

Counterinsurgency and Ethnic/Sectarian Rivalry in Comparative Perspective: Soviet Afghanistan and Contemporary Iraq

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ABSTRACT:

To address the question of whether the current state building and counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq are capable of bringing stability in the persisting environment of inter-ethnic/sectarian conflict in these countries, this paper looks at the insurgency against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan and the pro-Moscow regime in Kabul during the 1980s. It concludes that the preconditions for the development of the same chaotic and fragmented political landscape experienced by Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops are in place in Iraq. As a result of common ground conditions of ethnic/sectarian diversity and protracted irregular warfare, the approaches to the challenges of nation building and counterinsurgency efforts in Soviet Afghanistan and contemporary Iraq parallel each other. Modernization, associated with whole-scale imposition of alien political models, led initially to the ideologisation of the social conflict in the two countries. However, the disruption of traditional power balances eventually led to the emergence of ethnic/sectarian identities as more decisive for regime legitimacy. The Soviet and US efforts to stabilize the regimes by helping them build large national forces and poring billions in foreign aid is a strategy that ignores this reality.

Introduction

For most of this decade, US, NATO and other allied troops (part of MNF-I and ISAF), have been entangled in counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases, the Islamic concept of jihad seems to be the motivating factor and the main ideology behind the insurgency. However, both of these countries are diverse societies with multiple ethnic and sectarian cleavages, and parallel with the insurgency, brutal sectarian war engulfed most of Iraq in 2005-2006, while in Afghanistan the predominantly Pushtun character of the insurgency suggests ethnic grievances behind the ideological veil as well. Even though the security situation in Iraq has improved since 2007, analysts point out that the violence in Iraq is linked to “vicious struggles for power,” which still remain unresolved, making the calm simply a “temporary lull.”¹

The necessity to devise the right policy options when dealing with such complicated situations often prompts decision makers to base their solution on what they perceive as the “dominant” side of the conflict, i.e., either the ideological or the ethnic character of the insurgency. Political scientist Michael Fitzsimmons argues that western political thought tends to view insurgencies primarily as ideologically influenced, i.e., jahidism vs. liberal democracy in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Fitzsimmons, the Wilsonian concepts of self-determination and the modernization theory in the 20th century transformed the 19th century counterinsurgency approach from one based on the application of brutal power to gaining “the loyalty and the trust of the local civilian population” as the prerequisite for winning over the insurgents.² Furthermore, the key to the “winning hearts and minds” concept is considered to be the material benefits derived from the “good governance” provided by a legitimate government.³ These approaches are incorporated in the latest *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* of the US Army and Marine Corps, and the *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept* of the Marine Corps and the Special Operations Command:

“The primary objective of any counterinsurgency is to foster the development of effective governance by a legitimate government.”⁴

“IW emphasizes winning the support of the relevant populations, promoting friendly political authority, and eroding adversary control, influence, and support.”⁵

¹ Brian Katulis, “Redeploying from Iraq and Resetting U.S. Middle East Policy in 2009,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 93.

² Michael, Fitzsimmons, “Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (June 2008), 337-365.

³ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁴ *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24 /Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, (Washington DC, Dec. 2006), 21.

⁵ Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0 (Washington DC, June 2007), 19.

As a result, Fitzsimmons believes, counterinsurgency theory exhibits relative silence “regarding the role of ethnic and religious identity in determining how people relate to their governments.”⁶ But since “traditional” identities could be as strong legitimizing factor as good governance, the rationale behind the “winning hearts and minds” strategy is rightly questioned.⁷

On the other hand, the strong ethnic and sectarian aspect of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has not remained unnoticed. Steven Biddle concluded in 2006 that the war in Iraq “is not a Maoist “people’s war” of national liberation; it is a communal civil war with very different dynamics.”⁸ Being one of the strategists behind Gen. Petraeus, Biddle’s views may have contributed to the change in the US counterinsurgency approaches during the “surge” of 2007 and 2008. Among other tactics, the “surge” placed a strong emphasis on appeasing the most dissatisfied group in Iraq—the Sunni Arabs—by co-opting the Sunni tribal chiefs and giving their militias a semi-official status. The realization that ethnic divisions might be explored in a counterinsurgency seems to be taking hold as a viable addition to the “winning hearts and minds” concept. In fact, as part of its 2009 “surge” in Afghanistan, the US is attempting to replicate its Iraq tribal policy as well.⁹

Finally, a third group of scholars maintain that there could be a very little distinction between ideological and ethnic conflict. Stathis Kalyvas and Mathew Kocher, for example, point to the fact that even in “classic” ideological conflicts, such as the one in Vietnam, ethnic cleavages were important as well.¹⁰ Kalyvas and Kocher conclude that the possibility of a conflict to evolve as either an ethnic or an ideological war depends not so much on the strength of the social/ethnic cleavages but primarily on the existence or non-existence of unifying state structures.¹¹ In other words, this model brings the argument of “legitimate government and good governance” as applicable to the cases of ethnic conflicts as well.

To address the question of whether the current state building and counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq are capable of bringing stability in the persisting environment of inter-ethnic/sectarian conflict in these countries, this paper looks at the insurgency against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan and the pro-Moscow regime in Kabul during the 1980s. Despite being a focal point for the global jihadi movement, as well as for the Cold War great power competition at the time, the Afghan war also exhibits strong inter-ethnic conflict overtones behind the ideological veneer,¹² and it can thus serve as a useful point of reference for the contemporary counterinsurgency and

⁶ Fitzsimmons, “Hard Hearts and Open Minds?” 351.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁸ Stephen Biddle, “Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006).

⁹ Greg Bruno, “A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan,” Council of Foreign Relations Backgrounder (November 2008).

¹⁰ Stathis Kalyvas and Mathew Kocher, “Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam,” *Politics & Society*, Vol. 35 No. 2 (June 2007), 183-223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹² See Conrad Schetter, “Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan,” *ZEF Working Paper Series*, 3 (Bonn, 2005), 8.

stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹³ However, because the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is plagued by inadequate resources, a lack of unity of command and strategic directions,¹⁴ only the US efforts in Iraq are suitable for direct comparison to the Soviet operation. In these two cases we have not only similar ground conditions, but also massive investment of resources, unity of command and execution of strategy.

The paper will start with pointing the similarities in the ground conditions in which the Soviets have operated in Afghanistan and the US in Iraq. It will then examine the challenges that the Soviet and the US missions faced and their respective counterinsurgency responses. The analysis will emphasize the ethnic/sectarian rivalries in the two countries and the ethnic policies promoted by the two superpowers. In conclusion, the paper will try to establish the impact these ethnic/sectarian rivalries had on formulating the Soviet and US counterinsurgency and state building strategies as well as the implications of these strategies on the social cleavages in the two countries. It is presumed that the conclusions will apply to some extent to the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan as well.

Ground conditions

The first set of similarities that can be identified stems from the geographical settings, ethnic-religious composition, cultural background and historical experiences of the two countries. Both Afghanistan and Iraq possess difficult terrain (rugged mountains and deserts respectively) for conducting military operations and for providing logistic support to the troops. At the same time, the terrain facilitates small scale insurgent attacks and makes the borders porous. Both Afghanistan and Iraq are countries with diverse societies that include many ethnic and religious groups.¹⁵ Rivalry in the two countries exists not only between the major ethnic/sectarian groups but between the tribes that constitute them as well. There are also significant social cleavages between urban and rural populations. This social diversity makes government legitimacy more difficult to enforce and the idea of the modern nation-state more difficult to take hold. Both Afghanistan and Iraq share the Muslim cultural traditions that invoke the concept of jihad when non-

¹³ The Soviet experience in Afghanistan has often been ignored in the historical discourse on the lessons learned from past counterinsurgency efforts. It is a difficult proposition to suggest to US policy makers that the Soviet effort in Afghanistan, which they were actively working to spoil in the 1980s, might prove analogous to that of the US itself in another Muslim country two decades later (see Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Military Experience in Afghanistan: A Precedent of Dubious Relevance," *PONARS Policy Memo 202* (October, 2001), and Jeffrey B. Kendall, "Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan: Roadmap to Failure," *National War College Report* (November 2, 2001). Nevertheless, the similarities between Afghanistan and Iraq have been voiced by participants in the former Soviet contingent in Afghanistan and lately acknowledged by US policy makers as well (see Scott Peterson, "Afghanistan's Lessons for Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor* (November 20, 2003) and "The Future of the Middle East: Strategic Implications for the United States," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIV, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 12).

¹⁴ See on that matter Michael L. Roi and Greg Smolynec, "End States, Resource Allocation and NATO Strategy in Afghanistan," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19 (2008).

¹⁵ The main ethnic groups in Iraq are the Kurds, the Arabs and the Turkomans, as the Arabs are further divided into the Shia and the Sunni sects. In Afghanistan, the main division is between the Pushtuns and the non-Pushtun ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, Baluch, Farsiwan), but there, too, Shiites (the Hazara) are a significant minority.

Muslim militaries attack or occupy Muslim lands. As one of the main pillars in Islam, jihad is a much more potent rallying ideology than defence of ethnic or tribal interests. Perhaps, as a result of all these factors, often ignored by invading forces, both countries have a historical experience of resisting vehemently foreign forces perceived as occupiers—most notably the British in 1839, 1878 and 1919 in Afghanistan, and in 1920 and 1941 in Iraq.

