

## **“Communist Muslims”**

### **The USSR and the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan’s Conversion to Islam, 1978-1988**

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#### **Introduction**

In December 1979, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan to support its client-regime that was facing an expanding insurgency. The intervention was consistent with the Brezhnev Doctrine that stated that the USSR would use military force to keep a country that had moved toward socialism within the socialist camp. At its peak, the Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops (LCST) in Afghanistan numbered 115,000 people. After nine years, the war resulted in over 15,000 Soviets and between 600,000 and 1.5 million Afghans killed.<sup>1</sup> Millions more Afghans were displaced to neighboring countries and internally displaced. In February 1989, the Soviet Union completed the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan, leaving behind a friendly regime headed by Mohammad Najibullah.

Ironically, that regime had during the course of the conflict drifted away from Marxist orthodoxy. The Soviet occupation had presided over the transformation of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) – the “Afghan communists”<sup>2</sup> – into a party that embraced Islam and supported Muslim scholars. To counter insurgents’ calls to Afghans to defend religion against “godless communists”, the PDPA departed from its “anti-clerical” policies to Islamicise its rhetoric and the state’s institutions. Its relation to religion evolved from accommodation to integration into a new political platform. This transformation

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<sup>1</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> The PDPA actually avoided the label “communists” to fend off accusations of being subordinate to Moscow. It instead described its revolution as ‘national-democratic’.

happened with the support of the Kremlin that pushed the PDPA to be more tolerant of Islam and inclusive of religious authorities or ‘clergy’.<sup>3</sup>

Examining the PDPA’s policies toward Islam from 1978 to 1988 and Soviet support to them, this article draws on over 17,000 pages of copies in Russian of articles from Afghan newspapers, speeches and decrees by Afghan communists between 1979 and 1987 that are available in the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (*Telegrafnoye agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuz*, TASS) files at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* in Russian, GARF). It also relies on accounts by and original interviews with Soviet officials, advisers and military personnel who were present in Afghanistan in the 1980s, interviews with Afghans, and on various other primary sources available online and in archives in Moscow. As much as possible, biases associated with working with eyewitnesses’ accounts were dealt with through triangulation. The biases associated with using translated TASS material were in turn mitigated by the large number of documents and the fact that they were translated by experts and circulated to a restricted number of Soviet officials for information on Afghan affairs. Overall, this article adds to the literature on the “Afghan War” on three counts: (a) it provides a structured account of the story of the Soviet and the PDPA’s relation to Islam during the conflict; (b) it examines existing Soviet sources using specifically the “Islamic angle”; and (c) it brings some original sources into the discussion.

This article is structured in six parts. The first one gives an overview of the PDPA’s early policies toward religion. The second looks at the importance of the Islamic factor in leading to the Soviet intervention. The third and fourth examine the period under Babrak Karmal, the Afghan leader installed by the Soviets. They analyze the LCST’s and Karmal’s relation to Islam. Finally, the last two parts identify the fundamental shift in the PDPA’s attitude toward Islam that occurred under Najibullah who came to power in 1986

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘clergy’ (*dukhovenstvo*) that comes up in Soviet sources is problematic when writing about Sunni Islam because it does not have a hierarchic structure. Unless it is a translation from Russian, other terms such as figures and scholars are used to denote the various formal Islamic leaders (*imam, mullah, etc.*)

### The PDPA’s Marxist Playbook

The communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978 (the *Saur* (April) Revolution) came after a period of political turmoil that had started with the ousting of King Zahir Shah by his former Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan in 1973. Leading to the creation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), the coup had been a home-grown affair whose striking success came as a surprise for the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup> The rise of the PDPA was particularly unexpected given the party’s membership of only a few thousand members – mostly in Kabul and in the military – and, at the same time, its bitter factionalism. Since its inception, the PDPA was split between two groups – *Khalq* (People) and *Parcham* (Banner) – that competed for influence among its constituency and favor in Moscow.

After the April Revolution, *Khalq* dominated Afghan politics with its leader Nur Muhammad Taraki becoming the General Secretary of the Central Committee (CC) PDPA. To consolidate his power, Taraki, with the support of his ally Hafizullah Amin, side-lined *Parcham*. In summer 1978, Babrak Karmal, the latter’s leader, was sent as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Then, *Khalq* decided to remodel Afghanistan using the Marxist playbook. In his radio speech on 9 May 1978, Taraki announced a plan of far-reaching domestic and international policies. The first measure the regime wanted to adopt was the land reform, the second – the abolition of ‘old feudal and pre-feudal relations’.<sup>5</sup> Besides the traditional Islamic introduction and a nod to the respect of Islam, the speech was devoid of Islamic references and none of the 28 measures proposed by the PDPA dealt with religion. That radicalism came

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<sup>4</sup> Odd Arne Westad, “Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978-1979,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1994), pp. 49-69; David Gibbs, “Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan: A Declassified History,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2006), pp. 239-63; Alexander Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya i Doblest’ Afgana* (Moscow: GPI Iskon, 1995), pp. 61-139.

<sup>5</sup> “TASS Afganistan, tom (t.) 1, Tekst zayavleniya predsedatelya revolyutsionnogo soвета prem’er ministra Demokraticheskoi Respubliki Afganistan N.M. Taraki,” 9 May 1978, in Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Fond (F.) R4459, Opis’ (Op.) 43, Delo (D.) 19648, Listy (Ll.) 237-246.

as a surprise for many observers. The American embassy in Kabul reported that the PDPA was putting itself at risk by so quickly discarding its ‘initial veil of “Islamic nationalism”’.<sup>6</sup>

The issue with *Khalq*’s plan had to do with both the policies and their implementation. Its reforms, though not necessarily anti-religious, were directed against traditional economic and political elites, including Islamic authorities,<sup>7</sup> and challenged centuries-old tradition that were associated with religion. The new regime thus initiated a land and water reform aimed at redistributing Afghanistan’s land. Plagued by corruption, conducted with little planning and without having consolidated the regime’s hold in the countryside, the reform proved a disaster. It came as a critical factor in mobilizing the population against the PDPA.<sup>8</sup> Other measures such as literacy programs for women, mixed girls’ and boys’ classes, and the abolition of the bride price by which girls were given into marriage also led to protests in the conservative countryside.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, the regime’s drive to reform regularly led to misbehavior by party cadres with beatings of landowners, *mullahs* and ordinary peasants, pillaging of houses, and burning of religious books being reported.<sup>10</sup> Instances of disrespect for religion were also noted, including for instance in a village were party cadres forbade the morning prayer (*namaz*) and brought donkeys into the mosque.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the conflicts that occurred were the result of pre-existing tensions between Afghans in the city and the countryside. The often

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<sup>6</sup> “10. Telegram from the Embassy in Afghanistan,” 30 April 1978, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1977–1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, pp. 19-21.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan, A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 228; Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), p. 57; Chantal Lobato, “Islam in Kabul: The religious politics of Babrak Karmal,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (1985): pp. 111-20.

