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# Nation Building in Afghanistan

## *Abstract*

This article is an attempt to give a scientific explanation for the failure of nation building in Afghanistan. Through a politico-historical analysis, it discusses why the process of modernisation never took off in Afghanistan and how the Afghan modernist and nationalist movements failed to break the feudal structure of the country, and how the dream of modernizing and unifying Afghanistan led to an ever divided and diversified Afghanistan.

## *Key words*

Afghanistan • Nationalism in Afghanistan • Nation • Nationalism • feudalism in Afghanistan • State

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## **Introduction**

*Why did the process of nation building fail in Afghanistan?* This is the main question of this paper. The fact is that either in a political or cultural, social or economical sense we have always tended to direct our arguments towards a country that is called Afghanistan and an Afghan nation. Ironically, even in a scientific sense on the basis of an insufficient historical knowledge, we have legitimized ourselves to draw the conclusion that, if there is a country called Afghanistan, there must also be a nation, which we can call Afghan.

The idea behind this research is deeply rooted in two things: firstly in my personal thirst for a scientific explanation of this matter and secondly, in my interest as a student of political science in the perplexity and complexity of this issue. This might give birth to the question, why is a political science student doing a research under the sociology department instead of political science? For those who do struggle with a question as such, the truth is that, the social sphere and the political domain are so closely interrelated that we cannot give an entirely satisfactory explanation without at least a basic understanding of both domains, that is political science and sociology.

The Afghanistan we know today is simply a product of the British foreign policy of the nineteenth century, as I will explain it later on. The aim of this paper is not only to prove the generally accepted view of the west about Afghanistan and the 'Afghan Nation' wrong, but also to tell the untold version of the story.

## **The structure of the paper**

In the first section of this paper, in order to answer the question, I will firstly give a general definition of nation. Consequently I will focus on the need and rise of this understanding. In other words, what is a nation, and under what conditions does it come about?

In the second section of this paper I will turn to Afghanistan, where I will mainly focus on the internal politics and policies as well as the British foreign policy towards Afghanistan in eighteenth century and the first efforts to build the state of Afghanistan which started with Amir Abdur Rahman (1880 – 1901). I will not only be discussing his efforts and reforms, but also his failure to build a unified and strong state as he had aimed. The next discussing point, which to my understanding is of great importance, is the modernization movement and the Pashtunistan issue. This section will end with a look at the possible role that the European nationalism has played in this failure.

The third section will be an analysis followed by conclusion in which the main question of this paper; *why did the process of nation building fail in Afghanistan?* Will be answered.

## **Part I: Nation and Nationalism**

If one is ought to believe in causality, phenomenons are subject to other phenomenons which are prior to their own existence. In other words everything must have its origins or roots in something different than itself, or every sensible reality must have been caused. This brings us to the question of, what caused nation and nationalism? Hence, before defining nation and nationalism, for the sake of a better understanding a trip through the historical development of both concepts is of tremendous importance.

### **The origins of Nation and Nationalism**

According to some influential scholars, as will be presented later on, capitalism and along with capitalism the development of print technology, the disintegration of religious communities (reformation) and the change in the character of the Latin language, form the corner stones of national consciousness. Capitalism and print technology may not be the only explanatory factors of the national consciousness, but as Anderson puts it, “the factors involved are obviously complex and various. But a strong case can be made for the primacy of capitalism” (Anderson, 2006: 37). In sum, there are three main developments in the western societies, which directly contributed to the rise of national consciousness.

A first development, as mentioned above, is the change in the character of Latin language. “Thanks to the labour of the Humanists in reviving the broad literature of pre-Christian antiquity and spreading it through the print-market”, a new understanding and appreciation for the ancient perplex and stylistic achievements could be observed (Anderson, 2006: 39). This in its turn, led to the aspiration of Latin to be written differently from that of the Latin Church, which finally led to the age of Enlightenment.

Secondly, before the age of print, Rome being the most dominant dynasty and Latin the most dominant language in Western Europe, the Catholic Church never lost a war to its challengers because of its “internal lines of communication”. However, when for the first time “in 1517 Martin Luther nailed his thesis to the chapel-door in Wittenberg, they were printed up in German translation and within 15 days were seen in every part of the country” (Anderson, 2006: 39). This was just a starting point. Within two decades thousands of books and Biblical translations were published. Print work and translation to vernaculars became a new trend in trade as well as in the “battle for man’s mind”. Religious propagandists were the first amongst followers of Luther who took the advantage of this opportunity to propagate for the religious wars. In other words the “coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism, (...), quickly created large new reading publics, (...), who typically knew little or not Latin” (Anderson, 2006: 40). This not only led to the mobilization of people for the political and religious purposes, but also to “Europe’s first non dynastic, non-city states of Dutch

Republic and the Commonwealth of the Puritans”, which were the first visible and obvious steps towards national consciousness.

Thirdly, the same universality, which applied for Latin in the medieval Europe, did not apply for a universal political system. In other terms, after the collapse of the Western Empire no sovereign or monarch could mobilize Latin as the language of the state. Due to this political fragmentation Latin lost its binding element and Latin’s religious authority was deprived of a “true political analogue”. In Anderson’s terms, a shift takes place; there is a transition from the sacred *imagined communities*<sup>1</sup> to administrative vernaculars.

Within these administrative vernaculars print-language becomes the most essential, which, again paved the way for national consciousness in three distinctive ways. “First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication” (Anderson, 2006: 44). This made communication possible between different European people who before found communication difficult or in some cases impossible. Secondly, “print-capitalism gave a new fixity to the language”, through which the image of antiquity became a central objective to the idea of nation (Anderson, 2006: 44). Third and most importantly, “print-capitalism created the languages-of-power” through which some languages came to dominate certain dialects, which were close to them.

In sum, the convergence of capitalism along with the development of print technology in coalition with Protestantism and the decline of religious and political authority of Latin, made a new form of imagined communities possible, which set the stage for modern nation. Now with a basic knowledge of its historical rise and development, the step towards its definition can be taken.

### **Defining the Nation**

Though the logical order would be defining state, nation and nationalism, I have chosen for a different order and followed the course of history. For I believe that the idea of nation and nationalism are prior to the notion of state. Therefore, I firstly define the notions nation and nationalism and consequently the notion of state.

The notions nation and nationalism are mutually interdependent. That is to say, one cannot define them independently for the simple reason of disability to point, which is the cause of the other. Scholars have come to agree that; the nation should be defined in term of principles, which have defined nationalism itself. According to Gellner, “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent”(Gellner 2006: 1). Within this principle nationalism is best defined in terms of sentiment or a movement he argues, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> According to Anderson a nation is community, which is socially constructed. In other words it is a community imagined by a certain group of people who perceive themselves as part of that group.

the first holds “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment”, the second holds a movement, actuated by a sentiment of this kind (Gellner 2006: 1).

There are of course many ways in which this principle can be violated but, briefly, when the political borders fail to include all its members, or fail to exclude foreigners or in both ways, this can be felt as a violation of the nationalist principle. There is however a more fundamental and profound form of the violation, to which the nationalist sentiment is outstandingly sensitive: “if the ruler of the political unit belongs to a nation other than that of the majority of the ruled”(Gellner 2006: 1).

In the above formulation, it has become apparent that, the discussion of nationalism involves political and ethnical boundaries. In other words when one speaks of nationalism, he is bound to speak in terms of states and nations. In doing so, nationalism is defined as “a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation should not separate the power holders from the rest” (Gellner 2006: 1). Two questions rise from the above definition. One, what is a state? And two as already mentioned what is a nation?

### **What is a state?**

A state in its most basic definition involves a territory with defined borders, which is populated by a certain homogeneous or heterogeneous population, who do or do not share the same cultural elements and backgrounds. Besides this, a state is defined in terms of political sovereignty, which refers to its independency of any external force in the formation of its domestic and foreign policies. A sovereign state is also in possession of “the monopoly of legitimate violence” through which it defends itself against the internal and the external animosity and rivalries. In sum; the concept of sovereignty refers to the three-fold capacity of a state, which is the “absolute supremacy over internal affairs within its territory, absolute right to govern its people, and freedom from any external interference in the above matters” (Wang 2004: 473).

With this limited, but sufficient for the purpose of this paper, knowledge of nationalism and state, the step towards a definition of the nation itself can be taken.

