly bombs."

So, until Afghan security forces are capable of ensuring internal and external security, there will be a need for a new security architecture.

The proposal that forces drawn from Muslim countries should be used to provide interim stability in Afghanistan, at the conclusion of U.S. military operations, is not new. It was already being considered prior to the Bonn conference. However, the British-inspired ISAF project, which later morphed into a NATO mission, caused the idea to be shelved. The idea now needs to be seriously considered anew, competent and experienced forces need to be identified, and the phased manner of their planned deployment needs to be discussed.

Lastly, there's the matter of how to provide the Afghans with honest and competent governance that can shepherd Afghan society toward the desired goals of security, stability, economic prosperity, and representative government.

The film *Brewster's Millions* provides an answer. In it, the title character is left hundreds of millions in a will, provided he can spend tens of millions in a very short period of time. Finding (like the UN's recent electoral effort in Afghanistan) that the only way to do this is to become engaged in a political campaign, and devoid of other planks for his political platform, he enters the race with the slogan "None of the Above," meaning his fellow candidates, who are known scoundrels. To everyone's surprise, Brewster wins the election by a landslide.

Similarly, were the international community to approach the Afghan people with a "None of the Above" proposal and suggest the installation of an interim government of competent, apolitical technocrats in Kabul, it would have the overwhelming support of the Afghan population.

However, even if this path were to be chosen, peace and stability in Afghanistan would not be achieved overnight. For the Afghan technocrats who are co-opted to take on the burden of cleansing Afghan society of the present gang culture would face a situation similar to that faced by the FBI task forces that were assembled to fight organized crime in America during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. But, if foreign support for the various gang leaders is removed, the desired objectives are achievable.