<sup>8</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 115-21; Fred Halliday, “War and Revolution in Afghanistan,” *New Left Review*, Vol. 119 (1980), pp. 20-41.

<sup>9</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 43; Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964-83*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 88. Vasiliy Kravtsov, an Afghanistan expert, officer in KGB and adviser in KHAD from 1988 to 1991 who was notably stationed in Kandahar, assesses these to have been the main reasons for the insurgency. Vasiliy Kravtsov, interview, Moscow, 7 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Hyman, *Afghanistan*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>11</sup> David Gai and Vladimir Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie, Neizvestnyye Stranitsy Neob’yavlennoi Voiny* (Moscow: SP ‘IKPA’, 1991), p. 197.

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young urban party cadres were perceived as disrespectful toward Islam and tradition based as much on their behavior and look, such as bare head or long hair instead of the cap or turban, failure to pray five times a day, and lack of deference to the *mullah*, as on the policies they came to implement.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, *Khalq* surprisingly failed to appreciate that Islam in Afghanistan was an ‘all-encompassing way of life’.<sup>13</sup> The opposition to its reforms from conservative tribes, Islamic leaders, and the rural population was not unlike what faced by Amanullah Khan in the 1920s and by Daud.<sup>14</sup> In the late 1970s, the country had some 300,000 religious figures who worked in one of its 45,000 mosques and *madrasas*.<sup>15</sup> In villages, the mosque was the structuring building and the *mullah*’s role went far beyond that of a prayer leader. He was the authority for the resolution of disputes and a folk-healer. As noted by Oliver Roy, Islam in rural Afghanistan provided ‘a system of norms, a code regulating human relations, a social morality’.<sup>16</sup> Such “popular religion”, akin to the role Christianity played in medieval Western Europe, linked to all aspects of everyday life. Through the numerous religious figures, the religious buildings and the ever-present shrines of Muslims saints to which Afghans went to pilgrimage (*ziyarat*), Islam was also visible in the environment. By contrast to “village *mullahs*” whose role was central in the community and who at the same time formed part of the elite, the influence of religious figures in cities had eroded by the late 1970s following attempts at modernization, the introduction of new civil institutions, and secular schools.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hyman, *Afghanistan*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>13</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 40; Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 30-53.

<sup>14</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 187, pp. 174-225.

<sup>15</sup> Vasilii Khristoforov, *Afghanistan, Pravyashchaya Partiya i Armiya (1978-1989)* (Moscow: Granitsa, 2009), p. 144. If combined with the World Bank population estimate (13.4 millions) for 1979, this would mean one religious figure per 45 Afghans. The World Bank, “Afghanistan, Data” (2019). <https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan> The estimate provided by Khristoforov is 1 per 60.

<sup>16</sup> Roy, *Islam*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Hyman, *Afghanistan*, pp. 17-18.

In that context, reforms that were perceived to be anti-Islamic, as well as attacks on Islamic symbols and leaders played a significant role in spurring contestation. The problem was that *Khalq* was simply not paying enough attention to Islam.<sup>18</sup> Speaking with the Soviets, the Governor of Ghazni Province complained that the land reform and the introduction of mixed school classes did not take into account religious aspects.<sup>19</sup> As reported by a Soviet official, another issue was the reform of the Afghan judiciary system that had been modelled on the Soviet one. The latter deprived countryside *mullahs* of their role as arbiters of disputes. This antagonized both the religious figures who lost a source of material benefit and the population that was forced to travel far away in search of a judge.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, the reforms were not directed against religion but ended up being seen as such. Other measures tried to impose Soviet-style symbols on the DRA and had sometimes anti-Islamic undertones. In October 1978, *Khalq* thus changed the country's flag to make it entirely red and remove all Islamic symbols. The regime then decided to skip the preamble, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,' at the beginning of official statements.<sup>21</sup> Another badly-received decision forced Kabul residents to paint their doors in red to celebrate the new authorities.<sup>22</sup>

By 1979, the PDPA's Islamic credentials had been durably eroded. It did not help that its leaders boasted of their disdain for religion. In a discussion with Vladimir Kryuchkov, the Head of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, Taraki promised, that Afghan mosques would be empty within a year.<sup>23</sup> The fact that this quote by Taraki was repeated by an Afghan officer from a remote garrison to a visiting Soviet General suggests that the new authorities

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<sup>18</sup> Abdul Darmanger, interview, Bole (Switzerland), 13 January 2020. Darmanger is a former *Khalqi* Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs who personally knew Taraki, Amin, Karmal, and Najibullah. Darmanger notes that the PDPA leadership was very much secularized as compared to most Afghans. He however argues that *Khalq* did not wish to specifically attack religion, this came as a by-product of the reforms.

<sup>19</sup> Viktor Merimsky, *Zagadki Afganskoi Voiny* (Moscow: Veche, 2015), pp. 22–26.

<sup>20</sup> Georgy Korniyenko, *Kholodnaya Voina, Svidetel'stvo Ee Uchastnika* (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001), p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> Hyman, *Afghanistan*, pp. 112-114.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo, Chast' Pervaya* (Moscow: Olymp AST, 1996), pp. 191-92.

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were not afraid to pass that message to their countrymen.<sup>24</sup> In these matters, Amin appeared as the most radical leader. Unlike others, he was bent on taking Stalin’s ruthless policies as an example and spoke of establishing a ‘dictatorship of the working class’ in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

Facing opposition to its reform, *Khalq* deployed a campaign of repressions against groups that it saw as threats to the regime, including religious and tribal leaders, students and teachers, military officers, and *Parcham* cadres.<sup>26</sup> Though the campaign’s scale is difficult to ascertain, some 50,000 people, including 12,000 inside Kabul prisons, were probably executed between April 1978 and September 1979,<sup>27</sup> many more were jailed in the Pul-e Charkhi prison and pushed toward exile. Afghanistan’s Shia Muslims – the Hazaras – were particularly affected by the repressions. As the campaign grew in scope, it targeted religious leaders after fall 1978.<sup>28</sup> This included the executions of Islamists who were jailed under the previous regime. In February 1979, the PDPA took it a step further by executing several dozen male members of the Mujaddidi family of Sufi scholars, Afghanistan’s most influential Islamic authorities.<sup>29</sup> These repressions underlined *Khalq*’s “anti-clerical” character and led to some PDPA cadres complaining to the Soviets that Taraki’s war on ‘bearded men’<sup>30</sup> was stirring up unrest and preventing moderate insurgent leaders such as Sayyid Ahmed Gailani, the leader of a Sufi order, from establishing contact with the regime.<sup>31</sup>

By spring 1979, no more than 10% of Islamic figures among lower and middle ranks supported the regime according to the Soviets.<sup>32</sup> *Khalq* had in effect lost Islam to the

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<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Snegirev and Valerii Samunin, *Virus ‘A’, Kak My Zaboleti Vtorzheniem v Afganistan*, Electronic Copy from Author (Moscow: Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Interv’yu Kh. Amina,” 7 July 1979, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 20977, Ll. 140; Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya*, p. 101.