### **What is a Nation?**

Having defined nationalism and state, we have arrived at a point to make an effort to give a plausible answer to the above question. The theory of nationality has initially two promising candidates for its construction. Will on the one hand and culture on the other, argues Gellner. Will, he argues consequently refers to a “voluntary adherence and identification, loyalty, solidarity, on the one hand and fear, coercion, compulsion on the other”(Gellner 2006: 52).

In a cultural sense, “two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating”.

In sum, a nation refers to a set or group of people with the same or different cultural backgrounds who have come to accept and recognize each other as full members of their society, have managed to agree on a common system of signs, ideas, ways of behaving and communicating and who are inhabitants of a given territory with defined borders and boundaries.

### **The transition to an age of nationalism**

In the previous sections of this paper we have seen that the idea of nationalism is not something of today. The idea and desire to be distinguished and be different has always been there. But in the history of nationality and nationalism as any other movement, there must have been a tipping point to nationalism in the modern sense. In this part I will be trying to retrieve that turning point.

Once set out how this transition took place, in the last part of this section I will pay some attention to the conditions under which nationalism flourished. In other words, what made certain nation states more prosperous than the others?

### **The tipping point**

“(..), the age of transition to industrialism was bound, according to our model, also to be an age of nationalism”(Gellner 2006: 39). Unfortunately historical developments and processes are not visual. In other words one cannot point to a specific period in human history as the cause of a certain development, but fortunately one can study and evaluate a historical process to pass a plausible judgement. As it will be demonstrated below, scholars believe that the transition from the agrarian to the industrial society has been the driving force behind nationalism in the modern sense.

In contrast to the industrial societies the agrarian societies were divided into small or sub-communities and in most cases semi-independent of each other. Every community had its own structure and division of labour, but most importantly they were able to reproduce themselves and their culture. Put most simply, they were not dependent on their relation and communication with other sub-communities and they had the ability to maintain their “identity”.

The age of industrialism on the other hand, is characterized by its perpetual growth, rapid change and elaborate division of labour, its quest for the formation of homogeneous cultures and its desire for the universalization of norms and values. Industrialization means nothing but, “population explosion, rapid urbanization, labour migration and also the economic and political penetration of previously more or less inward-turned communities, by a global economy and a centralizing polity” (Gellner 2006: 41).

This is a dichotomous or two directional development which asks for two things: one, it demands the small communities to dissolve into a bigger, broader, advanced and centralized community and two, it demands a well ordered and strong organization capable of directing the ever growing flows of labour migration and the creation of a homogenous culture and a common language and means of communication. But how was this homogenous and universal culture to be formed? Gellner, for the sake of analogy, divides the cultures into wild and gardenized ones. In this botanical analogy he argues, “cultures, like plants can be divided into savage and cultivated varieties” (Gellner 2006: 48). Whereas the first refers to a culture which produces and reproduces itself as part of the life, the second kind refers to a culture developed from the wild varieties into a more rich and

complex one, sustained by literacy, specialized personnel and institutions of learning.

“During the agrarian epoch of human history the high cultures or great traditions became prominent, important, and in one sense, but one sense only, dominant” (Gellner 2006: 49). And when the transition from the agrarian societies to the industrial societies took place, the dominant cultures fought to universalize their values. Therefore, the task of the high culture now, as Gellner argues, is much more greater and onerous and for this reason it cannot dispense a political infrastructure. For, as they say, “every girl ought to have a husband, preferably her own; and every high culture now wants a state, and preferably its own” (Gellner 2006: 49).

In sum, industrialism made the quest for the formation of homogeneous and universal culture necessary. Along with this process went the rise of colonialism, that is the desire of the European powers to conquer the entire world, and of course the human greed, paving the way for a new era in human history, that of nationalism.

Another element of industrialism, which is of significance for the aim of this paper, is the urbanisation<sup>2</sup> and its quest for the formation of a homogeneous culture and a common language and means of communication.

## **Part II: Afghanistan**

The question of state and nation building is with no doubt one of the most complex questions in the history of political science. But the case of a multicultural and diversified country like Afghanistan brings it into a yet deeper complexity. Social scientists from abroad have in most cases approached Afghanistan as a unified country with a nation called Afghans. While Afghanistan as it is known today, is mainly nothing but a product of the British, and partially Russian, foreign policy in the nineteenth century and therefore, Afghanistan with its artificial borders is as illusive as is its nation. On these bases and for the sake of a wider, clarifying and most possible objective picture of the course of nationalism in Afghanistan, a historical overview of at least the “modern” Afghanistan is necessary. By the modern Afghanistan is meant the emergence of Afghanistan and the very first efforts towards a centralized government, which went side by side with the rise and development of post-industrialism and nationalism elsewhere.

Because the terms Afghan and Afghanistan are confusing, I will firstly give a brief overview of its historical names. From the ancient times to the fifth century A.D, the present day Afghanistan was called Iriana, Ariana or Iran. From the fifth century onward to beginning of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was called Khorasan (the land of the sun). In 1801 in an Agreement between the British and the Afghan tribes, the name Khorasan was changed into Afghanistan (Ghubar 1990: 4 – 10,

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<sup>2</sup> Urbanisation or urbanization in its most basic definition refers to the movement of people from the rural to urban areas. In other words urbanisation is the movement of people from the countryside to the cities or towns, because of the global changes.

Farhang 1994: 20 – 32). But even after the agreement of 1801, when Elphinston<sup>3</sup> in the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1808, was sent to Kabul notes, “Bahawul Khan sent out a tent into the neighbourhood of ours, (...), he retired to a carpet at some distance from the tents with Mr. Strachey and me; and there spoke fully on all subjects, giving me all the advice and information in his power. He ended, by saying, that, as he was the first subject of Khorassaun with whom we had met” (Elphinston 1969: 18 – 19).

This part is mainly divided into five sections.

1. Ethnic diversity and social organizations
2. The first attempts to form an Afghan state
3. The European imperialism and its impact
4. The modernization movements
5. The rise and fall of Nationalism

### **Ethnic Diversity and social organization**

In contrast to what so far has been presented by different western historians, Afghanistan is the land of the minorities. As Gregorian correctly argues, “nowhere is the difficult legacy of Afghanistan more sharply revealed than in her ethnic mosaic and socioeconomic structure. Linguistic, racial, cultural, and religious diversities, coupled with the country’s predominantly semi-feudal, tribal, and nomadic organization, presented great obstacles to the development of a modern state” (Gregorian 1969: 25).

Afghanistan counts more than 53 different ethnical groups. Within this there are four principal ethnic groups who have shaped at least the modern history of Afghanistan. These are the Tajiks, the Afghans, the Uzbeks and the Hazara’s.

### **The Tajiks**

Even though there has not been a census in Afghanistan, according to different estimations among which the Encyclopaedia of Nations, the Tajiks form 25% of the total population, which again according to the estimation of Encyclopaedia of Nations counted 23,897,000 in 2003, and thereby the second largest ethnic group. Different historians among which, Gregorian, Rasanayagam, Ghubar and Farhang, believe that they are the most probable aboriginal inhabitants of the country (Gregorian 1969: 32, Farhang 1994: 15 - 25).

They have Persian as language and live a sedentary life. And despite their heavy losses as by

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<sup>3</sup> Mounstuart Elphinstone was a historian and Scottish statesman who served the government of British India and was sent by the British government at the time to gather information about the kingdom of Kabul. His famous book about what we know now as Afghanistan is called, *An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul*.

the foreign invaders Gregorian argues, “the Tajiks remained the most important element of the sedentary population, representing until two or three decades ago the bulk of the urban population and of the merchant and artisan class of Afghanistan”(Gregorian 1969: 33).

### **The Afghans**

The Afghans who according to Encyclopaedia of Nations form 38% of the total population are the largest ethnic group of the country. Afghans are also known as Pathans, which is the Indianized form of Pashtun, Pushtuneh and Pukhtuneh. The ethnic origin of Afghans has not really been well established, but according to different western as well as Afghan historians, there are different theories on their origins. One of these theories is, that they are of Jewish origin. “According to this tradition, the Afghans were the descendents of the Beni-Israel, who were deported by Buktanasar (Nebuchadnezzar)” (Gregorian 1969: 27, Farhang 1994: 35 – 37). There is another theory, which traces “Afghans to the Irano-Afghan branch of the Indo-European or Aryan peoples with some mixture of Turkic, Mongol, and other groups,” (Gregorian 1969: 29).