Finally, an apparent point of comparison is the global dimensions and the support from neighbouring countries to the insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In the case of Afghanistan, the insurgents received support from the US, Saudi Arabia and other nations, but it was the active participation of Pakistan that enabled this support to reach the *mujahidin*. Fighters from other Muslim countries flocked to Afghanistan to take part in the struggle against the infidel troops. In Iraq, insurgents are supported by Iran and by private donors from Saudi Arabia and other countries. Again, foreign fighters from Muslim and even Western countries have streamed into Iraq to participate in the jihad against the invaders.

Invasion campaigns

The next set of similarities is displayed in the invasion campaigns of the two superpowers. In both instances the decision to invade was based on perceived security concerns. The US administration believed that Saddam Hussein's regime represented a direct threat to US security by possessing weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism, while Soviet leadership was concerned with the deteriorating security situation and feared that Afghanistan may be moved out of the Soviet orbit and into alignment with the United States.¹⁶ The direct objectives were to execute a regime change and no extended military presence was seen as a requirement.

The initial invasion operations were carried out with efficiency and according to plan. The Soviet invasion plan had an air assault and a ground component. The Soviet invasion force consisted of two motor rifle and one airborne divisions of the Red Army.¹⁷ Resistance from the Afghan army was minimal, with most of the attacks on the advancing Red Army carried out by guerrillas. In the early evening on 27 December 1979 Soviet Special Forces assaulted the presidential Palace in Kabul and killed Hafizullah Amin. By February 1980 there were over 80,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan.¹⁸

The US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, which began on March 17, 2003, displayed similar invasion strategy: early infiltration of special forces, targeting military and command and control infrastructure by air, and an attack by the ground forces on the capital on two

¹⁶ President George W. Bush, "President Discusses the Future of Iraq: Address to the American Enterprise Institute," *The White House Press Release* (26 February 2003) and A. A. Lyakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979," trans. Gary Goldberg and Artemy Kalinovsky, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper #51 (January 2007).

¹⁷ Lyakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion," 44,

¹⁸ Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (London, 1990), 46.

fronts.¹⁹ Despite the significant troop build up in Kuwait, the main invasion force consisted of four divisions.²⁰ The “shock and awe” air campaign, simultaneously with two-pronged, combined-arms coordinated assault from Kuwait, quickly overwhelmed the ill equipped and trained Iraqi army and Republican Guards. As in Afghanistan, it was paramilitary troops that put up the most determined resistance.²¹ Units of the southern assault group reached Baghdad in 21 days and occupied it. The toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad on April 9 is usually taken to represent the symbolic fall of the regime.²² The US troops in Iraq continued to flow in and by the end of April their number stood at 140,000.²³

Post-invasion challenges

In both the Afghan and the Iraqi cases, the invading forces discovered that a prolonged military presence to provide security and support to the new regime (and, in the case of the US, even to act as such initially²⁴) was necessary. The task of stabilizing the new regime in the face of the insurgency that found new purpose in combating the invading “infidel” Soviets proved to be a much more difficult proposition. The Soviet Union became bogged down in a protracted and costly war lasting nine years. In Iraq, reconstruction efforts also proved very challenging as the tide of violence and attacks on coalition forces, fuelled by the Sunni community’s anger about losing its dominant positions and intense nationalistic feelings against foreign occupiers, quickly gathered steam. As in the case of the Pentagon top brass, which estimated that it would need hundreds of thousands of troops to stabilize Iraq after the invasion, the Soviet General Staff assessed that they would need 30-35 divisions, but were allocated only four and a half.²⁵

The analogy between the Soviet and the US cases also exists in the fact that after the execution of the regime change both invading forces faced irregular warfare and not combat against conventional enemy armies. The enemy was elusive and decentralized. Soviet armoured columns that formed the main invasion force were not suited to combat operations on much of the rugged and mountainous Afghan terrain. The Soviets also discovered that their force structure based on large units, namely the 40th Army (the designation of the Soviet army in Afghanistan) and its divisions were unresponsive to small-scale insurgent attacks, and that Soviet commanders had little understanding of local social and cultural divisions in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the non-monolithic nature of

¹⁹ Col. Gregory Fontenot, LCol. E.J. Degen, LCol. David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis, 2005), Chapter 3.

²⁰ Catherine Dale, “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results, and Issues for Congress,” CRS Report for Congress (March 28, 2008), 20-21.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Donald P. Wright, Col. Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II. Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, May 2003–January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, June 2008), 142.

²⁴ The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). See *On Point II*, 31.

²⁵ Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Contradicts General on Iraq Occupation Force’s Size,” *New York Times* (February 28, 2003) and *On Point II*, 74; Peterson, “Afghanistan’s Lessons for Iraq.”

the insurgency completely changed the operating environment of the US troops, who had not trained or prepared to deal with such an environment.²⁶

Initial Counterinsurgency Strategy

The Red Army did not envision counterinsurgency combat operations against the armed groups that had been opposing the communist regime in Kabul. By securing strategic objects, the Red Army planners believed they would relieve the Afghan army from these duties and thereby allow it to take the lead in counterinsurgency operations. The Soviets only intended to provide the Afghan army with logistical and combat support (air, reconnaissance, artillery).²⁷ A similar approach to enforcing security was taken by coalition forces in Iraq. First, in planning for post-invasion security operations, the likelihood of an insurgency was not rated very high, and second, it was assumed that the Iraqi army would be available in some degree to the coalition and used.²⁸ In both cases these strategies did not work. In Afghanistan, the Afghan army was too weakened by the insurgency²⁹ and the Soviet invasion while attacks by guerrilla forces on the Soviet troops prompted a full-scale military engagement with the insurgents. In Iraq, the task was even more difficult since, with the dissolution of the Baathist regime's security forces in May 2003 (much to the surprise of the military planners³⁰), the ISF had to be built from scratch. The attempt to hand out the security responsibility to the ISF in February 2004 failed. In the face of escalating insurgent attacks at the beginning of April 2004, the newly minted ISF simply collapsed.³¹

By the middle of 2004, the security situation in Iraq had worsened significantly and the US troops were forced to mount several major operations against the insurgents.³² In its first year in Afghanistan, The Red Army also resorted primarily to conducting large scale, kinetic operations that had little impact on the decentralized insurgency. The Soviets showed little understanding of the local culture and traditions and ignored casualties among civilians resulting from these operations. Such attitude contributed greatly to the alienation of the population. In the case of Iraq, US officers were often frustrated that their overwhelming military superiority could not stamp out the resistance, while arrogance and cultural insensitivity alienated the population and contributed to the abuses of Abu Ghraib.³³

Parallel with its initial attempts to deal with the insurgency, the two superpowers sought to impose new and alien social models and political systems on the countries they

²⁶ *On Point II*, 89.

²⁷ Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, 1991), 10.

²⁸ *On Point II*, 73-79.

²⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan 1978-1992* (Washington, 2000), 67-68.

³⁰ *On Point II*, 80.

³¹ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Securing, Stabilizing, and Rebuilding Iraq, Progress Report: Some Gains Made, Updated Strategy Needed," Report to Congressional Committees (June 2008), 7.

³² Operations IRON SABRE, BATON ROUGE and PHANTOM FURY. See *On Point II*, 322-357.

³³ Andrew Garfield, "British Perspective on the U.S. Efforts to Stabilize and Reconstruct Iraq," The Foreign Policy Research Institute (October 13, 2006).

invaded—a socialist society and a Soviet political system in the case of Afghanistan, and a liberal society and a democratic system of governance. In both cases, the new political systems were viewed as the only path to modernization of the two countries. However, the combination of indiscriminate military action, resulting in civilian casualties, lack of respect to local traditions, and the attempted drastic change in political culture undermined the Soviet and US stabilization efforts. At the same time, the insurgents, despite remaining severely fragmented, embraced the concept of jihad as their overriding legitimizing principle.

Soviet Adjustments to the Counterinsurgency Challenges

The difficulties imposed by the growing insurgencies forced both the USSR and the US to make significant adjustments to their force structures and strategies. This transformation period from a conventional war to a counterinsurgency frame of mind stretched from 1981 to 1986 for the Soviet forces in Afghanistan and from 2004 to 2007 in the case of the US troops in Iraq.

One of the first steps taken by the Red Army command to adjust to the realities of Afghanistan was to withdraw all those units that had no utility in the counter-insurgency situation: anti-aircraft units, heavy artillery, and tank regiments.³⁴ The Red Army also decentralized command to brigade headquarters and gave brigade commanders fire power assets (artillery and helicopter gunships) and the authority to use these assets. Airborne troops were also deployed to regional bases. The Red Army brought in additional helicopters to provide air mobility and fire support.³⁵ The Soviets came to rely increasingly on Special Forces in their operations. Fixed outposts alongside the roads improved convoy security. The 40th Army was also reinforced, reaching approximately 110-120,000 troops by mid-1982. The introduction of new equipment, Special Forces, and the combined arms operations all led to increased effectiveness in the tactical engagement of small groups of mujahidin. The Soviet troops also adapted to the fragmented nature of the Afghan resistance. Initially, Soviet officers, especially those guarding strategic sites, would occasionally try to limit hostilities with local insurgent groups and to establish friendly relations with the surrounding villages by entering into local deals and truces with village and tribal authorities, warlords and mujahidin commanders without formal authorization.³⁶ Over the years, this practice became widespread. Soviet garrisons even helped some of the hostile groups in order to divert their attention to attacking rival mujahidin groups. However, these adjustments did not translate into the effective suppression of the insurgency in any area of Afghanistan. The Soviets did have some success in containing insurgent groups in the northern and central regions of Afghanistan, but could not contain those groups that operated along the

³⁴ “Minutes of CPSU CC Politburo Meeting of June 18, 1980,” available at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project (http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.browse&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan).