<sup>26</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*; Alexander Lyakhovskiy, *Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979* (Washington DC: Cold War International History Project, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> “39. Special Analysis Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency1,” 23 March 1979, in FRUS, 1977–1980, pp. 111-14.

<sup>29</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Fred Halliday and Zahir Tanin, “The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978–1992: Institutions and Conflicts,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 8 (1998), p. 1360.

<sup>31</sup> Snegirev and Samunin, *Virus*.

<sup>32</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, p. 145.

opposition.<sup>33</sup> Its policies had fostered a popular insurgency and *mullahs* had taken a key role in organizing it.<sup>34</sup> Some 1,300 of them fought among the insurgents, including over 400 who commanded military units.<sup>35</sup> In this context, the authorities faced a revolt in Herat, a city with an important Shia Muslim population near the Iranian border, in March. Initial discontent was apparently spurred by opposition to the regime's policies advocating for girls' education.<sup>36</sup> Some twenty thousand people died in the uprising while insurgents lynched party cadres and Soviet advisers.<sup>37</sup>

The Herat revolt showed the strength of the insurgency and led to the first calls from Kabul for a Soviet military intervention. Talking with Alexei Kosygin, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Taraki claimed that the Herat population was 'under the influence of Shia slogans.' A Soviet intervention was necessary because Afghans who had been trained in Soviet military academies were 'unreliable'. They were all 'Muslim reactionaries.'<sup>38</sup>

### **Islam and the Road to the Soviet Intervention**

PDPA's initial calls for action were rebuffed by the Soviet politburo. On 17 March, Soviet policymakers agreed that an intervention would require, in the words of Politburo member Andrei Kirilenko, the USSR 'to wage a war in significant part against the [Afghan] people.'<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the Politburo, under perhaps the influence of the PDPA, was mindful of the Islamic component of the insurgency. Kirilenko, Andrei Gromyko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yuri Andropov, the Head of the KGB, and Dmitry Ustinov, the Minister of Defense, all spoke of either 'religious fundamentalists,' 'religious fanatics,' or 'Islamic

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<sup>33</sup> Sergey Akhromeyev and Georgy Korniyenko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata, Kriticheskii Vzglyad na Vneshnyuyu Politiku SSSR Do i Posle 1995 Goda* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1992), pp. 171–73.

<sup>34</sup> David B. Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45. The number of Soviets killed was difficult to ascertain even at the time. Braithwaite suggests that it was overestimated and only three people were actually killed.

<sup>38</sup> Boris Gromov, *Ogranichennyi Kontingent* (Progress: Moscow, 1994), pp. 34-40.

<sup>39</sup> "Ob obostrenii obstanovki v Demokraticheskoi Respublike Afganistan i nashikh vozmozhnykh merakh," 17 March 1979, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), F. 89, Op. 25, D. 1, Ll. 1-25.

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fundamentalists’.<sup>40</sup> Kosygin summarized the politburo’s thinking by stressing that Afghans were ‘all Mohammedans’ whose faith was ‘sufficiently strong that they [could] close ranks on that basis.’<sup>41</sup> For the Soviets, the problem had to do with Taraki and Amin’s wrong ‘tactics’, including with regard to religion. They needed to be instructed that:

Executions, torture and so forth could not be applied on a massive scale. Religious questions, the relationship with religious communities, with religion generally, and with religious leaders [had to] take on special meaning .... [They] must ensure, with all decisiveness, that no illicit measures whatsoever are undertaken.<sup>42</sup>

Based on that conversation, Leonid Brezhnev instructed Taraki a few days later that ‘appropriate work must be done with the clergy to split their ranks’.<sup>43</sup> It was the Kremlin’s advice to the Afghans to only target Muslim figures ‘who spoke out against the revolutionary government’.<sup>44</sup> These discussions are central in understanding the evolution of Soviet thinking on the April Revolution. As reported by Andrey Grachev who worked in Boris Ponomarev’s International Department CC CPSU, this was the moment when the Soviet leadership’s view, pushed by Ponomarev, of Afghanistan as another Third World country moving toward socialism started to waver. This impression only grew throughout 1979.<sup>45</sup> Despite Soviet economic and military support, *Khalq*’s plan to ‘smash the existing social and political systems to clear the way for progress’<sup>46</sup> was not working.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Record of Conversation between L.I. Brezhnev and N.M. Taraki,” 20 March 1979, in RGANI, f. 89, o. 14, d. 25, l. 8, in History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive (HPPDA). <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111282>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Andrey Grachev, interview, Moscow, 3 September 2019. Grachev worked in the International Department CC CPSU from 1973 to 1991, being the Deputy Chief of the International Department from 1989 to 1991. He was in 1991 the acting Press-Secretary of the President of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Robinson and Jay Dixon, *Aiding Afghanistan, A History of Soviet Assistance to a Developing Country* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), pp. 155–56.

That March politburo discussion showed Soviet awareness of the religious factor in Afghanistan that many of the Soviets saw distortedly through the prism of the experience of the *Basmachi* movement, a popular revolt that had developed under the banner of Islam and in reaction to the Bolsheviks' drive to reform Central Asia during the October Revolution.<sup>47</sup> Islam was one of the reasons of Moscow's reluctance to intervene. Throughout 1979, a total of 15 calls for intervention by Taraki and Amin were similarly declined.<sup>48</sup> In June, the Soviet leadership made another attempt at pressuring the PDPA into tolerance toward Islam. Taking note of 'false reports' that spoke of Muslims being persecuted and of "canons of Islam [being] trampled on", the politburo instructed the Soviet ambassador to help the PDPA 'map out concrete steps directed at countering this malicious propaganda [and] attracting an ever greater number of Muslim *ulemas* [scholars] on the side of the Revolution'.<sup>49</sup> In the Soviet view, the regime was not doing enough in 'convincing the broad masses of Muslims that the socioeconomic reforms carried out by the PDPA and people's power, the need for which is advocated in Islam, [did] not affect and [would not] affect the religious beliefs of Muslims'.<sup>50</sup>

Following the events in Herat, KGB operatives in Afghanistan, the Soviet politburo's main source of information about the country,<sup>51</sup> also started paying more attention to the religious factor. As reported by a former agent, the KGB office in Kabul outlined a five-points plan to deal with Islam: (1) better take into account the 'possible reaction of the Muslim clergy' to actions of the authorities; (2) use KGB contacts to push the authorities to stop repressions against 'the Muslim clergy'; (3) work more actively with the "official

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<sup>47</sup> On the *Basmachi*: Glenda Fraser, "Basmachi — I," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1987), pp. 1–73; Glenda Fraser, "Basmachi — II," *Central Asian Survey* Vol 6, No. 2 (1987), pp. 7–42. Grachev notes that one issue was that the Soviets, despite referring to the *Basmachi*, were though mostly thinking of the Central Asia of the 1970s. Grachev, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya*, pp. 125–6.