In contrast to other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, Afghans are divided into further sub-tribes. There are however two main tribes. The Abdali or Durrani’s and the Ghilzai’s. The Durrani’s are the largest and the most important tribe of the Afghans. The name Durrani is derived from Duri-i-Duran (meaning pearl of pearls, in Persian) is a title given to Ahmad Shah Abdali, who is seen by different historians as the founder of the first Pashtun dynasty in the region (1747 - 1773). The tribe Durrani is again divided into other sub-tribes like, the Popalzai, Barakzai, Alizai, Nurzai, Ishakzai, Achakzai and Alikozai (Gregorian 1969: 30).

Ghilzai’s, who form the second largest Afghan tribe, are believed not to be Afghans originally. There is a disagreement between different scholars that Ghilzai’s originally belong to the Khilich (Khilij or Khaliji) Turks, who at one time lived along the upper course of the Jaxartes River”. Also this tribe is divided into more sub-tribes or clans like: Hotaki, Suleiman Khel, Tokhi, Andar, Ali Khel, Nassar and Taraki (Gregorian 1969: 31).

### **The Hazara’s**

Hazara’s, who are believed to be the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, form 19% of the population (again according to the estimations of the Encyclopaedia of Nations). Also on the origins of Hazara’s there are different theories. Some scholars believe that, “they were the descendents of the soldiers of the Mongol-Tatar regiments (*ming*s) who came to Afghanistan as garrison troops during the Mongol campaigns of the thirteenth century”(Gregorian 1969: 33). There are however other scholars, who do not believe in the link between Hazara’s and Mongols. Amongst these scholars is Schurmann who claims: “There is no link between Mongols and Hazara’s at the present

time. However, that fact does not exclude an earlier link. The large Mongolian element in the Hazara dialect alone suggests some fundamental culture contact with Mongols in the past, or a possible partial Mongol origin for the Hazara's themselves" (quoted in Gregorian 1969: 34). They live a sedentary life and are engaged in agriculture or herding. Hazara's speak Persian and live mostly in the central Afghanistan. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century they remained autonomous but after a bitter struggle with Abdur Rahman Khan, they lost their autonomy. "Most of Hazara lands were taken over by the Afghans. (...), as a result of political upheavals or because of their own depressed position within Afghanistan, many Hazara's were forced to leave their traditional homeland in central Afghanistan. Some moved to Quetta in Baluchistan, others to Meshed or to the other foreign cities"(Gregorian 1969: 35 – 35).

### **The Uzbeks**

Amongst the Turkic minorities in Afghanistan, "the Uzbeks are the largest Turkic speaking group". They form an estimated 6% of the population. Like Afghans they are also divided into different groups. The Turkic minorities in Afghanistan contain: the Uzbeks, the Turkomans and the Qizil-Bash. They are mostly farmers, merchants or craftsmen.

There are of course other minorities who also deserve notice, but not necessarily for the aim of this paper. Therefore, with this very basic and simplified overview of the ethnical diversity, we turn to the other divisive forces, that of the organization and social structure.

### **Religious diversity**

Religious diversity is not as crucial as an ethnical or lingual cleavages, but because it was an obstacle for both Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims to merge and to form a homogenous culture or social institutions, a short notice is of no harm. Scholars believe that almost up to 99 per cent of the present day Afghan population professes Islam. There are two branches of Islam, the Sunni's who are followers of the Hanafi school of Islam and there are Shi'ahs. "There are no precise figures on the ratio of Sunni to Shi'ah Muslims. (...), but there are indications that the Sunni majority probably does not exceed 75-80 per cent of the total population" (Gregorian 1969: 38).

However the difference between these two communities, the Sunni and the Shi'ah, "were a major problem for those who wanted to build a modern Afghan state", because both communities failed to build a homogeneous culture and shared institutions or a common social force (Gregorian 1969: 39).

In other words, religion could not really serve as a shared social force or institution to unite different ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups had their own local customs. As for the Afghan tribes, for example, the Islamic law had to coexist with their local tribal code or the Pushtunwali, of

which more will be said later on.

Islam however was an important element of the late afghan nationalism and of efforts of unification. But both, the Afghan monarchy and the Afghan nationalist failed to make that happen. Besides religion another institution, which is of great importance for the rise and failure of nationalism in Afghanistan, is the Afghan tribalism.

### **The Afghan Tribalism**

Many scholars believe that, the Afghan tribalism has, from the very beginning, been a great barrier to nation building, modernization and technological progress. What is the Afghan tribalism, how did it come to shape the political structure of Afghanistan, and in what way it was and is a barrier?.

Gregorian argues; “despite the attempts of the Afghan monarch to broaden their political base and to pursue a policy of centralization, their dependence on the strength of the Afghan tribes committed them to defending the feudal tribal social structure” (Gregorian 1969: 39 – 40). Along with Pushtunwali it is exactly this “feudal tribal social structure” that forms the core of the Afghan tribalism.

Many sub-tribes surround the main core of every tribe. The sub-tribes again are divided into various family units or clans. Within a tribe the families choose a chief, the so-called *Malik*, meaning the land possessor. The *Malik* on his turn elects the *Khan*, who is the leader of the tribe. “Among the tribes whose feudal relations were highly developed, the eldest son customarily succeeded his father, (...), the flexibility of the law of succession encouraged the development of tribal dispute and intrigues, (...). The lack of a firm succession law affected the Afghan ruling dynasty itself and hindered the development of the monarchy as an institution” (Gregorian 1969: 40).

In dealing with the Afghan tribes the Afghan monarchs were facing the same difficulties and limitations of authority as the tribal chieftains. The actions of both the tribal chieftains and that of the Afghan monarchs had to conform to the Islamic law and Pushtunwali.

### **The Pushtunwali**

Pushtunwali is another institution that defied and limited centralization of the political power, legal and economical encroachment. Pushtunwali is a tribal code, “which set the limits of acceptable behaviour within the community and governed the relations between the tribes”. Pushtunwali as any other law system contains also positive elements. “Respectively, the laws of asylum and interaction, hospitality and protection for all guests, and safe conduct” are of those positive elements, which were moral restraints that checked lawlessness.

There is however another side of the Pushtunwali, “particularly the concept of *nang-i-Pukhtun* or *nang-i-Pukhtana* (Pathan honour), which embodied the principle of equity and *badal*, or

revenge at all costs, seriously impeded the development of a secular system” (Gregorian 1969: 41). “In appealing to the customary law the injured person is actuated by a desire for redress or revenge. It would afford him little satisfaction to see the man who had robbed him punished, unless he were indemnified for his loss.... there is no conception of a criminal act as an outrage against the peace of the community. There is no state whose peace could be violated, and only a rudimentary conception of a commonwealth. Hence every offense is merely a tort which entitles or requires the person injured to see redress and obtain it if he can”(quoted in Gregorian 1969: 41).

### **The Customary law**

*Rawaj* or *Rawaj-e-am*, which means customary law is another institution that resisted the process of political and socio-economic integration. The Afghan tribes did not even succeed to form a homogeneous customary law. There were a variety of *Rawaj*, which differed from tribe to tribe and from region to region. These customary laws were so deeply rooted that, “it often not only circumvented the laws of the kingdom but also modified certain tenets of Islamic law, especially in matters of marriage, inheritance, and woman’s rights”(Gregorian 1969: 41).

In sum, besides the religion as social institution there are three other institutions; The Afghan tribalism, the Pushtunwali and the *Rawaj* or customary law which defied, limited and constrained political, social and economical progress. As already shown above and as will be shown in the coming sections, these laws mostly contradicted and prevailed over Islamic law and the laws of the kingdom.

With a basic knowledge of the ethnic diversity and the social structure and institutions, in what follows, the first attempts towards the formation of an Afghan state will be discussed. Within this debate the role of the British imperialism and the impact of its foreign policy are indispensable elements which will be discussed consequently.