³⁵ McMichael, *Stumbling Bear*, 13.

³⁶ Carey Schofield, *The Russian Elite: Inside Spetsnaz and the Airborne Forces* (London and Mechanicsburg, 1993), 111-113.

permeable Afghan-Pakistani border. The mujahidin continued to maintain bases in Pakistan, generate forces there, and receive supplies.

As a result, the Soviets resorted to a brutal counter-insurgency strategy in the period 1983-85. Counter-insurgency efforts included operations aimed at depopulating large areas of territory for the purpose of denying the insurgents food and support from the local population. To accomplish this goal the Soviets razed villages, destroyed fields, orchards and irrigation systems, and slaughtered livestock.³⁷ These actions achieved the desired result of emptying entire regions such as the Panjshir, Paghman, Kunar and Logar valleys of the settled population and created a mass refugee exodus into Pakistan and Iran. It is estimated that between 1 and 1.3 million Afghans were killed during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and that 5 million Afghans were driven to seek refuge in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran.³⁸ For a period of time the strategy succeeded in depriving the insurgents of supply infrastructure.³⁹ In the longer term, however, the mujahidin were not critically affected. Increased supplies from Pakistan and Iran offset the loss of provisions from the local population.

During this period, the objective to transform Afghan society through the export of Soviet institutions, political models and ideology—a process usually referred to as “sovietization”—continued to be the main trust of Soviet state building strategy. However, there was a growing realization among the Soviet leadership that the legitimacy of the Kabul regime cannot be imposed through military means and that the policy of overt sovietization needs to be changed in order to increase the regime’s social base.⁴⁰

US Adjustments to the Counterinsurgency Challenges

To counter the growing insurgency in Iraq, the US Army began planning for a long-term presence and stability operations as early as the summer of 2003. In January 2004, the coalition forces published their first campaign plan involving full-spectrum operations that emphasised political, economic, and social progress in addition to military success. The shift to “deliberate and well-defined full spectrum” counterinsurgency campaign was completed with the transition to MNF-I in the summer of 2004. The objective was to limit large-scale combat operations that lead to alienating the population and to win the support of Iraqis. To break the barrier between itself and the Iraqi people, army units began to engage “constructively” tribal leaders in the troublesome Sunni areas.⁴¹

³⁷ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, London, 1995), 228.

³⁸ See Marek Sliwinski, “Afghanistan: The Decimation of a People,” *Orbis* (Winter, 1989), 39; and Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 1. Other estimates put the number of Afghan deaths at between 450,000 to 600,000. See Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 191.

³⁹ See Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 180-181, for discussion of the effects of Soviet counterinsurgency efforts on the resistance.

⁴⁰ See “The Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, 1985,” trans. Anna Melyakova, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 192 (May 2006), available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB192/index.htm>.

⁴¹ *On Point II*, 120-125.

As in the case of the Soviets in Afghanistan, during the transitional period the US army in Iraq also went through reorganization on a tactical level. In a similar fashion as the Red Army, US brigades were given additional units to achieve more balanced mix of forces and heavy armour tank battalions were converted into light-wheeled mobile units. Field artillery and armour battalions were transformed into general manoeuvre units that conducted full-spectrum operation rather than combat missions.⁴² Training the ISF and support operations became another focus of US forces during the 2004-06 period.⁴³

The change in the counterinsurgency strategy complimented efforts to create a functional Iraqi government based on democratic principles. On June 2008, the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) assumed authority from the CPA⁴⁴ as a caretaker government until the first parliamentary elections. The first National Assembly, elected in January 2005, drafted a permanent constitution of Iraq. Elections for a four-year term government were held in December of the same year. However, fearing eminent defeat, the Sunni parties boycotted the January election. On the other side, the Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani declared voting to be a religious duty of the Shia.⁴⁵ As a result, the Transitional National Assembly, which created the new Iraqi Constitution, was composed almost entirely by Shia and Kurdish deputies.⁴⁶ In October 2005, the Sunnis also voted overwhelmingly to reject the proposed Constitution.⁴⁷ Despite the decision of the Sunnis to participate in the December 2005 elections for a permanent National Assembly, the elections reaffirmed the sectarian division in Iraqi political life and the shift in the political power between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shia in favour of the latter.⁴⁸ As a result, throughout 2006 and the first part of 2007, the security situation deteriorated significantly as the anti-US insurgency became interwoven with a sectarian war.

In Iraq, the level of destruction and civilian deaths, although not triggered directly by the US counter-insurgency strategy, but by the vicious intra-communal conflict, may also be compared to the level reached in Afghanistan. In September 2007, Opinion Research Business (ORB), a British polling agency estimated that 1.2 million Iraqis have died in the four years since the invasion.⁴⁹ ORB, however, estimates that its margin of error is a

⁴² Ibid., 126-127.

⁴³ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁴ *On Point II*, 156.

⁴⁵ Sir Harold Walker, Sir Terence Clark, "Elections in Iraq—January 2005: An Assessment," *Asian Affairs*, Volume 36, No 2 (July 2005), 184. See also Mehdi Noorbaksh, "Shiism and Ethnic Politics in Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Volume XV, No 2 (Summer 2008), 53-65 for a discussion of the motivation of the Shia community to engage in the modern Iraqi political life.

⁴⁶ See Walker and Clark, "Elections in Iraq," 191 for the distribution of seats by political party.

⁴⁷ The Constitution was rejected by 97 percent and 82 percent respectively by the Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salahuddin—Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Government Formation and Benchmarks," CRS Report for Congress (August 2007), 3.

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict," Middle East Report N°52 (February 26, 2006), 29. For distribution of seats by political party and its affiliation see Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Reconciliation and Benchmarks," *CRS Report for Congress* (September 2008), 4.

⁴⁹ See "More than 1,000,000 Iraqis murdered," at the ORB website

http://www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=78. It is worth pointing out that the Afghan

minimum of 733,158 to a maximum of 1,446,063. In addition, 2 million Iraqis are believed to have fled the country and 2.8 million to be internally displaced.⁵⁰ Alternative, less shocking estimates, are that of John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHBSPH), which puts the number of deaths at just above 650,000 and that of the Iraq Body Count, which estimates the number of Iraqi civilian deaths at less than 100,000.⁵¹

Soviet post-1986 Strategy

By 1986, Soviet leaders realized that their policy of overt sovietization and pursuing the defeat of the resistance by military means was not going to lead to the withdrawal of Soviet forces anytime soon, and that a change in the strategic objective was necessary.⁵² In December 1986, the new Afghan leader, Muhammad Najibullah, launched the policy of National Reconciliation with the objective of reducing the military confrontation and negotiating a political compromise with the opposition and thus allow for the Red Army to disengage.

The main thrusts of the National Reconciliation policy included: restoring the peace in Afghanistan, opening the lines of communication with the mujahidin commanders, resistance parties and former political figures, negotiating deals with the tribal chiefs and other local notables, and the creation of a coalition government with participation of all political groups. To win support from the peasant population in the countryside, the National Reconciliation policy called for more investment in the rural economy in order to improve the farmers' standard of living.⁵³ The government and local administration became more inclusive by offering positions to non-party members and even mujahidin commanders.⁵⁴ Despite a failure to achieve a compromise with the opposition parties,⁵⁵ successes were registered in accommodating the tribal leaders and mujahidin commanders. This was accomplished by offering concessions for more local autonomy and material support. Former insurgents were allowed to enrol in the militias and given large salaries and landholdings. The financial incentives enticed more than 125,000 insurgents to enrol in government militias by 1989 and 70-80 percent of their commanders ceased military operations against the government.⁵⁶

After 1986, Soviet efforts to build the Afghan Army (see discussion below) allowed the 40th Army to adopt a defensive posture. The Red Army all but ceased military operations against the insurgency, set up permanent security posts outside the main bases and sent

civilian deaths figure put forward by Sliwinski, quoted above, is based on the same polling method of interviewing families as the ORB in Iraq.

⁵⁰ "The Iraqi Displacement Crisis," *Refugees International* (July 18, 2008).

⁵¹ "Updated Iraq Survey Affirms Earlier Mortality Estimates," JHBSPH Public Health News Center (October 11, 2006) and www.iraqbodycount.org/.

⁵² "Minutes from the CC CPSU Politburo meeting of November 13, 1986," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, (Winter 1996/1997), 178-181. Available at the National Security Archive website, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html>.

⁵³ M. F. Slinkin, *Afganistan. Stranitsi istorii (80-90-e gg. XX v.)* [Afghanistan. Historical Notes (80s-90s of the 20th century)] (Simferopol, 2003), 69.

⁵⁴ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 163-173.