<sup>49</sup> "Draft instructions to the Soviet Ambassador in Kabul with Appeal of the CC CPSU Politburo to the CC PDPA Politburo," 28 June 1979, in HPPDA. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113036>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Anatoly Adamishin, interview, Moscow, 28 August 2019. Adamishin is a career diplomat who served as the Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1986 to 1990, and Minister of the Russian Federation for the Community of Independent States from 1997 to 1998.

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clergy””; (4) organize visits to Afghanistan of Soviet Islamic authorities; and (5) increase contacts through KGB agents with Gailani to convince him to return to the DRA.<sup>52</sup> Among these measures, ones that depended only on the Soviets started to be realized even before the start of the intervention; others appeared long unacceptable to the PDPA.

In fact, throughout 1979, the contrast of outlooks between Afghans and Soviets grew more important. It did so as to how to fight the insurgency, broaden the base of the regime, as well as implement reforms. *Khalq* sought a maximalist interpretation of the socialist ideal while the Soviets saw it as unsuitable for Afghanistan. Islam was here a case in point. In the USSR, atheistic propaganda in Muslim regions was conducted with limited resources by the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, *Khalq*'s attempts to take active measures against religious figures in an environment less prone to that than Central Asia appeared surreal to Moscow.

In parallel, the Soviets were appalled by the factionalism and unreliability of the PDPA. After purging *Parcham*, *Khalq* turned to internal infighting. In October 1979, the assassination of Taraki by supporters of Amin aggravated tensions.<sup>54</sup> Although the DRA remained aligned with the USSR, Amin's increasing unpredictability was crucial in altering the Soviet position on non-intervention.<sup>55</sup> The main factor was apparently his unsuccessful attempt to reach to the US.<sup>56</sup> Concerns that Kabul may try to balance between the two superpowers were compounded by the Kremlin's belief that with the loss of Iran after the Islamic revolution, Washington was looking for new allies in the region. The fact that Moscow thought that the international situation was already moving toward confrontation also made it less mindful of the fallout of its policies in Afghanistan.

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<sup>52</sup> Snegirev and Samunin, *Virus*.

<sup>53</sup> Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim, The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 298-365.

<sup>54</sup> Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye, The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 23.

<sup>55</sup> Westad, “Prelude”; Gibbs, “Reassessing”; Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, pp. 61-39.

<sup>56</sup> Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, pp. 104, 119.

Besides, conflict developments in Afghanistan factored in Soviet calculations. Amin's inability to either quell the insurgency by force or radically alter his policies to accommodate Soviet advice for restraint suggested to the Kremlin that without an intervention, Afghanistan was heading for a prolonged civil war.<sup>57</sup> Speaking after the events, Fikrat Tabeev, the Soviet Ambassador in Afghanistan, even believed that there was at the time a 'real threat of a counterrevolutionary coup under the banner of the Islamic fundamentalists.'<sup>58</sup> The latter presented an ideological problem for Moscow: it meant that a 'progressive revolution' would be overturned by 'reactionary forces'.<sup>59</sup> In this regard, it is useful to point out that Soviet, at the time widely dismissed, claims that 'imperialism' was aiding the 'counter-revolution' in Afghanistan proved true. The Americans had been delivering non-military aid and providing propaganda support to the *Mujahideen* since July 1979.<sup>60</sup> Finally, though it was not a major factor, several Soviet policymakers voiced concerns that a victory of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan might stir trouble among Soviet Muslims in Central Asia.<sup>61</sup>

In late November, Andropov, with the support of Ustinov and Gromyko, took the decision to intervene. That triumvirate side-lined Kosygin, who was the main advocate of restraint, and overruled the opposition of the General Staff.<sup>62</sup> The plan was for Soviet forces to install *Parcham's* Karmal and then avoid engaging the insurgents.<sup>63</sup> It anticipated that a large part of the population would greet the removal of Amin with relief. On 25 December 1979, the USSR deployed its military to Afghanistan under the Soviet-Afghan Friendship and

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<sup>57</sup> In minor concessions, newspapers started writing more positively about religion and the authorities re-introduced the Islamic preamble at the beginning of official statements in fall 1979. Hyman, *Afghanistan*, p. 113; "Afghanistan, t. 6, Statya v 'Kabul Taims'," 22 October 1979, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 20979, Ll. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, p. 79.

<sup>59</sup> Akhromeyev and Korniyenko, *Glazami*, pp. 173–75; Grachev, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*. Kindle (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe*, pp 200–201; "275. Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union," 24 May 1980, in FRUS, 1977–1980, pp. 736–37. Concern over Islamic fundamentalism's impact on Central Asia though grew in importance as the war progressed.

<sup>62</sup> Westad, "Prelude"; Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya*, pp. 105–25.

<sup>63</sup> Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya*, p. 176.

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Cooperation Treaty using the pretext of *Khalq*'s previous calls for intervention. On 27 December, Soviet Special Forces physically eliminated Amin.

### The USSR and Islam in the DRA

In January 1980, it quickly became clear that Karmal's regime was unable to fight the insurgency on its own. Following protests in Kabul and attacks on the Soviet embassy in February, the LCST received instructions to start military operations with Afghan forces.<sup>64</sup> In the meantime, the Kremlin decided that a withdrawal was inadvisable until the situation was stabilized.<sup>65</sup> The Afghan government was placed under Soviet supervision while hundreds of advisers were dispatched to the country.<sup>66</sup>

Though Moscow oversaw the development of policy during the war, new initiatives were discussed with the PDPA and the latter retained flexibility in their implementation. Soviet advisers sometimes substituted themselves to Afghans, especially in domains that required technical or “ideological” expertise,<sup>67</sup> but a lot was left for the PDPA to decide in areas where knowledge of the context was needed according to former KGB and Afghan State Intelligence Agency (*Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati*, KHAD) officers.<sup>68</sup> Such was the case of religious policy where Soviet involvement remained limited until late into the war.<sup>69</sup> One reason for that was the continuing influence of “orthodox” communists in defining policy in Afghanistan; another had to do with the military's belief that pacification would be achieved by force. This though did not mean that individual advisers could not intervene in

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>66</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, p. 49; Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, p. 101.