### **The first attempts to form an Afghan state**

For many Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747 - 1773) is the founding father of the modern Afghanistan. But this is very far from being true. Contrary to this claim, which exists even now, it was Mir Wais Hotaki of the Ghilzai tribe who in 1707 made the first attempt to establish an autonomous Afghan state in the province of Kandahar. It is crucial to mention that by the Afghan state is not meant contemporary Afghanistan in any sense. In contrast by Afghan state is meant a first effort of the Afghan tribes to build a political community of their own.

In the year 1709 Mir Wais Khan Hotaki, “rallied his tribe in a successful revolt against the Persian Empire and assumed power in the city and province of Kandahar, thus providing a base for the nucleus of an Afghan state. The political concept of Ghilzais was exceedingly parochial. However; they organized their state along regional rather than national lines and did not aspire to unify all of

the Afghan tribes” (Gregorian 1969: 45). The weakness and inability of Persia to reassert her sovereignty and on the other hand the success of Ghilzai revolt encouraged other Afghan tribes as well to revolt. And so in 1716 the Abdali tribe revolted against the Persian forces and conquered the city of Herat.

In the year 1722 the Ghilzai power reached its highest stage, when the Ghilzai forces defeated the Persian armies and conquered Isfahan, the Safawid<sup>4</sup> capital. The Ghilzai rule is described as “precarious, short and bloody”. The Ghilzai’s were an outnumbered minority coming from tribal and nomadic society. This on one hand and the disagreements of Ghilzai’s in Persia and back home in Kandahar along with the “strenuous Ghilzai rivalry with the Abdali tribe” on the other, made it impossible for them to a: secure their rule over a sedentary urban population with a high culture and B: to establish an Afghan state under Ghilzais. This however, led to the end of Ghilzai and gave birth to the rise of Abdali rule, which did succeed in establishing an Afghan kingdom. But since the aim of this paper is to study the modern (present-day) Afghanistan, and also because the Afghan kingdom predates the modern Afghanistan, no further attempts will be made to discuss the rule under this kingdom.

What is interesting and relevant for the purpose of the paper, is the European imperialism on the one hand and the rise of Abdur Rahman or the Iron Amir on the other, or in other words the first attempts towards a centralized Afghanistan in the modern sense. For, it is the Ages of Imperialism and Industrialism in which borders were drawn and the idea of nationalism flourished. As mentioned in the Introduction, the present day Afghanistan, as will be explained, is simply a product of the British, and partially Russian, foreign policy or the European Imperialism. Therefore, before coming to the rise of Abdur Rahman and his role in the formation of the modern Afghanistan, firstly the role and impact of European imperialism will be discussed.

### **European Imperialism and its impact**

The Age of European Imperialism is by many scholars described as the new era of conflicts in the Middle East, to which Afghanistan was no exception. As Gregorian puts it, “with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, a new chapter in Afghan history opened. For more than a century thereafter, Afghanistan was caught up in a web of economic and political rivalries between the great European powers” (Gregorian 1969: 91).

The Napoleonic expedition to Egypt had three major objectives, one of which was the opening of the Red Sea, on the one hand to open the trade route to India and on the other to combat

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<sup>4</sup> Safawids or Safavids were one of the most significant ruling dynasties of the present day Iran. They ruled from 1502 to 1722.

the English satellites and to drive the English from their oriental possessions. This however, was not a new desire. For, “there had even been suggestions of a joint Franco-Russian expedition to India. Peter the Great had reportedly proposed in 1717 that the two powers cooperate in establishing a continental route to India through Central Asia and Afghanistan” (Gregorian 1969: 91). The French and the Russians were not the only two powers who desired to conquer India through Afghanistan. British government of that time along with the East India Company too play a very important role within this debate.

As a reaction to the Franco-Russian designs to conquer India, the British came with a different policy towards Afghanistan and India which expressed itself in two ways: “they began making detailed studies of the regions neighbouring India, including Persia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, which had been ignored until then, and they formulated a long-range policy designed to contain any threat to their interests in the area” (Gregorian 1969: 92). It was this policy, which sowed the first seeds of an ever-growing diversity, animosity and inequality between different ethnic groups in the modern Afghanistan.

Lord Mornington, at that time the governor-general in India, and later Marquis Wellesley along with the East India Company, undertook to neutralize the French from India. But French were not their only fear and concern. “Wellesley also sought to forestall an invasion of India by Zaman Shah<sup>5</sup>, the Afghan Ruler” (Gregorian 1969: 92). The British believed that an Afghan incursion into India would stir up the Muslim population and would lead to a revival of the Moghul power. In order to weaken the French political ties and presence in the region on the one hand, and on the other to prevent an Afghan incursion into India, Wellesley persuaded a dual policy: “he fostered discord within Afghanistan and, at the same time, encouraged the Persians to attempt to re-establish their sovereignty over the province of Khorasan. Both moves were successful. Renewed civil strife in Afghanistan and the threat of a full-scale war with Persia placed the Afghan ruler in a critical position and undermined his Indian plans”(Gregorian 1969: 93).

By doing so the British secured an anti-Afghan, anti-French treaty with Persia, which contained that any attempt of the French national army to settle in Persia would be fought with a conjoint force of the British and Persia. This however, led to a further agreement between Sir

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<sup>5</sup> Zaman Shah Durrani (1770 - 1844) was ruler of the Durrani Empire from 1793 until 1800. He was the grandson of Ahmad Shah Durrani and the fifth son of Timur Shah Durrani. Zaman Shah became the third King of present day Afghanistan and at that time, like his father, known as the king of Khorasan.

Harford Jones<sup>6</sup> and the Persian monarch in 1809, in which the Persian monarch agreed, “not to permit any European force whatever to pass through Persia either towards India, or towards the ports of that country”. Within this treaty in exchange for warlike armaments and subsidies Persia also agreed, “in the event that British dominions were attacked or invaded by Afghanistan or any other country to afford a force for the protection of the said dominions”. To make sure that, neither Afghanistan nor Persia could become a threat to the British domination in the region, “the Treaty of Tehran, was concluded in 1814; it specifically provided for a Persian attack against Afghanistan in the event the Afghans invaded India” (Gregorian 1969: 94).

Meanwhile the British went on making diplomatic overtures to the Afghans, Amirs of Sind and the Sikhs. Their intention was to use Afghanistan as a buffer state against the Persian encroachment and the Sikhs against the Afghans. In so doing, in the year 1809, “Elphinstone secured an agreement from Shah Shuja (the first Afghan pact with a European power) that stipulated joint action in case of Franco-Persian aggression against Afghan or British dominions” (Gregorian 1969: 94).

But since the European powers were not the only concern of the British, Palmerston, the British foreign secretary at the time, adopted another policy in order to neutralise Persia against the Russian influences. This policy, the so-called ‘forward line’, was to secure the British hegemony in Persia and Afghanistan. It furthermore contained that no European Nation would be permitted to carry out political or commercial activities, directly or indirectly in the Afghan affairs. “To this end, Palmerston was ready to grant a British subsidy for the modernization of the Persian army, provided an agreement could be reached with Persia that would secure British economic interest, contain Russia, and safeguard Afghan independence” (Gregorian 1969: 94 – 96). This led to a disagreement between the political and military experts. For, some found it inadvisable to meet a Russian military threat against India. The British however, had to find a way to reconcile these two opposing views in order to formulate a desirable Afghan policy, since the fate of both Persia and Afghanistan was essential to British interest.

Whether or not to tolerate a Strong Afghanistan, was the dilemma that British were facing. The re-emergence of a politically and militarily viable Afghan state would have meant the capacity to check Russo-Persian aggression. But if so, how would the British be able to stop an Afghan threat against India? “To resolve this dilemma, the British authorities in India decided to continue to seek a balance of power in the area. They would tolerate an Afghanistan strong enough to resist Persian attempts to seize Herat but not strong enough to reduce Sikh power. It was in pursuit of this policy,

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<sup>6</sup> Sir Harford Jones ((1764 – 1847) was a British diplomat at that time and also a working assistant of East India Company.

(..), that the British government in India adopted measures, destined to keep the Afghans weak and divided” (Gregorian 1969: 96 - 97).