⁵⁵ Slinkin, *Stranitsi istorii*, 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

dozens of civil-military units to the countryside to establish closer connections with the local population.⁵⁷ As a result of the new strategy and the launch of the National Reconciliation policy the security situation improved. In 1986 and 1987, according to UN reports, the number of civilian deaths was down 65-70 percent, compared to 1985.⁵⁸

There was also a change in the overall state-building strategy. The pre-invasion Soviet objective of making Afghanistan a socialist country was replaced with the goal of keeping it a neutral state and preventing the US from stationing troops there. In fact, National Reconciliation signalled the end of the sovietization process in Afghanistan. Marxist propaganda was gradually discontinued while religious instruction was reintroduced in schools. Increasingly, the Afghan leaders started to distance themselves from secularism and to reconnect with Islamist circles. In November 1987, a Loya Jirga (National Assembly) accepted a new constitution which removed the word Democratic from the name of the country.⁵⁹ As a result of these adjustments initial expectations for the quick fall of the Kabul regime after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 did not materialize. The Soviet-trained Afghan army was able to achieve a balance of power with the *mujahidin* and as a result, the Kabul regime began to acquire a degree of legitimacy at the beginning of the 1990s.

Post-2006 US Strategy in Iraq: The “Surge”

To deal with the grave security situation that emerged in 2006, the US administration decided to transfer an additional 30,000 combat troops to the country.⁶⁰ The objective was to improve the security and thus provide a window of opportunity for the Iraqi government to establish greater legitimacy. As part of the so-called “surge” strategy, the troops were not stationed at large bases but at security outposts in the most violent neighbourhoods. A series of offensives were launched over the summer of 2007 against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), other Islamist groups and Shia militias. Washington also adopted a different policy towards the Iraqi Sunnis, who were previously seen as the main source for the insurgency and were thus marginalized compared to the Shia population. A concerted effort has been made to build local alliances and co-opt Sunni tribal leaders by signing formal agreements and providing them with financial incentives. By the end of 2008 close to 100,000 Sunnis,⁶¹ dubbed Sons of Iraq (SoI), became members of US-backed militia groups, providing security in Baghdad, the West and Northwest Iraq. It is not difficult to see the resemblance of this strategy to the Soviet policy of co-opting tribal leaders and *mujahidin* in Afghanistan the second half of the 1980s.

In addition to the change in military strategy, National Reconciliation in Iraq has also been one of the political thrusts of the US administration’s 2007 New Way Forward

⁵⁷ See for discussion of these units in Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 40-45.

⁵⁸ UN Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, Prepared by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Felix Ermacora, in Accordance with Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1986/40, E/CN.4/1987/22* (19 February 1987), 11; and *E/CN.4/1988/25* (26 February 1988), 8.

⁵⁹ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 109.

⁶⁰ George W. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation,” *White House News Release* (January 10, 2007).

⁶¹ US Department of Defense, “Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq,” Report to Congress (September 2008), 23.

Strategy.⁶² The Iraqi government agreed to work towards 18 political and security benchmarks that, if achieved, were supposed to bring political reconciliation. Among the most important benchmarks were an amnesty law, de-Baathification law (to allow former members of the Baath Party regain their jobs), a hydrocarbon law (to insure equitably distribution of revenues from oil among the different sectarian/ethnic groups), combined with an emphasis on economic reconstruction and building up the capabilities of the ISF.⁶³ In other words, despite the recognition of ethnic/sectarian loyalties' role in Iraqi society, good governance continued to be considered as the main condition for winning the support of the Iraqi people on the side of the government (regardless of their ethnic or sectarian affiliation) and undermining the insurgency. However, as in Afghanistan, National Reconciliation ultimately ended up being understood as cutting deals with the different Sunni and Shia factions, while suppressing those that did not agree to align with the central government, thus not much real reconciliation taking place. As in the case of Afghanistan, National Reconciliation paved the way for greater regional autonomy (the Regions law),⁶⁴ while al-Maliki's use of Islam as a legitimizing force seem to parallel that of Najibullah's policies in the late 1980's.

In the second half of 2007 the tide of violence began to recede—both the sectarian war as well as the anti-American insurgence.⁶⁵ By May 2008, civilian deaths were 75 percent less than in January 2007 and 82 percent less than the peak in November 2006,⁶⁶ while US casualties in the first seven months of 2008 decreased 66 percent compared to the same period in 2007.⁶⁷ Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) displayed more confidence during Operation Knights Assault against the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia in March 2008 and during several operations against AQI in the provinces. As of September 1, 2008, the ISF has assumed responsibility for the security in 11 of the 18 provinces in Iraq.⁶⁸ The position of Prime Minister al-Maliki and his government appeared to be stronger, as all parties of the governing coalition rallied behind al-Maliki during the assault against JAM.⁶⁹

The similarity of the Soviet change of strategy after 1986 and its results to the one executed by the US in 2007 and its outcomes with respect to the security situation and the legitimacy of the central governments is striking. It appears, however, that the US forces

⁶² The White House, "Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq," Press Release (January 2007). Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-3.html>.

⁶³ Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Reconciliation and Benchmarks," CRS Report for Congress (September 2008).

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, the more "hands-on" US counterinsurgency approach did play a role in the improvement of the overall security situation. However, with respect to the reduction of sectarian violence, the most important factor seems to be the homogenization of Iraqi population in mixed sectarian quarters/regions, the ceasefire, declared by Shia militias, and the tribal backlash against Al-Qaeda's jihadi puritanism and disrespect of tribal customs and authority. See for discussion of these factors Colin H. Kahl, "Turning Point or Tactical Pause? Prospects for Stability and Political Accommodation in Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Volume XV, No 1 (Spring 2008), 85-86.

⁶⁶ "Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq," 25.

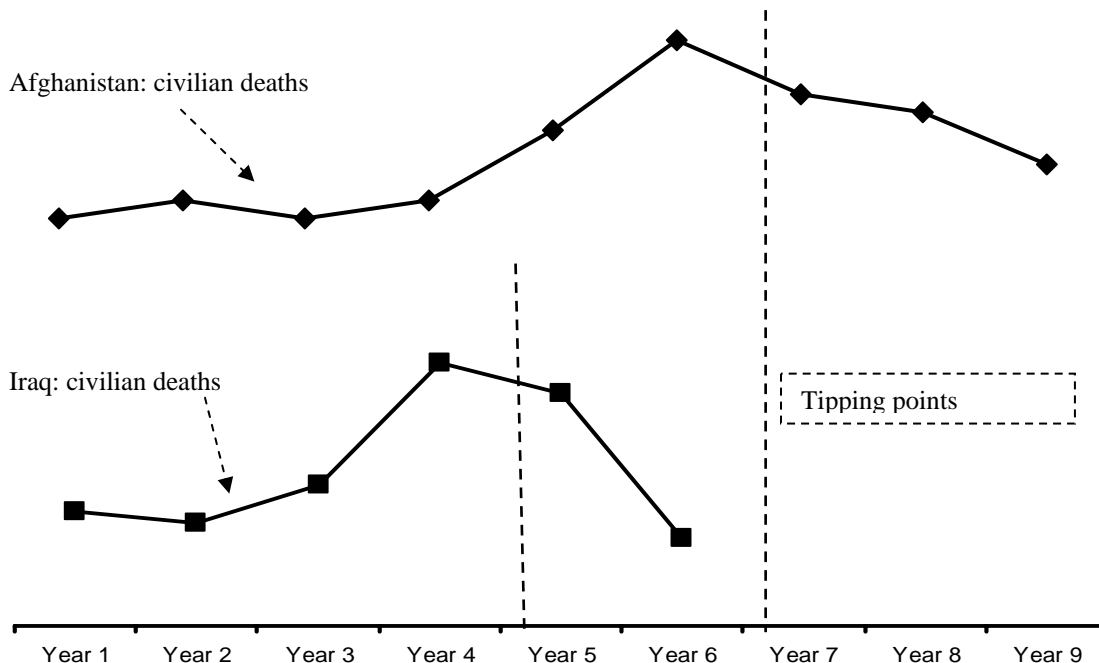
⁶⁷ Based on data available at the website Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (<http://icasualties.org/oif/>).

⁶⁸ "US hands over key Iraq province," *BBC* (September 1, 2008).

⁶⁹ Katzman, "Reconciliation and Benchmarks," 3-4; Hamza Hendawi, "Iraqi PM Wins Rare Kurdish, Sunni Support," *The Associated Press* (April 5, 2008).

and strategists were somewhat more efficient in adjusting to the challenges they faced on the ground. Graph 1 below compares the improvement of the security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan based on the number of civilian casualties per year. In both cases there is a clearly defined “tipping” point, i.e., a point from which civilian casualties started to fall—an indication for a reduction in the intensity of the insurgency/intra-communal wars. The “tipping” point occurred in year five in the case of Iraq and year seven in the case of Afghanistan.

*Graph 1: Counterinsurgency Trends in Afghanistan and Iraq*⁷⁰



Rebuilding Efforts

As noted above, to augment their counterinsurgency efforts, in addition to direct military engagement, the USSR and the US invested on a large scale to rebuild Afghan and Iraqi society and state institutions. This paper will only look at two areas that are most indicative for the level of the rebuilding efforts, namely, rebuilding the security forces and the level of foreign aid provided to the two countries.