<sup>67</sup> Ramazan Daurov, ed., *Dnevnikovye Zapisi M.F. Slinkina - Sovetnika Zaveduyushchego Mezhdunarodnym Otdelom TSK NDPA (1982 g.)* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2016), p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Kravtsov, interview; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview, Moscow, 18 February 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Vladimir Snegirev, interview, phone/ email, 25/26 January 2019; Snegirev is one of the top Russian experts on the Afghan War. He was a correspondent for Soviet newspapers during the war. Vladimir Plastun, interview, email, 22 May 2019. Plastun is a top Russian researcher on Afghanistan and was an adviser in the Afghan military during the war. Anonymous Soviet General, interview, Moscow, 10 December 2017/ 02 February 2018. The General notes that there was in the military no interest for non-military issues, including religious questions.

matters of religion. In one such case, the editor of the Afghan journal *Life of the Party* complained that a Soviet had admonished the Afghan Minister of Islamic Affairs.<sup>70</sup>

Upon their arrival, most of the Soviets had little understanding of Afghan culture, traditions, and Islam.<sup>71</sup> To communicate with locals, they mostly relied on Central Asians who served as translators in the LCST due to the linguistic proximity between Central Asia and North Afghanistan. This however did not help much in filling the existing cultural gaps, especially in the Pashtun South. In this context, measures were undertaken to inform the LCST about the DRA. These however remained limited to handbooks and briefings that covered Afghan history and geography, and presented stereotyped information about the population. These documents introduced the LCST to local ‘customs’, ‘superstitions’, and gave recommendations. Some of these related to Islam, including warnings to avoid camping near shrines and cemeteries, disrupt and laugh at daily prayers, and approach veiled women.<sup>72</sup>

During the war, the LCST remained influenced by official ideology that stipulated that it was providing ‘internationalist help’ to a fellow progressive revolution. The handbooks to soldiers were complemented with ones to political workers who conducted in-country lectures to ensure ideological correctness. Full of Marxist rhetoric, one such handbook dealt with the PDPA’s policy toward Islam.<sup>73</sup> It emphasized Karmal’s newfound tolerance for Islam but avoided criticizing *Khalq*’s earlier policies. Overall, it struggled to strike a balance between describing religion as a vestige of the past and a necessary evil. Its last paragraph

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<sup>70</sup> Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, p. 330.

<sup>71</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, pp. 169, 198; Snegirev, interview; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview; Grachev, interview. The KHAD officer notes that only with time Soviet advisers started to better understand the realities of Afghanistan while the military always remained less interested in the context. On a separate note, the USSR had knowledgeable experts on Afghanistan, notably in the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID). Given the secrecy of the decision-making, most experts and people in the MID were though kept in the dark about the upcoming intervention. See: David A. Welch and Odd Arne Westad, eds., “The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente,” Nobel Symposium 95, Lysebu, 17-20 September 1995 (Oslo: The Norwegian Nobel institute, 1996), pp. 153-56, in NSA.  
<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=6552418-National-Security-Archive-Doc-5-The-Intervention>

<sup>72</sup> G. Arzumanov and L. Shershnev, eds., *Sovetskomu Voinu ob Afganistane* (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamenogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> L. Shershnev and V. Granitov, eds., *Islam v Sovremennom Afganistane. Politika NDPA v Otnoshenii Religii* (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamenogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1982).

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candidly noted that ‘the PDPA was taking into account that given the deep religiosity of the population of Afghanistan, the low level of political consciousness of a considerable part of the workers, the extreme backwardness of the country, it was impossible to fight for the masses from openly atheistic positions.’<sup>74</sup> The Soviets were hence not ready to tell the LCST that Karmal’s tolerance of Islam was anything else than a temporary tactic. This seemed a mistake to some advisers who advocated for a less ideological approach.<sup>75</sup> Unlike other handbooks,<sup>76</sup> the one on Islam interestingly avoided drawing parallels between Afghanistan and Central Asia. This was perhaps done to avoid discussing the difficult topic of religion in the USSR with Soviet soldiers.

By contrast, Moscow tried to inform Afghans about the life of Muslims in Central Asia even before the intervention. In May 1979, an exposition was organized at the embassy in Kabul. It had a booth devoted to Islam in the USSR that distributed Soviet-printed Korans. Staffed by an Uzbek representative from the Soviet Council for Religious Affairs, the state administration dealing with religion, it was reportedly one of the most visited parts of the exposition, including personally by Taraki and Amin.<sup>77</sup> Such events continued to be held afterward. In July 1980, a photo exposition about the life of Soviet Muslims was conducted in Kabul. Many pro-regime Muslim figures allegedly visited it.<sup>78</sup> During the war, Afghan media continued to regularly report about Central Asia but focused on the industrial and economic development it had achieved. Islam was mentioned only in passing. There is for instance no mention of religion in documents on cultural co-operation between Central Asian republics

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Plastun, *Iznanka Afganskoi Voiny, 1979-1980 gg. Dnevnikovye Zapisi i Kommentarii Uchastnika* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2016), p. 353.

<sup>76</sup> A. Bondarenko, *Aktual’nye Problemy Formirovaniya u Lichnogo Sostava Ponimaniya Tselei i Zadach Prebyvaniya Sovetskikh Voisk v DRA, Klassovoi Nenavisti k Vragam Afganskoi Revolyutsii (Material k Lektsii v Sisteme Marksistsko-Leninskoi Podgotovki Ofitserov)* (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamennogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1985).

<sup>77</sup> Eren Tasar, “The Central Asian Muftiate in Occupied Afghanistan, 1979–87,” *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 215-16.