The overall impact of the European Imperialism was the destruction of political and economical structure and social order of Afghanistan. Present-day Afghan historians and statesmen attribute Afghanistan’s backwardness to Imperialism and Capitalism. “After a long struggle against capitalism, a struggle to attain and preserve national independence, the Afghan people have only in the past few years acquired an opportunity for making efforts to liquidate our backwardness and to concentrate attention on moral and material progress as well as on the development of our country” (Gregorian 1969: 124). But the European imperialism was not the only source of Afghanistan’s backwardness. The cultural backwardness of the Afghan tribes, the feudal character and structure of the state and army, the incapacity and disability of the Afghan rulers to translate the political opportunities to the country’s interest and the tribal, ethnical and cultural diversity were as essential as the European imperialism. Therefore, we must now turn to an internal image of Afghanistan’s political and social structure during the European Imperialism.

#### **Afghanistan: From anarchy to absolute monarchy**

Many historians believe that the first major and concentrated attempt to reform Afghanistan began in 1880 when Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, ascended the Afghan Throne. The new Amir however was left with a country weakened by wars and foreign interventions and occupations and internal strife. There was a total anarchy. The Amir himself described the situation as: “Every priest, mullah and chief of every tribe and village considered himself an independent King, and for about 200 years past, the freedom and independence of many of these priests were never broken by their sovereigns. The Mirs of Turkestan, the Mirs of Hazara, the chiefs of Ghilzai were all stronger than their Amirs” ( Gregorian 1969: 129).

Due to above described structures the power of the Afghan central government was very limited. In order to construct a strong central government, the first challenge the new Amir was facing was, to break the feudal and tribal structures, but how and where to start? The new Amir was aware of the importance of religion. Therefore, he ascribed a divine sanction and purpose to his rule. “As god wished to relieve Afghanistan from foreign aggression and internal disturbances, he honoured this, his humble servant, by placing him in this responsible position, and he caused him to become absorbed in thoughts of the welfare of the nation and inspired him to be devoted to the progress of this people... for the welfare and true faith of the Holy Prophet Mohamed” (Gregorian 1969:129 – 139). What Amir did was in effect two things, firstly he provided a religious justification for the monarchy and secondly he invoked the concept of the divine rule of the King. But he had still a long path to walk.

### **Breaking the tribal resistance**

As Amir himself mentioned, the Mirs and tribal chieftains had been stronger than their sovereigns in the 200 years passed. In other words the first steps towards a centralized and authoritative regime was to break the tribal resistance to legitimate his rule. What he did, was beyond sheer sentimental appeals. In order to overcome the tribal resistance, “force, bloody reprisals, matrimonial alliances, bribes, and intrigues were all used in his battle” (Gregorian 1969: 132). Besides the political and the coercive means, he also “used his own marriages and those of his sons to tighten his ties with tribal chieftains, religious leaders, and important members of non-Afghan ethnic groups” (Gregorian 1969: 132).

Within this fight, religion was an important and effective weapon. Religious injunctions were used against any revolting tribe, leader or feudal lord. They were branded as traitors and outlaws. In the “struggle with the powerful Shi’ah Hazaras in 1888”, he used for example, “the orthodoxy and fanaticism of the Sunni Muslims, a move that secured him thousands of volunteers” (Gregorian 1969: 132 – 133). In the end according to some scholars and foreign historians who somehow have completely misinterpreted the situation, “these policies were largely successful”, for he succeeded to unify Afghanistan “politically”. The reason for my disagreement with this statement is that one cannot measure these successes anywhere in the history or in the modern day Afghanistan. And this failure is nowhere more apparent as it is in the administrative, social and political reforms of Amir.

### **The administrative reforms**

Two things drove Abdur Rahman. Firstly unifying Afghanistan at any cost and at the same time constituting administrative changes and social, political and economic reforms. In order to do so he was to form a constitutional government. “He established a general consultative assembly made up of three consultative categories of representatives: *Sardars* (aristocrats), (...), *Khawanin mulki* (commoners), (...), and *Mullahs* (religious representatives” (Gregorian 1969: 134).

Amir however, had no intentions of truly sharing his power and the selection of members of this assembly who had no executive or legislative power, were subject to Amirs approval. The only function of this assembly, “aside from symbolizing and promoting the concept of unity under the monarchy was to serve in a consultative capacity to help the Amir gather war supplies and advise him in various state activities”. Amir, however, also established another executive body as supreme council, “but it was equally powerless. Not only was there no office equivalent to that of prime minister; the council could not give advice to the monarch unless he requested it to do so.” Its only function was to execute the will of the Amir (Gregorian 1969: 134).

The quest for the political absolutism, unification of the country and the administrative

reorganization of the country, led the Amir into a fierce struggle with the *religious establishment*<sup>7</sup>. By whatever means, either through peaceful or coercive it was essential for the Amir to gain their support. Therefore, he again used religion as a means to win the hearts of the people. As he did with the Hazara revolt of 1888, in 1896 he conquered Kafaristan (what is now called Nooristan) and converted its inhabitants to Islam. This way he strengthened his position with respect to religious establishment (Gregorian 1969: 135 – 136). One should not judge a king of the nineteenth century with the criteria of the twenty-first century, but the question that arises is, what was the need of these administrative reforms, if the constituted bodies were only subject to the will of the monarch and had no share in the power, and could not enjoy any degree authority?

### **Legal and social reforms**

In order to get a better and further grip and control over the kingdom, Abdur Rahman divided the existing laws of his kingdom into three categories: Shari'a or the proper Islamic law, *Qanun* or the administrative or civil law, and the tribal laws. He established also three types of courts: "Religious courts, which dealt with religious and civil affairs, criminal courts, which were administered by the chief of police (*kotwals*) and judges, and a board of commerce, which was made up of merchants Afghan and non-Afghan, Hindu as well as Muslim, which settled business disputes" (Gregorian 1969: 136).

But again, like the administrative reform and early-constituted assemblies, "although the decisions of the courts were based on Islamic law, they were subject to the Amir's approval. He retained the powers of a supreme court in his hands" (Gregorian 1969: 137). Despite all these reforms, Afghanistan was not in possession of a universal code of law. Though the Amir did establish an administrative unity, but the legal system remained ill and weak of character and very complicated, because every law had to conform the *adat*, or the customary law or at least to the Afghan tribal code, that is the *Pushtunwali*.

Another effort of Amir Abdur Rahman was the attempt to abolish the long standing customary law, which "in violation of Islamic law bound a wife not only to her husband but to his entire family as well; widows who wanted to remarry had to marry their husbands' next kin, often against their will". But again as any other reform there is unfortunately no way "to check to what extent this reform was enforced" (Gregorian 1969: 138). Historians from Afghanistan however believe that the *Pushtunwali* or the Afghan tribal law always prevailed the Islamic as well as the civil

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<sup>7</sup> As is today, back then too was religion a great means to mobilize masses. The religious establishment represented the will of Allah and therefore, were very powerful.

law of the state. Another reform that the Amir brought was the abolition of slavery. But even his anti-slavery law failed to free those already enslaved from economic bondage.

### **Political reforms**

The political reform of Abdur Rahman and their consequences were essential to the process of nation building in Afghanistan, in particular his isolationist position towards the use of European technology to modernize country.

At the end of the nineteenth century there were many European plans to connect Afghanistan into the international railway system. The plan was to connect "Paris (and Calais) with Calcutta, via Orenburg, Tashkent, Balkh, and Peshawar" (Gregorian 1969: 152). The plans however were not carried out due to political tensions between Russia and Britain. But even if there had been an agreement between those two powers, Abdur Rahman wouldn't have allowed it. Because he, "firmly resisted all efforts to introduce railways into Afghanistan. In this, he acted against the advice of some of his own advisers as well as the British government in India, who argued that Afghanistan could not fully exploit its natural resources or market its products unless modern means of transportations, production and communication were available"(Gregorian 1969: 153).

But that was not enough to convince the Amir of the importance of the modern means of transportation and communication. For he believed that technological advances and especially the introduction of railways would make Afghanistan vulnerable and accessible to the foreign powers. In his own words: "I again advise my sons and successors not to listen to these people. I k now what they say is quite true, but, at the same time, they do not consider that by making the country easily accessible, foreign powers would not find so much difficulty in entering and spreading themselves over our country. The greatest safety of Afghanistan lies in its natural impregnable position" (Gregorian 1969: 153).