Rebuilding the security forces

The most successful Soviet strategy for ensuring the continuity of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul was in the realm of security sector reform. In addition to party and state institutions, the Soviet strategy of state building relied to a great extent on the state security forces. These included the regular army, gendarmerie and secret intelligence

⁷⁰ Based on data provided by Sliwinski, “The Decimation of a People,” and the Iraqi Body Count. There is no scale comparison, however, in the number of casualties in the two cases.

police. Their role was as much to participate in the war against the resistance as to control the population and ensure the regime's hold over the means of violence. In 1988, total security forces available to the government in 1988 numbered almost 310,000.⁷¹

Soviet strategists and the Kabul regime realized that in order to defeat the insurgents they needed to engage them on their own ground and to use their methods of asymmetric warfare. By the end of the 1980s the tribal militia in Afghanistan became one of the main instruments for exercising control over the countryside and engaging rebel groups. In 1988, these irregular troops, comprised of tribal militia, self-defence units in the villages and the so-called Groups for Defence of the Revolution (GDR) numbered 150,000. However, the militias were difficult to control by the central government.

At present, the strength of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) seems to be evolving on the path of the DRA forces during the 1980s. As of September 2008, the US Department of Defense (DoD) reports that the ISF number 591,695–209,713 in the different branches of the armed forces and Special Operations forces, and 381,982 with the police establishment and border enforcement troops.⁷² As in Afghanistan during the Soviet period, it was the tribal militia (SoI) that engaged the Jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaida and contributed substantially to the reduction in violence in 2007. If we consider the SoI militia groups as currently supporting the Government of Iraq,⁷³ the combined forces would come to 690,000. The similarity of the Soviet and US efforts to strengthen the security forces is further enforced when we compare the size of the two forces to the population of the two countries. In both cases, in the sixth year of the security forces' reconstitution (1986 for the DRA forces⁷⁴ and 2008 for ISF), their ratio to the country's total population (15 million for Afghanistan in the 1980s and 28.8 million for Iraq in 2008⁷⁵) is almost even—20 security personnel to 1,000 inhabitants in Afghanistan and 21 in Iraq. Again, the difficulty in controlling the militias has been voiced with respect to the Sunni and Shia militias in Iraq as well.⁷⁶

Combat readiness is a better measure than forces' numerical strength for the success of the security sector reform. In Afghanistan, many indicators point to greater combat responsibilities of the DRA army after 1985. For example, beginning in 1986 Afghan army combat deaths increased exponentially while at the same time Soviet deaths were decreasing, which seems to suggest a lesser involvement for the Red Army and increased involvement of the DRA army.⁷⁷ Data about border-sealing activities, such as ambushes and intercepting mujahidin caravans, also suggests that by 1989 Afghan forces assumed

⁷¹ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 266.

⁷² "Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq," 35.

⁷³ There are considerable frictions between the SoI and the Iraqi government with respect to the future status of the militia. Furthermore, the SoI's loyalty to their commanders and tribal sheikhs is perhaps stronger than that to the government.

⁷⁴ In 1986, the DRA security forces stood at 300,000—Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 266.

⁷⁵ CIA, *The World Factbook 2008* (Online edition at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>).

⁷⁶ Douglas Macgregor, "Sheikhs for Sale," *Defense News* (January 28, 2008).

⁷⁷ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 271 and Gareev, *Afganskaya strada*, 328

most of these responsibilities.⁷⁸ Despite its less than desired level of preparation and motivation, the DRA army was able to hold its ground after the withdrawal of the Red Army and even achieve important strategic victories in the mujahidin offensives against Jelalabad and Kabul during 1989 and 1990.⁷⁹ In a similar manner, ISF's casualties have doubled in 2007⁸⁰—a sign that they have indeed been engaged in combat activities to a greater degree—and, as pointed out above, the ISF demonstrated greater confidence during the 2008 offensives. In the case of ISF, how successful they will perform when coalition troops withdraw, remains to be seen. Despite ISF assuming responsibility for the security of most Iraqi provinces, the US Government Accountability Office concluded in June 2008 that the readiness level of the Iraqi army shows little improvement and only 10 percent of them are rated at the highest readiness level, i.e., capable of planning, executing and sustaining counterinsurgency operations.⁸¹ Another report concluded that the Iraqi Army would be able to assume a leadership role in counterinsurgency operation by the end of 2009.⁸²

Foreign Aid

Military aid was the most important aspect of the Soviet contribution. In 1980, military aid was valued at 267.6 million rubles (approximately 370 million dollars⁸³)—more than 7 times the level of pre-1978 aid.⁸⁴ Military aid gradually increased until 1984, when it reached 366.3 million rubles. Between 1985 and 1988, with stepped up efforts for transferring the security responsibilities to the Afghan army and the Red Army's withdrawal from active combat, military aid increased fourfold from the level in 1984 to 1.6 billion rubles. The most significant increase, however, occurred between 1988 and 1989 when military aid was increased by 2.3 billion rubles to 3.97 billion – more than the entire amount for the period 1980-1987.⁸⁵ Converted in 2007 dollars, Soviet military aid for the period 1979-1989 was 22.8 billion dollars.⁸⁶ Economic aid also steadily increased—from 8.9 billion afghanis (\$178 million) in 1980 to 33.8 billion (\$676 million) by 1988. Combined economic and military Soviet aid to Afghanistan from 1980 to 1988, converted in 2007 dollars, would be \$29.7 billion.

The amount of Soviet military aid to Afghanistan seems to have been already surpassed by the US military aid to Iraq, which in 2008 is expected to reach \$24.7 billion.⁸⁷ However, the greater level of US military aid is most probably due to the fact that the ISF are larger than the DRA forces. Military aid per soldier is actually very similar – \$43,983

⁷⁸ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 271

⁷⁹ Gareev, *Afganskaya strada*, 166-178 and 186-211.

⁸⁰ See "The Report of the Independent Commission on Security Forces in Iraq," 38.

⁸¹ GAO, "Securing, Stabilizing, and Rebuilding Iraq," 27-28.

⁸² "The Report of the Independent Commission on Security Forces in Iraq," 14.

⁸³ Based on an exchange rate of \$1.38 for 1 ruble—see Noorzoy, "Economic Relations," 165.

⁸⁴ M.S. Noorzoy, "Long-term Economic Relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: An Interpretive Study," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (1985), 159.

⁸⁵ Gareev, *Afganskaya Strada*, 258.

⁸⁶ Based on the Consumer Price Index method – see Samuel H. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present," *Measuring Worth Calculator* (2008), at <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.

⁸⁷ "Report of the Independent Commission on Security Forces of Iraq," 36.

in the case of Afghanistan (based on Soviet aid to 1988 and 1988 size of the Afghan forces), and \$44,107 in the case of Iraq (based on 2008 level of aid and ISF strength). Soviet economic aid to Afghanistan, however, pales in comparison to US and other international donors' aid. As of July 2008, pledges of combined international aid to Iraq stood at \$73.4 billion.⁸⁸ This amount translates into \$2,622 per capita, while the total Soviet aid to Afghanistan is \$1,980 per capita. It should be pointed out that in Iraq only \$33.4 billion has actually been disbursed to date.⁸⁹

One implication of such a large foreign aid for the internal dynamics in Afghanistan and Iraq is their overreliance on foreign aid. In Afghanistan, domestic revenue covered only 48 percent of expenditures in 1986 and only 30 percent in 1988. Until 1992, the difference was covered by foreign aid from the Soviet Union and some Eastern European countries.⁹⁰ In Iraq, GAO pointed out that most of the investment in the Iraqi economy comes from foreign aid rather than from its budget. For example, in the period 2003-2008, \$27.1 billion were invested in the security, oil, water resources and electricity sectors. Only \$3.9 billion of them, or 15 percent, were money invested by the government of Iraq (GoI), with the rest coming from the US allocated funds.⁹¹ Therefore, to a large extent regime legitimacy in Afghanistan and Iraq has been achieved through the government's monopoly over distribution of economic resources (foreign aid). Second, an inherent problem connected with the large amount of foreign aid and its control by small elite is the level of corruption, which appears to be pervasive in both cases.⁹²

Ethnic Politics in Afghanistan

The Afghan state in the 18th and the 19th century was build around the uncontested political domination of the Pushtuns. Modernization of Afghan state institutions after World War I, however, led to members of non-Pushtun groups—Tajiks, Uzbeks and others—to enter the civil bureaucracy in increased numbers and to the gradual weakening of Pushtun control over the political system.⁹³ This situation eventually resulted in the Afghan governments pursuing a policy of establishing equality among the ethnic groups. In the 1964 Afghan Constitution, no ethnic minority was given more rights than any other.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the sense of rivalry between Pushtuns and non-Pushtuns persisted. This rivalry seems to have been an important factor in determining the pro-Moscow People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime's ethnic relations and politics when it came to power in 1978, and during the 1980s.

⁸⁸ *Iraq Index*, 42-43 and Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq," 19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, GAO, "Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq: Iraqi Revenues, Expenditures and Surplus," Report to Congressional Committees (August, 2008), 16

⁹⁰ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 113.