<sup>78</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 16,” 6 July 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22325, L. 44.

and Afghanistan in the mid-1980s<sup>79</sup> and little about Islam in the materials sent by the Soviet *Press Agency Novosti* (APN) to Afghan media between 1984 and 1987.<sup>80</sup>

People-to-people exchanges, including initially of religious officials, complemented the expositions and media reports about Central Asia. In January 1980, the Afghan Head of the Religious Council reported that he had ‘visited Tashkent, Tajikistan’ together ‘with 15 mullahs’. In the Soviet Union, he noted the ‘respect shown to religious cults’ and Islam, claiming that it was ‘even greater than what [he] had witnessed in Saudi Arabia’, a statement that may have given any Muslim pause.<sup>81</sup> In this context, a milestone was the visit to the DRA of Ziyauddinkhan ibn Eshon Babakhan, the Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, in July 1981. Babakhan was the most influential Islamic authority in the Soviet Union and part of the state organ overseeing Islam in Central Asia. He was received as a head of state in Afghanistan, touring mosques, meeting loyal Muslim figures and government officials, including the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Sultan Ali Keshtmand.<sup>82</sup> His visit even reportedly led to discussions about the dispatch to Afghanistan of a permanent adviser for religious policy, though according to various Soviet officials, it does not seem anyone was sent.<sup>83</sup> At least one other visit by

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<sup>79</sup> “Plan sotrudnichestva sovetского obshchestva družby i kulturnoi svyazi s Afganistanom,” 1985, in GARF, F. R9576, Op. 21, D. 46, L. 7.

<sup>80</sup> “Otchety Agentstva Pechati ‘Novosti’ (APN) v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti,” January-December 1984, in GARF, F. R9587, Op. 4, D. 90; “Otchety APN v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti” January-June 1985, in *Ibid*, D. 242; “Otchety APN v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti,” July-December 1985, in *Ibid*, D. 243; “Otchety APN v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti,” January-December 1986, in *Ibid*, D. 417; “Otchety APN v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti,” January-June 1987, in *Ibid*, D. 603; “Otchety APN v Afganistane of informatsionno-propagandistskoi deyatel’nosti,” July-December 1987, in *Ibid*, D. 604.

<sup>81</sup> “TASS Afghanistan, t. 4, Interv’yu predsedatelya soveta Ulemov,” 22 January 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22313, L. 235.

<sup>82</sup> “TASS Afghanistan, t. 6, Zavershenie vizita Z. Babakhanova,” 1 July 1981, in GARF, F. R4459, O. 44, D. 84, Ll. 41-3, 52-3.

<sup>83</sup> Tasar, “Central Asian Muftiate,” p. 219. Kravtsov, interview; Snegirev, interview; Grachev, interview. Tasar notes that it is unclear if anyone was sent. Interviews conducted by this author suggest that there was no such person.

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Afghan Muslim figures to the USSR occurred in April 1985 while Soviet religious officials occasionally visited the DRA.<sup>84</sup>

Such exchanges of religious officials however never became massive and influential as one can conclude from the lack of reports about them in Afghan media in the 1980s. By contrast, visits by Central Asian party officials remained frequent and every delegation from Moscow included people from Central Asia. According to journalist Vladimir Snegirev, one reason was that Islam and Muslim figures were not key to Moscow’s strategy in the DRA. The argument put forward was that it was Soviet industrial and economic development that should appeal to Afghans. This was why they were brought to study in technical institutes in the USSR.<sup>85</sup> Besides, although Islam was no longer frontally under attack in the Soviet Union, the country remained openly atheistic.<sup>86</sup> Giving the way Islam permeated everyday life in the Afghan countryside, it may have been counter-productive for the PDPA to discuss the situation with Islam in the USSR. Even the Central Asian religious figures who came to the DRA ended up being sometimes criticized when they addressed people in mosques, especially in the Pashtun South.<sup>87</sup> As put by Nikolai Egorychev, another Soviet Ambassador in Kabul, the PDPA had already to fend off *Mujahedeen*’s accusations of being ‘doubly infidel’ for having first attacked Islam under *Khalq* and then brought in the Soviet atheists.<sup>88</sup> Under these conditions, it was better for the regime to focus on explaining that it was itself respectful of Islam and that the Soviets were here only temporarily to fight international interference.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Tasar, "Central Asian Muftiate," pp. 217-18. Tasar documents several such visits between 1980 and 1986 but their impact was probably limited.

<sup>85</sup> Snegirev, interview.

<sup>86</sup> Tasar, *Soviet*, pp. 298-365.

<sup>87</sup> Tasar, "Central Asian Muftiate," p. 220; Plastun, interview.

<sup>88</sup> "Materialy Egorycheva N.G. k vozvrashcheniyu iz Afganistana v Moskvu," September-November 1988, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii, F. 797, Op. 1, D. 33, L. 1.

<sup>89</sup> In one exception in February 1980, an article noted that Soviet soldiers did ‘not only wholly respect the holy religion of Islam, but also protected it’. “TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Kommentarii agentstva ‘Bakhtar’,” 24 February 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22317, L. 49.

The benefits of modernization were also what the Soviets focused on when they developed a hearts-and-minds strategy late into the war. The latter started with the creation of the first agitprop unit in 1982 and was mainstreamed by the mid-1980s.<sup>90</sup> Managed by the military who were unused to such tasks,<sup>91</sup> the agitprop units provided medicine and food to Afghan villages, showed movies and distributed leaflets about the USSR, brought doctors and dentists, collected complaints and did infrastructure repairs.<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, they ended up including Afghan *mullahs* in a sign of the concessions on ideology made during the war. Still, it ended up being up to the PDPA to show that the Afghan regime, now led by *Parcham*, was respectful of Islam.

### **Karmal's "Islamic Socialism"**

Karmal faced many challenges in consolidating his regime. He had to justify his rise to power with Soviet support, praise and uphold the legacy of the April Revolution while accounting for the 'mistakes' committed under Amin, and find a way to increase support for the PDPA despite it being now subservient to a foreign power. In this context, one topic on which the regime focused to boost its legitimacy was religion. Relying on the radio, television, the news agency *Bakhtar*, and newspapers such as *Haqiqat-e Inqilab-e Saur* (Truth of the April Revolution), *Kabul New Times*, *Khivad*, and *Anis*, it deployed a narrative where Islam was now seen positively and integrated by the PDPA. In support of this, the media featured interviews with party officials and loyal Islamic figures.

Showing more respect for Islam was part of Karmal's plan to increase support for the regime by rendering its Marxist ideology and policies more acceptable to Afghans. In terms of the rhetoric, a shift was noticeable immediately after Karmal's arrival. On 19 January,

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<sup>90</sup> Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, pp. 195, 201; Kravtsov, interview; Snegirev, interview. Snegirev stresses that it was done reluctantly. Anonymous General, interview. The General likewise emphasizes that the military had long little interest for that.

<sup>91</sup> Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, pp. 202–3.

<sup>92</sup> Plastun, *Iznanka*, pp. 334–35.