Abdur Rahman had his reasons to believe so. He was not all the way against the introduction of railways and modern means of transportation and communication, but Afghanistan was not ready yet, he felt. The first and foremost priority of Afghanistan he claimed was to build an army that was able to defend Afghanistan against the foreign invaders. Once that was realized, the process of modernization would follow automatically. It was this desire, to build a strong and independent Afghanistan, which did and does dominate politics in Afghanistan. The economic and political policies of Abdur Rahman were mostly determined by a constant fear of European imperialism. Therefore, he did not only oppose any attempt towards modernization, but also the training of Afghan officers by the British and sending young Afghans abroad to study. "He held that such a measure would cost the government huge sums of money, in return for which the students might acquire such vices as gambling, and drinking, lose their faith, and, above all, become partial to alien interest". The Amir

rejected any reform that was not in the interest of the monarchy. As he always claimed, “reform and modernization were only the means, independence, under an absolute monarch, the end” (Gregorian 1960: 155).

Another element, which deeply affected and still does the politics of Afghanistan, is the so-called Durand line<sup>8</sup>. In 1893, caught between two powers, the Russian pressure on the one hand and the British intransigence on the other, Abdur Rahman signed the Durand agreement with the British. “In this pact which increased his subsidy from 80, 000 to 120, 000 pounds, the Amir renounced Afghanistan’s right to intervene in tribal belt” (Gregorian 1969: 158). The Durand agreement shaped the politics of Afghanistan in many serious ways. Besides having other serious consequence, “it gave the British control of the border passes, (...), with this diplomatic and economic weapon, the authorities in India believed they could induce the Afghans to compose any difference they might have with the British government” (Gregorian 1969: 159).

The reign of Abdur Rahman, with his dead, ended in 1901. Despite certain achievements on the administrative, political and economical fields, he failed to form the Afghanistan he wanted to build. This failure had many external and internal contributing factors, but the most important of all, “was the overwhelming number of divisive forces within Afghanistan itself: the ethnic differences, the religious animosity between Shi’ah and Sunni Muslims, the tribal jealousies, the feudal obligations and prerogatives, the conflict of regional interests and the traditional values”. Another factor, which contributed to this failure, “was the lack resources, both material and human, that a successful and sudden leap into modernity required” (Gregorian 1969: 160).

The end of Amir Abdur Rahman was not particularly the end of the desire to form a unified and independent Afghanistan. His successor and son Habibullah Khan continued to walk the same path, though facing new challenges and political difficulties. The rise of Habibullah Khan gave birth to the first movements towards limited modernisation, enlightenment and nationalism both in a tribal as well as in a ‘national’ sense.

### **The rise of modernism and Afghan “Nationalism”**

Amir Abdur Rahman had banished many of his political opponents. Amongst these was Sardar Ghulam Muhammad Khan Tarzi, the Father of Mahmud Tarzi, a young, learned and ambitious young man, who was charged with conspiracy against the state. When Habibullah Khan, successor of Amir Abdur Rahman ascended the throne, he pardoned his father’s political opponents and allowed them

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<sup>8</sup> The Durand Line refers to the border between the present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was established after the 1893 Durand Line Agreement between the Government of British India and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan for fixing the limit of their respective spheres of influence. It is named after Henry Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of British India at the time.

to come back. With the death of both Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and Sardar Ghulam Muhammad Khan, the Tarzi family decided to return to Afghanistan.

“After a brief stay in Karachi, the Tarzis went to Damascus, where Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the Ottoman Emperor, allowed them to establish residence”. The twenty years of exile were of great importance for the young Tarzi. In the schools of Damascus and Constantinople he did not only come in contact with the European cultures and institutions, but he “was also exposed to the Ottoman nationalist-revivalist movement and the Pan-Islamic views of al-Afghani<sup>9</sup>” (Gregorian 1969: 163). Furthermore, serving in the secretariat of the Ottoman provincial administration he gained also administrative experience abroad. His eventual return to Afghanistan meant two things: the rise of both modernist and a nationalist movement.

Immediately after his arrival, Tarzi made a first efforts to initiate a programme of reform in Afghanistan, calling for Amir’s attention to the seriousness of problems in the educational, communication and industrial system, as well as pointing the undesirable effects of the political, cultural and intellectual isolation.

At first, the new Amir appointed Tarzi as the chief of the Bureau of Translation. Tarzi’s main task was to inform Amir about changes and events in the Islamic world and Europe. Consequently, after many untiring efforts of Tarzi and Inayatullah Khan, the eldest son of Amir Habibullah who supervised the educational administration, Tarzi succeeded to introduce the first newspaper in Afghanistan, the *Siraj al-Akhbar*, meaning the Lamp of the News.

*Siraj al-Akhbar* was published biweekly in Persian from October 1911 to January 1919 and served as a forum for small group of young Afghan intellectuals. In Tarzi’s view a newspaper was one of the most essential tools of modern civilization, and except for some savage tribes, there was no organized society without it. “To this end, he published both domestic and foreign news, either carrying translations of stories that had appeared in the English, Urdu, Turkish and Arabic press or reproducing articles from Persian newspapers and journals” (Gregorian 1969: 163 – 165).

*Siraj al Akhbar* was also a medium of propagating the Afghan nationalism. Given the fact that the majority of the country was ethnically non-Afghan, Tarzi and his associates faced a twofold challenge. On the one hand “they had to try to redefine the term Afghan on a geographic and religious basis, and so allay any fear of the non-Afghans that modernization might lead to a strengthening of the Afghan hold over the country”, and on the other, “to convince Habibullah that a socioeconomic transformation of Afghanistan would not invite foreign intervention and domination

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<sup>9</sup> Sayyid Jamal-al-din al-Afghani (1838 - 1879) was a political activist and Islamic nationalist active in Persia, Khorasan or the present-day Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century. He was one of the founders of Islamic modernism, and an advocate of pan-Islamic unity.

or jeopardize the monarchy and its ruling dynasty” (Gregorian 1969: 164). Worth mentioning with this process is the clashing idea’s of young intellectual Afghans and that of the religious establishment, and their efforts to persuade the religious leaders of the compatibility of Islam with modernity.

Tarzi and his associates rejected the view of those who argued that the backwardness of the Islamic societies had its roots in the religion itself. Instead they believed, a planned modernization would not contradict Islamic values and therefore, we should not only look into “these limited European culture exports, which were designed exclusively for European colonies”. According to Tarzi, the main cause of Afghanistan’s backwardness was on the one hand the disunity and on the other the isolationist position of country, which had led to a cultural and intellectual isolationism.

The disunity he describes is a kind of Hobbesian state of nature where everyone is the judge of his own, and survival is the only concern. “The disunity was such, he declared, that it had calamitously set city against city, village against village, street against street, tribe against tribe, brother against brother” (Gregorian 1969: 166). And it was due to this disunity, he believed, that the Afghans developed a negative conception of freedom.

Along with all these, Tarzi repeatedly emphasized the importance of the contact with the outside world and other culture. From his perspective this was the first concrete and essential step towards Social reform and transformation. To this end he used *Siraj al Akhbar* to bridge the gap between Afghanistan and the rest of the world. He did this to firstly, inform young Afghan intellectual of the scientific and technological achievement of the West and secondly, to advance their understanding of the western institutions.

To fight illiteracy, to emphasize the importance of education and to motivate the youngsters towards education, Tarzi came up with *Siraj al Atfal*<sup>10</sup> or the Light of Children. In this newspaper, he published stories, moralistic and didactic tales riddles and puzzles, all designed to impress the Afghan youngsters, about the importance of education. In order to generate popular interest in science and learning, he translated many works from the English, Turkish and Arabic literature, amongst which; “Around the World in Eighty Days, Twenty Thousand leagues Under the Sea, The Mysterious Island and International law. (..), and a five volume of History of the Russo-Japanese war” (Gregorian 1969: 171).

The dilemma that Afghan modernists like Tarzi were facing was the question of, how to

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<sup>10</sup> Besides the *Siraj al Akhbar*, *Siraj Al Atfal* was a separate newspaper designed for children and youngsters to on the one had, stimulate reading and children literature, the importance of education and on the other hand, to keep them updated about the scientific and technological advances in the West and elsewhere in the world.

modernize the country and to preserve its independence and monarchy. While they failed to find an immediate solution to that dilemma, “they thought they saw a long-range solution: in nationalism they foresaw a force mighty enough to protect Afghan sovereignty and permit Afghanistan to modernize itself unhindered” (Gregorian 1969: 173 – 174).