⁹¹ GAO, "Iraqi Revenues, Expenditures and Surplus," 17

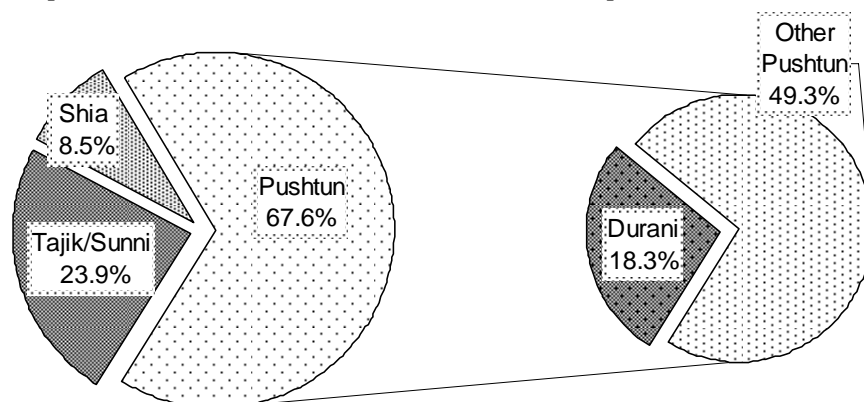
⁹² Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 129 and Salam Adhoob, Former Chief Investigator (Baghdad), Commission on Public Integrity Government of Iraq, "An Inside View of the 'Second Insurgency': How Corruption and Waste Are Undermining the U.S. Mission in Iraq," Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing (September 22, 2008).

⁹³ Richard S. Newell, "Post-Soviet Afghanistan: The Position of the Minorities," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 29, 11 (November, 1989), 1101.

⁹⁴ Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, "The Decline of Pashtuns in Afghanistan," *Asian Survey*, vol. XXXV, No. 7 (July, 1995), 622.

One of the PDPA's major characteristics was that it was not ethnically uniform. Its two main factions—Khalq and Parcham—had different ethnic composition. The Khalq faction of PDPA was dominated by non-Durani, primarily Ghilzai Pushtuns while the Parcham faction's base consisted primarily of urban Pushtuns who probably had weaker tribal identities than rural Pushtuns and urban Tajiks.⁹⁵ However, real power after the 1978 Revolution, which placed PDPA into power, rested with the leadership of the Khalq faction while the Parcham faction was repressed. In the period 1978-1979, perhaps as many as 2,000 Parchamis were killed by Khalq supporters.⁹⁶ A similarly antagonistic attitude towards non-Pashtuns was displayed in the official policies implemented by the Khalq-dominated PDPA. On the surface it looked as if the new regime was committed to pursue a policy of equality among the ethnic groups. In fact, one of the stated goals of the 1978 revolution was to put an end to the ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan.⁹⁷ As part of the transformation towards a Soviet type of society, the first PDPA government adopted the Soviet nationality policy model, which was based on dividing the minorities according to ethno-linguistic affinity.⁹⁸ In November 1978, the PDPA government recognized Dari Persian, Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluch and Nuristani as official languages in addition to Pushtu.⁹⁹ As part of the policy, it also announced that ethnic language schools would be created and each child would have an opportunity to study in their own mother tongue. In reality, the objective of the Pushtun-dominated Khalq faction was to undermine the importance of Dari, which until then was the language of the central administration. It was expected that by reducing the use of Dari, on the part of the other ethnic minorities, Pushtu would displace it as a lingua franca among the Afghans in one or two generations.¹⁰⁰ The favouring of Pushtu is also evident in the fact that all public addresses by the first two PDPA leaders—Taraki and Amin—were given in Pushtu.¹⁰¹

Graph 2: Ethnic Distribution: PDPA Leadership



⁹⁵ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 92-94.

⁹⁶ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹⁸ Eden Naby, "The Ethnic Factor in Soviet-Afghan Relations," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 20, 3 (March 1980), 238.

⁹⁹ Naby, "The Ethnic Factor," 238 and Ahady, "The Decline of Pashtuns," 622.

¹⁰⁰ Naby, "The Ethnic Factor," 242.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

In other words, the new ethnic policy, primarily its language reform aspect, combined with the brutal attitude of the Khalq regime towards their more ethnically diverse “comrades,” may have created among the Dari and Farsi speaking minorities in Afghanistan the perception that the new regime in Kabul was an attempt by the Pushtuns to regain pre-eminence in the political life again. It may not be a coincidence that the first wave of uprisings in the spring of 1979 against the PDPA regime was in Tajik and Farsiwan areas in the East. In addition, the non-Durani image of Khalq antagonised the Durani Pushtuns who traditionally hold the political power in Kabul. The Durani Pushtuns in the rural South eventually also rose in rebellion.¹⁰²

The situation changed, however, with the Soviet invasion and the elimination of the Khalq leader Amin. The new PDPA leader, Babrak Karmal, as well as all PDPA governments in the period 1980-1992, came from the Parcham faction, which included a large number of Tajiks. The political change resulted in a shift of PDPA’s attitude towards ethnic policies. The pro-Pushtun orientation of the regime was replaced with favourism of non-Pushtun minorities. The greater non-Pushtun influence in the faction is reflected in the fact that Babrak Karmal, despite being a Pushtun, used Dari in his public communications.¹⁰³ Furthermore, Karmal allowed a large number of non-Pushtuns, especially Tajiks, to enter the army and the bureaucracy as well as into important government positions.

There were several important reasons that forced the new PDPA government to change its ethnic strategy. First, the Parcham government believed that it was primarily the southern Pushtuns behind the insurgency. Second, the Khalq faction which still enjoyed considerable influence among PDPA membership was also predominantly Pushtun. An additional, external factor for the policy shift may have been the presence of a large number of Soviet advisors from Tajik and Uzbek background who favoured Afghans from the same ethnic groups.¹⁰⁴ To stabilize its regime, therefore, Karmal exploited the Pushtun ethnic rivalry with non-Pushtun minorities and began to attract the support of the latter. Although Pushtuns continued to control the PDPA leadership to a significant degree (Graph 2), among the regular party cadre, Tajiks, Uzbeks and the other non-Pushtun groups gradually became a majority. The proportion of Pushtuns in the party declined from 56 percent in 1980 to 37.7 percent in 1988/89, while that of Tajiks increased from 35 percent to 47.1 percent in the same period (Graph 3). This situation resulted in ethnic animosity within the PDPA. In addition to their ideological differences, ethnic differences also exacerbated the conflict between the PDPA and the opposition parties based in Pakistan, which were predominantly Pushtun.¹⁰⁵

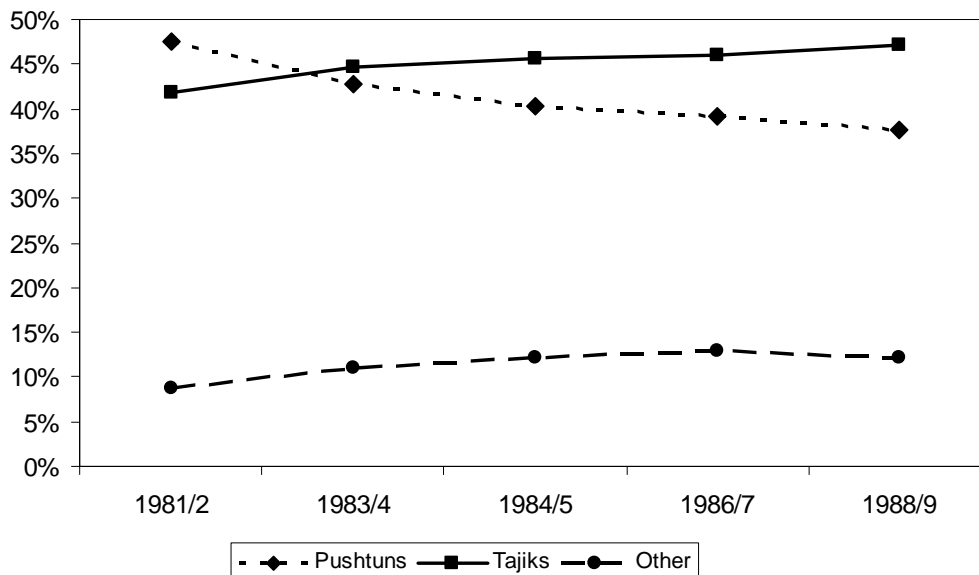
¹⁰² Newell, “Post-Soviet Afghanistan,” 1102.

¹⁰³ Naby, “The Ethnic Factor,” 246.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 249-252.

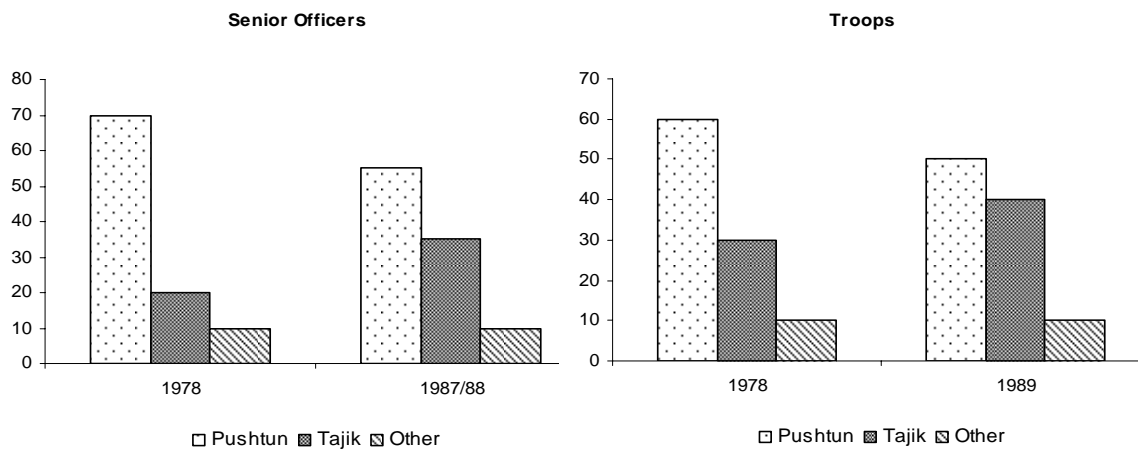
¹⁰⁵ Ahady, “The Decline of Pashtuns,” 625.