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*Bakhtar* published an ‘Address of the Presidium of the DRA to Muslims of Afghanistan and the World’ that claimed that the April Revolution was a ‘materialization of the will of the country’s Muslim people toward the assertion of authentic social justice and a huge step on the path to the materialization of the ancient aspirations of true Muslims’.<sup>93</sup> The Address hence no longer called the April Revolution a ‘proletarian’ one. Such Amin-era expressions were banned. It instead presented it as part of a global Muslim struggle for liberation. Then, it argued that the ideologies of the April Revolution and Islam converged around social justice, suggesting that the PDPA’s program was indeed Islamic. Finally, the Address introduced an international angle by denouncing imperialist meddling and linking the April Revolution and the Islamic Revolution in Iran.<sup>94</sup> This argument served a double purpose for the DRA: it drew on the recognized Islamic legitimacy of the Iranian revolution to increase the legitimacy of the Afghan revolution and pursued a policy of building a joint anti-American front with Teheran that Moscow thought was still possible at that point.<sup>95</sup>

The change in the discourse on Islam was confirmed in a speech on 26 January 1980. The latter introduced the sort of “Islamic language” that Karmal tried to use afterward and that marked a stark contrast with official statements during the Amin period:

The sacred religion Islam, our national traditions and the traditions of our ancestors [are] the precious heritage of our people, and no one has the right to demonstrate against them and to oppose them. .... Amin and his criminal band have persecuted a great number of spiritual leaders, mullahs ... as well as elders of various tribes. .... The Revolutionary Council ... officially and decisively, with all sincerity, declares again the complete freedom of cults, national customs and traditions, the complete freedom to follow these traditions and worship whatever believers are Sunni or Shia.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Obrashchenie,” 19 January 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22313, Ll. 107-15.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview. The KHAD officer notes that limiting the criticism of Iran was then Moscow’s advice to the PDPA.

<sup>96</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Poslanie Babraka Karmalya,” 26 January 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22314, L. 138.

In following communications, Karmal often presented the regime as a staunch defender of religion. On 28 April 1980, he explained that ‘it was necessary in accordance with the principles of the holy Koran and Sharia to punish each person, who dared to shamelessly violate the ideals of Islam.’<sup>97</sup> At another level, the 26 January speech also marked the start of a policy change as the measures outlined in support of Islam were made into law. This included Karmal’s announcement that religious figures would be returned their ‘offices, positions, and assets’ if they went to the side of the regime.<sup>98</sup> The Kremlin approvingly noted that this marked ‘definite shifts in relation to the work with religious officials’.<sup>99</sup>

In the aftermath, Karmal took measures to correct *Khalq*’s reforms and behavior that were perceived as especially un-Islamic. Among these measures, some were symbolic adjustments, others represented major policy changes. With regard to the former, the regime now systematically celebrated Muslim holidays and festivals, such as the end of Ramadan (*Eid al-Fitr*) and the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (*Mawlid*). Party members partook in Islamic rituals, a practice that had been only irregularly present before 1980. Karmal visited mosques, including when touring provinces as in Herat in October 1982,<sup>100</sup> and the whole ‘party and state leadership of the DRA’ participated in *namaz* on the *Eid al-Fitr* in June 1985.<sup>101</sup> Besides, the PDPA now provided fuel for mosques and restored religious buildings destroyed by the opposition. Between January 1980 and August 1985, 57 mosques were reportedly constructed and another 527 restored in Kabul alone.<sup>102</sup> It

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<sup>97</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 12, Rech’ Babraka Karmalya,” 28 April 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22321, Ll. 128-9.

<sup>98</sup> “Poslanie Babraka Karmalya,” 26 January 1980.

<sup>99</sup> “CC CPSU Politburo transcript (excerpt),” 17 January 1980, in Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, F, F. 3, Op. 120, D. 44, Ll. 31, 42-44 in HPPPD, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111583>.

<sup>100</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Vystuplenie Karmalya,” 21 October 1982, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 1618, Ll. 61.

<sup>101</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Obrashchenie k narodu,” 19 June 1985, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 6178, Ll. 8-9.

<sup>102</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Zayavlenie b. Karmalya v svyazi s vyborami v dzhirgi,” 10 August 1985, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 6178, Ll. 213-4.

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also paid stipends to loyal Muslim figures, helped their families find accommodation, and financed pilgrimages to Mecca and to holy places in Afghanistan.<sup>103</sup>

Overall, these measures allowed the regime to present a more Islamic image but remained lacking in many ways. The PDPA was thus only able to reach to a fraction of the mosques and Islamic figures, mostly located in the urban areas it controlled. According to one estimate, the state supported in one way or another only some 2,500 mosques out of a total of 15,000 in the mid-1980s. Likewise, the financial help to Muslim figures reportedly represented only a third of what they received in insurgents’ Islamic committees.<sup>104</sup>

With regard to substantial policy changes, the PDPA attempted to identify *mullahs* and Islamic authorities to help in ‘building a new Afghanistan.’<sup>105</sup> For this matter, the regime organized religious assemblies with *ulemas* from across the country despite the fact that some of them resulted in criticism of its policies.<sup>106</sup> The religious figures’ support was though easier to channel if relations with them were institutionalized. This explained the creation of the High Council of Ulemas and the Clergy soon after Karmal’s arrival and of the General Department of Islamic Affairs in July 1980.<sup>107</sup> The latter was according to some accounts supervised by KHAD.<sup>108</sup> In April 1985, the transformation of the General Department of Islamic Affairs into an independent Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs marked an important step in the process of institutionalization.<sup>109</sup> As progress in consolidating a group of loyal Muslim figures was made,<sup>110</sup> insurgents started targeting them. In March 1984, Keshtmand reported that more than 200 of them had been killed by

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<sup>103</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Zayavlenie religioznogo deyatelya,” 27 September 1984, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 4573, Ll. 182.

<sup>104</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, p. 147.

<sup>105</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Na uchreditel’nom kongresse natsional’nogo otechestvennogo fronta DRA,” 15 June 1981, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 83, Ll. 167-78.

<sup>106</sup> Giustozzi, *War*, p. 61.

<sup>107</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 15, Zasedanie soveta ministrov,” 21 July 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22325, Ll. 210.

<sup>108</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 134.

<sup>109</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 2,” 11 April 1985, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 6176, Ll. 191-92.

<sup>110</sup> Giustozzi, *War*, p. 62.

the counter-revolution.<sup>111</sup> That campaign of violence was one indicator that in some areas, especially in the North, the PDPA's work to attract religious figures to its side was rather successful and seen as a threat by the opposition.