### **Nationalism in Afghanistan**

Tragically it would be exactly the rise of nationalism that would lead to the fall of it. Unfortunately, even Mahmud Tarzi, at that time maybe the most educated and experienced man within the Kingdom, failed to put his personal and tribal interest aside and promote and foster the true interest of the country and the nation that was yet to be built. Later on in this section and particularly in the answering part of this paper, I will try to analyse and explain how this tribal conduct of statesmen, the cultural backwardness of the Afghan tribes and the isolationist position of the country and the ethnical diversity led to this failure of modern nationalism.

In order to legitimate the idea of Afghan nationalism, Tarzi and his associates had to do two things; firstly, to convince people that the idea of nationalism does not contradict the Islamic theory of brotherhood, and secondly to convince them that modernization is compatible with Islam. To the first aim, he distinguished between the Islamic community and the small Islamic entities. It is true, he argued that Muslims are brothers, but every entity within that great community has the right to love and defend the place where he lives. “To support his contention that the very concept of an Afghan ethos and fatherland emanated from Islam, he quoted a saying of the Prophet Muhammad: *Hob ul watan min al iman* (patriotism derives from faith)” (Gregorian 1969: 174).

Furthermore, he argued that the Afghans have accepted Islam by grace and will of God. And given the fact that Afghanistan was a God given country, thus love of the fatherland was divinely ordained.

The next dilemma that Tarzi was facing was, how to link nationalism with modernization to overcome religious resistance. To this end he argued, “patriotism was explicitly sanctioned and exalted by Islam as a commitment to the defence of the fatherland. Since progress and modernization were indispensable in this regard, they were compatible with Islam” (Gregorian 1969: 175). Only through modernization could the Afghan kingdom defend itself and Islam against the insatiable appetite of European imperialists. For, he argued, “true patriotism thus went beyond the willingness to fight in defence of the fatherland; it necessarily entailed the desire to reform and modernize the fatherland as well” (Gregorian 1969: 175).

Tarzi and his associates formed a group of scholars to develop historical rationalism. Their task was to do comparative studies to discover the source of success and weaknesses of different civilizations, in order to secure the future of their own country. Besides this, Tarzi argued, “these

studies ought to be accompanied by a concerted effort to raise the status of Pashtu, which he and his associates regarded as the Afghan language, in contrast to Persian, the official language. Pashtu or Afghani was the manifestation of the national genius and the ancestor of all languages, a true national language. As such, it must be studied and taught to all the ethnic groups in Afghanistan” (Gregorian 1969: 175 – 176).

This would continue to be the driving force behind “Afghan nationalism”. Decades later, in 1933 when the nineteen years old Zahir Khan (1933 - 1973) ascended the Afghan throne, there was a man within his administration who drastically shaped the course of the Afghan nationalism. The man was Hashim Khan the young king's uncle, who was the prime minister and had “the complete control of the country’s domestic and foreign policies” (Gregorian 1969: 342). Among many other things that Hashim Khan did in order to promote the national consciousness, he changed the educational system. For, he believed along with King Zahir, only the establishment of a good school system would provide the Afghan Kingdom with a solid base for modernization. But modernization was not the only aim of education. “Education was also perceived as an instrumentality to achieve national unity, promote national consciousness, and institutionalize Pashto as the national language” (Gregorian 1969: 351). According to Hashim Khan in one year Pashto was to become “the language of our officials, doing away with Persian”.

The policy of making Pashto co-equal to Persian had become the subject of debate. “The case for the use of the Persian language in Afghanistan was best defended by the Calcutta paper *Habl-ul-Matin*, which warned the Afghan government against the disastrous effects of imposing an artificial national language, which may be harmful to the national unity of the people of Afghanistan. Pashtu was spoken by a minority of the inhabitants of Afghanistan, wrote the paper, whereas Persian was the language of the majority. Instead of forcing everyone in Afghanistan to learn Pashto, *Habl-ul-Matin* suggested, the government might encourage the Afghan tribesmen to learn Persian and thus partake in and benefit from the treasures of the Iranian culture” (Gregorian 1969: 351 – 352). Instituting Pashtu as the official language, argued *Habl-ul-Matin*, would furthermore deprive Afghan tribes from their literary and scientific language.

The Afghan government was not persuaded and followed its own path. This policy led to a lot of difficulties and inefficiencies within the country. Teachers were forced to learn Pashtu; “government officials were obliged to take night courses in the new national language”. According to Louis Dupree, an American anthropologist resident in Kabul at that time: “Some non-Pashto speaking high ranking officials found it necessary to have clerks translate their Farsi communication into Pashto for transmission to another office. The recipient, often a non-Pashto speaker as well, handed the report to an assistant for translation back into Farsi. The scheme collapsed in a welter of translation and retranslation” (Hyman 2002: 301).

The proposal to teach Pashto throughout Afghanistan, revealed many other problems to the Afghan government, argues Gregorian: The shortage of teachers, the absence of modern teaching techniques and the predominance of the Persian language in most of important urban centres of the country.

But according to many other scholars and western historians amongst which Anthony Hyman, the theme of nationalism in Afghanistan begs for many questions. For, they believe that, “with the national or patriotic idea so weak and underdeveloped, it arguably makes more sense to analyze rival ideas of the nation held by country’s different ethnic groups than some hypothetical all-emerging Afghan nationalism” (Hyman 2002: 299). Because different ethnic groups in Afghanistan could not identify themselves with the term Afghan. Better yet, in the very beginning the term Afghan did not embrace all the Afghan tribes either. “The term Afghan gradually became synonymous with Pashto speakers in general, while non-Pashtun inhabitants of Afghanistan, then as now, commonly used their respective identifying labels of race and language, i.e., *Uzbek, Tajik, Farsiwan* or of region, i.e., *Herati, Panjsheri, Kohistani* and *Badakhshani* (Hyman 2002: 302).

Another essential ingredient to the idea of nationalism was the high cultures and history. But, neither ancient nor medieval history became well integrated into Afghan nationalism. Different scholars have different interpretations, but most of them agree that, in order to raise Pashtu as an official language, the Afghan Nationalist movement had to cover history. Because other whys the historical consciousness of the non-Afghan inhabitants of Afghanistan would have troubled the process of Pashonization of the country. “The image of the colossal Buddhist statues<sup>11</sup> at Bamiyan did appear on national postage stamps, but it was never adopted methodically as the symbol for the nation’s past glories like, for example pyramids in Egypt or the Arch of Ctesiphon or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon in Ba’thist Iraq” (Hyman 2002: 307).

Besides these cultural biases and tribal preferences, the successive regimes in Kabul “never adopted a coherent national ideology. Official nationalism espoused the cause of freeing the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan (Northwest Frontier province and Baluchistan), with the goal of forming a Pashtun (or Pathan) state to be called Pukhtunistan (also Pashtunistan) and eventually uniting them with Afghanistan” (Hyman 2002: 307). This policy was adopted for two reasons, Hyman argues. One to ending Afghanistan landlocked status by giving it access to the Arabian sea and second, to increase the weight of the Pashtun element in an enlarged Afghanistan, inevitably at the expense of the

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<sup>11</sup> From the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD during the Kushan Empire, Khorasan or the present-day Afghanistan was one of biggest centres of Buddhism. Buddhism was also the religion of the kingdom.

country's non Pashtun groups (Hyman 2002: 307 – 308). Prince Daoud's<sup>12</sup> Pukhtunistan policy is an apparent example, which was based upon a long-standing irredentist grievance. Kabul's pro Pukhtunistan initiatives took the form of annual days, officially organized demonstrations, symbolic postage stamps, and many tracts and other publications intended to further the cause, argues Hyman. The results of this policy however, were wholly negative. By 1963 it had caused "a damaging series of confrontations with Pakistan, a key neighbour which led to periodic closure of the Torukham border and transit trade, inflicting serious economic damage on Afghanistan" (Hyman 2002: 308). With this limited but hopefully for the purpose of this paper sufficient historical knowledge, the step towards the third and the last part of this paper can be taken.

### **Part III: The answering**

Before attempting to an answer the question raised in the introduction of this paper, *Why did the process of nation building fail in Afghanistan?* Some remarks about the process of national consciousness and the rise of the nationalist and modernist movements in Afghanistan will be made.