Graph 3: Ethnic Distribution: PDPA Membership¹⁰⁶



Another factor that influenced the policy shift was that, although the Khalq faction was no longer in power, its members were still dominant in the security apparatus. The increase of the number of non-Pushtuns in the army was, therefore, aimed at weakening the internal opposition. As a result, a significant transformation in the ethnic composition of the army indeed took place (Graph 4). In 1978, 70 percent of the senior officers and 60 percent of the troops in the army were Pushtuns. By 1987-88 the ethnic representation in the army seems to have been moving in the favour of the non-Pushtun minorities and especially to that of the Tajiks. At that time, the number of Pushtuns among senior officer ranks had shrank to 55 percent and that among the troops to less than 50 percent.

Graph 4: Ethnic Composition: The Afghan Army 1978-1989¹⁰⁷



¹⁰⁶ Based on data from Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, 256-257.

¹⁰⁷ Based on data by Giustozzi, *War Politics and Society*, 276.

If we were to judge from the enrolment in military schools in 1985 (48 percent Tajiks and 45 percent Pushtun), the trend was moving towards a clear Tajik majority in the army. The Pushtuns lost their positions in the army even further when in 1990 an unsuccessful coup against Karmal's successor, Najibullah, led to the dismissal of a large number of Pushtun officers (mostly Khalqis).¹⁰⁸

In addition to PDPA's policies, the inter-ethnic conflict in Afghanistan also grew as a result of Soviet counterinsurgency strategies. As mentioned above, the Soviet counterinsurgency strategy in the period 1983-85 aimed at interdicting mujahidin supply routes from Pakistan. As a result, Pushtun villages in the South and the East had to endure the heaviest fighting of the conflict. The heavy casualties inflicted on the Pashtun civil population by the Soviets instead of pacifying these regions had the opposite effect, i.e., ensured the most prominent role of the Pushtuns in the insurgency.

The ethnic tensions within the regime, and between the regime and the mujahidin, were further aggravated during the period of National Reconciliation. One of the strategies to draw mujahidin commanders on the side of the government was to encourage alliances between non-Pushtun commanders and non-Pushtun officers. This practice was met with much resentment by both the Pushtun generals and the Pushtun mujahidin alike. So significant was the impact of the PDPA regime's ethnic policies that some analysts believe that, at least on an elite level, the conflict was transformed from an ideological to an ethnic one.¹⁰⁹ Policies that favoured non-Pushtuns may have altered the balance of power so much that ultimately, their privileged status may have been one of the reasons for the fall of the PDPA regime. After all, it was the refusal to follow the orders from Kabul on the part of the Uzbek general Dosum and the Tajik general Abdul Momen that was the immediate cause for Najibullah's stepping down.

Ethnic Politics in Iraq

The importance of ethnic/sectarian factors in Iraq was predetermined by the very fact that the country was created in 1921 as an artificial amalgamation of three, ethnically homogenous, Ottoman provinces, thus ensuring its multi-ethnic character.¹¹⁰ As in the case of Afghanistan, one of the ethnic groups—the Sunni Arabs—was established as the ruling elite of the new state.¹¹¹ There are a couple of major differences, however, in the history of inter-ethnic/sectarian relations in Iraq and Afghanistan. First, the Sunni Arabs were a minority in Iraq, as opposed to the Pushtuns being a majority in Afghanistan. Second, state modernisation in Iraq did not result in diminishing of the dominant ethno-religious group's stronghold of political power as occurred in Afghanistan. On the contrary, the participation of the other ethno-religious groups—Shia Arabs, Jewish Arabs, Turkomans and Kurds—in the army, the state apparatus and the political system

¹⁰⁸ Ahady, "The Decline of Pashtuns," 625.

¹⁰⁹ Ahady, "The Decline of Pashtuns," 625.

¹¹⁰ Michael Rear, *Intervention, Ethnic Conflict and State-Building in Iraq: A Paradigm for the Post-Colonial State* (New York, 2008), 164.

¹¹¹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes, and of its Communists, Ba'athists and Free Officers* (Princeton, 1978), 176-186.

was significantly reduced.¹¹² Not sharing the ruling elite's political ideals and largely excluded from political participation, the non-Sunni Arab groups became disenfranchised from the regime. To preserve the status quo, the Sunni Arabs increasingly resorted to repression, especially after the Baath party's ascendancy in 1968.¹¹³ The severity of the ethnic cleavages in Iraq was demonstrated, and further exasperated, by several waves of uprisings with clear ethnic underpinnings in the 1920s, 1930s and 1990s (among the Shia) and an almost perpetual state of Kurdish unrest in the North. On the other hand, the power of the state in Afghanistan has never reached the level achieved in Iraq and thus the different ethnic communities in Afghanistan simply remained in a state of permanent disenfranchisement from the state, a situation not too different from that of Iraq. Therefore, the invasion in Iraq, which ousted the Baath regime and created the dynamics for a shift in the political power hold by the different ethno-religious groups, is much similar to the way the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan set up the conditions for the non-Pushtun minorities' rise in power.

The political shift in Iraq was greatly facilitated by the US efforts to eradicate all vestiges of the autocratic regime of Saddam Hussein and to establish liberal democracy. The dismissal of all Baath party officials from their jobs and the demobilization of the Iraqi army by the CPA simply meant that the state apparatus—the tool used by the Sunni Arabs to maintain their dominant position—virtually ceased to exist. Besides stimulating the insurgency, these actions by the CPA, created a power vacuum in which the Shia and the Kurds saw an opportunity to gain an eminence in the political life. As the former Baath party members were banned from holding government posts and Shiites quickly filled the vacuum, the disparity in the power-sharing of the two main ethnic groups was even more prominent than it was in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The other pillar in the US's state-building approach to Iraq—the liberal democracy—also benefited these two ethno-religious groups because of their demographic strength.¹¹⁴ The original hope for the three major groups negotiating a stable formula of power sharing through the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003 quickly evaporated. The reason was twofold. First, Iraq's political culture lacks the moderation and compromise necessary for a power-sharing arrangement to work in a sustainable way.¹¹⁵ Much as the Khalq-Parcham coalition in Afghanistan never represented a real power-sharing, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq did not accept their diminished position while the Shia did not want to miss the opportunity to assert itself as the dominant political group.¹¹⁶ The other reason for the inability of the democratic model to unite the Iraqi ethno-religious groups is the ethnic favourism of the Bush administration. Because of the Saddam Hussein regime's Sunni Arab make-up and the prominent role played by the latter in the insurgency,¹¹⁷ the US

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1080.

¹¹³ Andreas Wimmer, "Democracy and Ethnic Conflict in Iraq," *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 2003-04), 115.

¹¹⁴ According to the most recent edition of the CIA World Factbook, there are 60-65 percent Shia, 15-20 percent Kurds and 17 percent Sunni Arabs in Iraq.

¹¹⁵ Wimmer, "Democracy and Ethnic Conflict in Iraq," 121.

¹¹⁶ Shia have missed opportunities to participate in Iraqi political life in the past—see Mehdi Noorbaksh, "Shiism and Ethnic Politics in Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Volume XV, No 2 (Summer 2008), 53-65 for a discussion of the motivation of the Shia community to engage in the modern Iraqi political life.

¹¹⁷ "Testimony of Dr. Ahmed S. Hashim," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (April 24, 2004).

began to court the Shia and the Kurds as a way to stabilize the country. This strategy is clearly seen in the 2005 National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, which ties the establishment of democracy in Iraq with improving the positions of the Shia and the Kurds and identifies them as the main groups likely to support US efforts in Iraq.

“Commitment to democracy—rather than other forms of governance—not only is consistent with our values, but is essential to keeping the long-oppressed Shi’a and Kurds as our partners in Iraq.”¹¹⁸

Despite disagreements as to the timing of a power transfer,¹¹⁹ under Shia and Kurdish pressure and considerations about the legitimacy of being an occupying power, the US administration agreed to hold elections in 2005 to enable the quick transfer of power to the Iraqi people. As mentioned earlier, the January and December 2005 election reaffirmed the sectarian divisions in Iraq. The cross-ethnic/sectarian groups won 43 seats, or 19 percent, in the January elections and only 26 seats or 10 percent in the December elections (see Table 1). Despite the Sunni’s decision to participate in the December elections, the Shia has been steadily consolidating the political power in their hands. For example, the number of Shia cabinet ministers increased from 43 percent in the Interim Iraqi government to 58 percent in the most current incarnation of the Maliki’s government (Graph 5). On the other hand, the number of Sunni cabinet ministers increased from 17 percent to 21 percent while that of the Kurds decreased from 20 to 18 percent. The six cabinet ministers from the cross-ethnic/sectarian Iraqi National List appointed in May 2006 were gradually dismissed and currently only one remains in the cabinet. Such state of affairs speaks for the staunchly ethno-religious character of the Iraqi political parties and that the main legitimacy factor in Iraq is ethno-sectarian identification.