#### **Analysis**

As mentioned in the introduction and seen throughout different sections of this paper, the historical development and the rise of nationalism and national consciousness go hand in hand with the rise of historical awareness. Therefore, one can argue that it was the *historical consciousness*<sup>13</sup>, along with the human greed and the rise of industrial age that gave birth to the idea of nationalism. But the case of Afghanistan was and is a difficult one. For, we have seen that the country has always been, geographically, important for different empires and Superpowers, even today.

In the outlined historical development of nationalism is seen that, there are some underlying stages that every society must go through, in order to reach the state of national consciousness. Seen the historical past and the disastrous results of nationalism in the twentieth century, the question whether nationalism is or is not 'ethically' a desirable political form, is an important one, but one that I leave unanswered. Because regardless the answer, one cannot ignore the fact that it is a political reality, which has shaped not only our personal preferences and imprisoned us within our 'national' borders, but also has deeply affected our political thinking and awareness.

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<sup>12</sup> Mohammed Daoud Khan (1909 –1978) was an Afghan prince and politician who overthrew the monarchy of his cousin King Zahir Shah and became the first President of Afghanistan from 1973 to his assassination in 1978.

<sup>13</sup> By historical consciousness I mean the rise of the gradually growing nationalistic sentiments and awareness.

Therefore, in the case of Afghanistan, it would not be unjust, instead of asking, why the process of nation building failed in Afghanistan, to ask why and how would and ought Afghanistan become a nation? Because all the stages that other successful nation states have gone through, would have been and is still lacking.

In a diversified country like Afghanistan with many different ethnic groups, there were no other binding elements upon which nationalism and national consciousness could have built its pillars, except for the Persian language and some shared historical past. However, it was not only the lack of binding elements, but most importantly and essential to the idea of nationalism, the lack of a responsible leadership.

As stated in the second part of this paper and particularly in the section on the rise of nationalist and modernist movement in Afghanistan, is shown that even the most educated man within the Afghan kingdom, has failed to put the country's interest before his tribal preferences. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that, the process of nation building in Afghanistan never truly took off. Instead it was more the process of imposing an artificial identity of the ruling Afghan tribes on an absolute majority of the non-Afghan population.

Another process that made national consciousness in Europe and elsewhere possible was the industrial age and the untiring desire for modernization and separation of state and religion. On the contrary in Afghanistan as shown in the previous section, religion was used in the first place to legitimize monarchy and in the second as the force behind the nationalist movement. "Islam, Afghan history, and Pashto together formed the mortar that would permit the country's ethnic mosaic to be moulded into a single nation" (Gregorian 1969: 176).

As for industrialization and urbanization, which were also two important factors of nationalism, the Afghan government under the leadership of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880 – 1901), who's only desire and political will was to build a united and independent Afghanistan (in his strange and despotic way), failed to translate the political opportunities into the interest of the country. Out of a constant fear for the European imperialism, the Amir did not allow any effort and attempt for the technological modernization. This did not only led to a technological poverty of the country, but also to a cultural and intellectual backwardness, because of the isolationist position the government took.

Another problem was added to the process of nation building, when the Afghan ruling tribe decided to build a nation all over Afghan. As Tarzi himself formulated, they were to build an Afghan nation with an Afghan language (Pashto). It is true that Afghanistan was and is an ethnically diversified country with many different local and regional customs. But there was and still is a basic

universal culture accepted by the majority of the population, along with a shared language (Persian<sup>14</sup>), which is one of the most important elements of culture. A responsible government would have built on these shared elements instead of imposing, as the paper of Calcutta argued, an artificial language and identity and forcing the majority of the country to learn a new language and accept a new identity. The question that rises is, how can the destruction of an identity lead to the formation of a united nation, when the idea of nationalism is entirely based on an ongoing desire for identity?

A last but not least factor, which disturbed the process of nation building in Afghanistan, was the Afghan (Pashtun) tribal code - the Pushtunwali. As repeatedly mentioned, modernization has been the fuel of nationalism. Because of the fact that Pushtunwali or the Afghan tribal code prevailed the Islamic and the civil law, every effort of political and social reforms was in vain. It was due to this tribal-feudal structure and the disability of the Afghan rulers to break it, that every effort towards modernization and thereby to the formation of a true and united nation was shipwrecked.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to answer the question: *Why did the process of nation building fail in Afghanistan?* But, because the terms Afghan, Afghanistan and nationalism in Afghanistan, each, raise many questions, there are so many possible answers that one could give.

The difficulty of this case lies not only on the complicated history of the country, but also in the fact that, there are so many sides to this question. What I am trying to say is, that it would be impossible for a political science student to answer this question in a political sense only. Therefore, a politico-historical analysis was needed. And since I am in no sense a historian it was for me too difficult to find my way through the different ups and downs of at least the contemporary history of Afghanistan. For, there are so many factors that could have played a role. However, based on the literature I have studied, I came to draw the following conclusion. Viewed from a political science perspective, there are some crucial and overwhelmingly important elements that led to the failure of the process of nation building in Afghanistan.

The first, of such an element is the impact of European nationalism and Nazism, which inspired the statesmen or the ruling tribe in Afghanistan, to translate the nationalistic ideas into tribalism and instead of fostering and embracing a wider understating of nationalism and building on the existing elements, to impose their own identity and language on the majority of the populations.

The second reason for the failure of nationalism in Afghanistan is its politico-historical past, and isolationist policies of the government, especially under the reign of Abdur Rahaman Khan and

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<sup>14</sup> Persian was always a taboo because with Persian as the dominant language it was impossible for the Afghan nationalists to form the new Afghan national identity with Pashtu being the national language, as has been discussed in the previous sections of the paper.

the myth of an independent Afghanistan. It is correct that Afghanistan was not colonized directly, but the impacts of the British foreign and imperialist policies were so enormous that every Afghan policy, which deviated from the English interest, would have led to drastic turnovers in Afghan politics. The Durand agreement between Amir Abdur Rahman and the British which increased the subsidies of Amir from 80, 000 to 120, 000 pounds is one example of Afghanistan's indirectly being colonized by the British at that time.

The third reason for the failure of nationalism in Afghanistan from my perspective is the Pushtunwali or the Afghan (Pashtun) tribal code. Pushtunwali was of course not the only local custom, but it was, and still is, the only custom, which undermined every effort to reform the political, social and economical structure of the country. The persistently efforts of Amir Abdur Rahman to break the tribal customs, followed the by the persistent efforts of his successor Amir Habibullah Khan to reform the feudal structure of the tribes, have all been in vain. The reason for this failure, as already discussed in the previous sections of the paper, is the strong character of Afghan tribal code. For it transcended not only the civil laws but also that of the Sharia (the Islamic law). Another factor that contributed to the strong character of the Afghan tribal code was the cultural lag of the Afghan tribes. Since in most cases they were not used to a sedentary life, they, in contrast to other ethnic groups, showed less affection towards change, education and modernisation. Therefore, Pushtunwali had been and still is a great obstacle on Afghanistan's way to modernize and an undermining force for nationalism.

The forth reason for the failure of nationalism in Afghanistan is its geopolitical position. From the ancient times until today, present-day Afghanistan has been a pass way to different civilizations and superpowers. Therefore, it has always been in the interest of the Western powers to keep Afghanistan divided. The rise of the brutal regime of Taliban, which led to the total cultural distraction, was an invention of the United State of America itself. Even today the presence of the Western forces and the puppet regime, which lacks every form of sovereignty, is another example of western intervention in Afghanistan's internal and external politics and policies.

The ethnical diversity, the lingual issues and the claims and desires of the Afghan tribes for cultural and political supremacy still prevent Afghanistan from becoming a nation. If one analyses Afghanistan and its politics and judges them from today's perspective, the country is struggling with the dilemmas of Recognition and Redistribution. The case of Afghanistan is not only the clashing political ideologies, but foremost the clashing identities who seek for acceptance and their share in the political power and the process decision-making and governance.

But even today, the sanctions and punishments of the government against those who seek to fight socio-political injustice and inequality, those who claim their right to be recognized as the full members of the society, those who prefer to speak Persian instead of Pashto, those who prefer a

different political system, the debate for a federal Afghanistan for example, are labelled as traitors and the enemies of national unity, which never existed, and a prosperous Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the myth of a united Afghan Nation under the same old political preferences and condition of the last century continues to exist.

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