*Table 1: Iraqi Political Coalitions and Parties, 2005*¹²⁰

Political Party/Block	Ethno-religious affiliation	Jan. 2005 seats	Dec. 2005 seats
United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)	Shia	140	128
Kurdistan Alliance	Kurdish	75	53
Iraqi National List (INL)	cross-ethnic/sectarian	40	25
Iraq Accord Front	Sunni	N/A	44
Iraqi National Dialogue Front	Sunni	N/A	11
Iraqi National Congress	cross-ethnic/sectarian	part of UIA	0
Iraqis Party	Sunni	5	part of INL
Iraqi Turkmen Front	Turkmen	3	1
National Independent and Elites	Shia	3	2
People’s Union	cross-ethnic/sectarian	2	part of INL
Kurdistan Islamic Group	Kurdish	2	5

¹¹⁸ National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (November, 2005), 15.

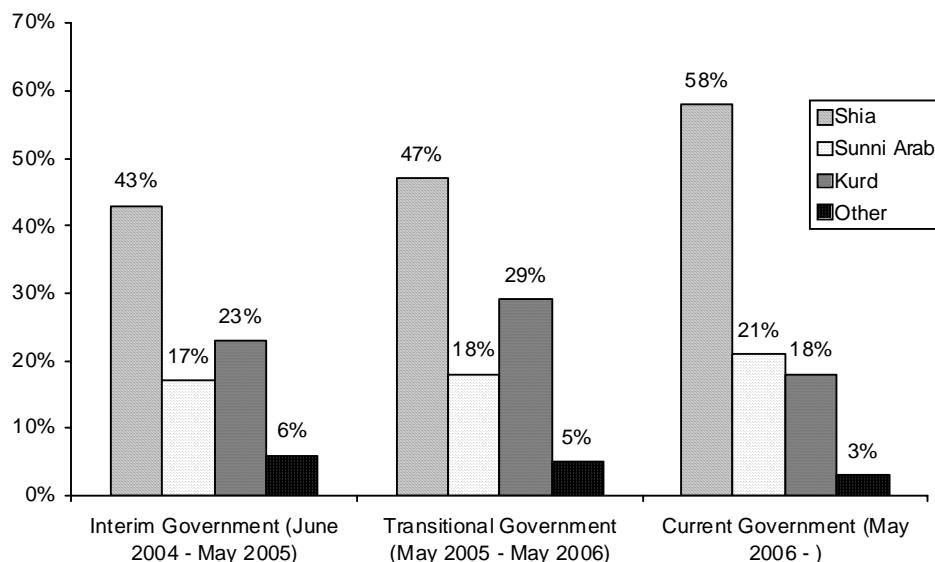
¹¹⁹ See *On Point II*, 26 and Wimmer, “Democracy and Ethnic Conflict in Iraq,” 125.

¹²⁰ Adapted from Katzman, “Elections, Government and Constitution,” 6.

Islamic Action	Shia	2	0
National Democratic Alliance	cross-ethnic/sectarian	1	0
Rafidain National List	Assyrian Christian	1	1
Liberation and Reconciliation Gathering	Sunni	1	3
Ummah Party	cross-ethnic/sectarian	0	1
Yazidi list	Yazidi	N/A	1

In addition to political power, the Shia-dominated governments tried to consolidate their supremacy by controlling the means of violence as well. According to the Independent Commission on the Security Forces in Iraq (ICSFI), 75-80 percent of the Iraqi Army soldiers are Shia, while the National Police have been heavily infiltrated by the Shia Badr militia. The latter remains loyal to their militia commanders and the National Police is “widely seen as sectarian and not trusted by most Iraqis.”¹²¹ The ISF, and especially the police, may have taken part or, at the least, turned a blind eye to the sectarian cleansing that took place in 2006-2007.¹²²

Graph 5: Iraqi Government (2004-2008), Ethno-sectarian Distribution¹²³



¹²¹ See Gen. James L. Jones, Chairman, “The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces in Iraq,” Report to Congress (September 2007), 35-45.

¹²² Stephen Zunes, “The US Role in Iraq’s Sectarian Violence,” *Foreign Policy in Focus* (March 6, 2006).

¹²³ Based on information from Esther Pan, “Iraq: The Interim Government Leaders,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder (June 2, 2004); “Interim Iraqi Government,” *BBC News* (June 2004), “Interim Iraqi Cabinet: Who Are They?” *Seattle News* (May 13, 2005), “Iraqi Transitional Government,” Liberty Park Report (9 May 2005), “New Iraqi Government Members,” *BBC News* (8 May 2005), “Iraqi Cabinet Members”, available at the website of The Iraq Foundation http://www.iraqfoundation.org/iraqi_cabinet.htm. I was not able to identify the ethno-religious background of 5 of the cabinet ministers in the IIG.

The sectarian war, which broke out in 2006 is the result, therefore, of both the discontent among the Sunni community with Shia ascendancy, prompting an aggressive response by the latter to defend their government, and the US strategy to throw its support behind a largely sectarian regime that is not seen as the legitimate government by all Iraqis. Although the creation of the Sunni tribal councils and the US support for the SoI in 2007 indicates that some sort of ethnic policy shift has occurred in Iraq, the domination of the Iraqi government and state institutions by one sectarian group (the Shia) remains a source of discontent among the Sunnis. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the performance of the Iraqi government, whose influence and legitimacy remains very weak outside Baghdad, is affected by the ethnic-religious factionalism to a significant degree. The power of different government officials is linked to their connections with various militia groups and not with their offices.¹²⁴ On the whole, the Iraqi government can be characterized as a partisan government of the Shia parties, which “seek to run the Iraqi state solely on their own terms.”¹²⁵ Despite US claims to the opposite, the de-Baathification law, passed in January 2008 by the Iraqi parliament, is seen by the Iraqi Sunnis as a negative step rather than a move towards national reconciliation.¹²⁶ Another telling example is the Iraqi amnesty law, which, as in the case of Afghanistan, is part of the Iraqi national reconciliation process. However, out of the 65,000 amnesty application and the approved 48,000, only 1,700 prisoners have been actually released.¹²⁷ There are still significant disagreements on perhaps the most important legislation for the reconciliation—the hydrocarbon law, which is supposed to regulate the revenue sharing from the oil exports. As in Afghanistan, National Reconciliation in Iraq ultimately ended up being understood as cutting deals with the different Sunni and Shia factions, which, in its turn, empowered many local actors and weakened the national government.¹²⁸ Although it appears to be a successful tactical manoeuvre to rally tribal and militia support on the side of the government, strategically, it undermines the legitimacy of the central government and thus works against the state model being promoted by the US, i.e. a strong, democratic, centralist state. Furthermore, the Shia community is also not content with the rise of prominence of the Sunni tribal leaders because the situation reminds them of the time of Saddam Hussein when the same tribes were used to provide security for the Baath regime.¹²⁹ US support for Sunni militias has been seen by the Maliki government as a recipe for civil war.¹³⁰

Conclusion

Contrary to the prevailing views, the strategic failure of the Soviet approach to Afghanistan was not due to military setbacks. It was the failure of Soviet social and economic policies that ultimately led to the disintegration of Afghanistan. The National Reconciliation policy and the tribal policies instead of ensuring stability of the regime, in

¹²⁴ William S. Lind, “Military Matters: Iraq State Fantasy,” *Middle East Times* (April 10, 2008).

¹²⁵ Kahl, “Turning Point or Tactical Pause?” 89.

¹²⁶ Lynch, “US Strategy and the Failures of National Reconciliation,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 97.

¹²⁷ “Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq,” (June 2007), 3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

¹²⁹ Noorbaksh, “Shiism and Ethnic Politics in Iraq,” 65.

¹³⁰ “Transcript: Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on Iraq,” *CNN* (April 17, 2008).

fact, only perpetuated the power of local centers as alternatives to the state. The connection between countryside and government under the banner of National Reconciliation was an artificial one, which could persist only so long as the central government was able to re-distribute the resources coming mostly from foreign aid. There was no cohesion even inside the regime as the policy to appease different power groups and include their representatives in the government was only superficial. In reality, only one faction, which was dominated by a particular ethnic group, held most of the political power.

The complete withdrawal of the US army from Iraq is still to be accomplished and we don't know what would be the ultimate outcome of the current stability operations in the country. This study concludes that the preconditions for the development of the same chaotic and fragmented political landscape experienced by Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops are certainly in place in Iraq. As a result of common ground conditions of ethnic/sectarian diversity and protracted irregular warfare, the approaches to the challenges of nation building and counterinsurgency efforts in Soviet Afghanistan and contemporary Iraq parallel each other. Modernization, associated with whole-scale imposition of alien political models, led initially to the ideologisation of the social conflict in the two countries. However, the disruption of traditional power balances eventually led to the emergence of ethnic/sectarian identities as more decisive for regime legitimacy. The Soviet and US efforts to stabilize the regimes by helping them build large national forces and pouring billions in foreign aid is a strategy that ignores this reality. In a situation of power struggle alongside ethnic/sectarian lines, the control over security forces and distribution of foreign aid by one ethnic/sectarian group is perceived as a threat by the other groups with traditional identities. Good governance and winning hearts and minds, extended by the "wrong" government, is not likely to be a genuine and would only perpetuate the social cleavages. Legitimacy in such case could only be obtained through a power-sharing agreement between the rival ethnic and sectarian groups or through authoritarianism and repression of the minorities. Given the fact that such an agreement was not achieved during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and in the two decades that followed, the latter alternative is more likely to hold in contemporary Iraq.