In the following years, one of the functions of loyal Muslim figures would be to support political initiatives, such as the National Fatherland Front (NFF) created on 15 June 1981 and aimed at giving the impression of a growing popular base for the regime.<sup>112</sup> In parallel, the PDPA relied on them to issue statements in support of the regime. In June 1980, Karmal ordered Muslim scholars to 'explain to the population the positions of the government with regard to Islam' and 'uncover the lying propaganda of the enemies'.<sup>113</sup> Following the adoption of the law on compulsory military service in January 1981, they were to remind Afghans of their Islamic duty. In April 1981, Sayyed Afghani who headed the General Department of Islamic Affairs until 1983 argued that 'in accordance with Islam, service in the army was considered a holy duty'.<sup>114</sup> In 1984, the party expanded that strategy by creating propaganda commissions of Muslim figures under the NFF. Their role was to publicize the politics of the PDPA by lecturing in mosques and in markets. These commissions were then tasked with calling on Afghans to join the armed forces.<sup>115</sup> As the *Mujahideen*, the PDPA was ironically using religion to mobilize the population for war. By the same token, it recruited *mullahs* into the military to organize *namaz* and conduct propaganda activities. However, testifying to the regime's difficulty of finding enough volunteers, only 300 *mullahs* were enlisted by the mid-1980s.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 1, Vystuplenie Keshtmanda," 16 March 1984, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 4570, Ll. 227.

<sup>112</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, pp. 134-35.

<sup>113</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 14, Vstrecha. Dve chasti," 15 June 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22323, L. 202.

<sup>114</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 4, Obzor kabul'skikh gazet," 2 April 1981, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 82, Ll. 61-62.

<sup>115</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 3, O sozdanii propagandistskikh komissii dukhovenstva," 25 June 1984, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 4572, Ll. 75.

<sup>116</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, pp. 148-9.

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Most crucially, the regime also reviewed key reforms implemented under *Khalq*. In April 1980, it replaced the all-red flag by the traditional tricolor that featured the color green, as well as a *mihrab* (niche) and a *minbar* (pulpit), two pieces of mosque architecture. The change was presented by Karmal as necessary due to the ‘objective realities of the Afghan society.’ The restoration of the color green was meant to ‘reflect [its] Islamic character.’<sup>117</sup> That measure in particular reportedly led to renewed tensions in the party as *Khalq* opposed *Parcham*’s ‘moderation’ and its ‘respect for Islam designed to placate the hostile populace’.<sup>118</sup>

In this context, the most far-reaching measure consisted of revisions to the land reform, the PDPA’s landmark measure so far. Here, the Soviets played a central role. In March 1980, criticism of Amin’s policies was formulated in the International Department CC CPSU and sent to Tabeev in Kabul. The Soviets were especially unhappy with how the land reform had been managed so far. It had been rushed and no well-tested tactic was used to not immediately provoke landowners and *mullahs*. The International Department in particular noted that including army officers, Islamic scholars, and *waqf* lands (Islamic endowment of lands to be used for religious purposes) in the reform had been a mistake.<sup>119</sup> As to the latter group, the report stressed, ‘the political importance of showing flexibility in manoeuvring toward Islam that is so strong and influent in the country, its traditional institutions, and, accordingly, religious leaders does not need to be demonstrated’. Yet, ‘exceptions on that count in the legislation on the reform are completely missing’. In conclusion, the International Department believed that it was still not too late to correct

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<sup>117</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 12, Vystuplenie Babraka Karmalya,” 22 April 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22321, L. 7.

<sup>118</sup> “282. Report Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research,” 2 June 1980, in FRUS, 1977–1980, pp. 753–6.

<sup>119</sup> “Uroki zemel’nykh reform v Afganistane,” International Department, CC CPSU, 24 March 1980, in NSA, pp. 2–4. [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text\\_files/Afganistan/A%201980.01.25-1.PDF](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afganistan/A%201980.01.25-1.PDF)

the reform. This Soviet advice became the blueprint for Karmal's adjustments to the land reform that were adopted the August 1981 and now made exceptions for Muslims figures:

Article 2. Waqf lands, belonging to holy sites of the religion of Islam, such as, mosques, religious madrassas, holy places, cannot be seized, and remain in the use of their custodians. Article 3. Surpluses of land areas included in the plots of religious scholars, imams of mosques, khatibs [persons delivering the sermon during the Friday prayer], and leaders of other cults... cannot be seized and remain in their possession and use. These land areas cannot be sold or hypothecated by their current owners and are transmitted in heritage indivisibly to rightful heirs on the condition of the continuation of the corresponding religious office. Article 4. Surpluses of land areas included in the plots of chiefs, elders of tribes, who have contributed to the fight against the domestic and foreign counterrevolution ... cannot be seized. Article 5. Surpluses of land areas included in plots of officers, who are serving in the armed forces, cannot be seized.<sup>120</sup>

In parallel, it was decided that peasants would be given land for a symbolic amount of money instead of for free.<sup>121</sup> These adjustments helped present the land reform as in accordance with the Koran and exemplified PDPA's attempt at diluting its ideology to appeal to Muslim figures, reward army officers, and reach to tribal elders.<sup>122</sup> Unsurprisingly, these groups were also the ones whose support the regime needed to fight the insurgents. Until the end of the war, the PDPA remained focused on gaining their support.

Nevertheless, the regime's measures in support of Islam had their limitations. A crucial one had to do with the background of the Muslim figures attracted by the PDPA. Most had had no national religious role before 1978 or even under Amin. Afghani was long the only pro-PDPA Islamic figure with a classic high-level Islamic education from Al-Azhar in

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<sup>120</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 12, Ukaz presidiuma revolyutsionnogo soveta," 11 August 1981, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 84, Ll. 241-43.

<sup>121</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Afganskaya kontrrevolyutsiya i Islam," 7 June 1986, in GARF, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7569, l. 204; Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, p. 37; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview.

<sup>122</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, pp. 142-45. The Soviets though continued to criticize the land reform that was soon to be suspended.

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Cairo. Others had been promoted through the ranks and were unorthodox elements with early sympathies for the PDPA. Their Islamic legitimacy was in doubt.<sup>123</sup>

Another was related with the overall strategy. Under Karmal, the party was ready to review measures that were unacceptable to believers but not to forsake the socialist ideal. The PDPA argued for convergence between Islam and socialism and wanted to establish freedom of worship and equality between Sunni and Shia Muslims. However, such a message came short of the aspiration of most of the population to see Sunni Islam return to its central place in Afghanistan. In March 1982, when proclaiming the party's plan of action, Karmal argued that the April Revolution's determination to establish 'social justice and equality' was 'one of the main values, of the main traditions of the holy religion of Islam'. To support his argument, he took the examples of such countries as Algeria, Syria, Libya, and South Yemen. He argued that 'revolutionary transformations' did not contradict 'the social content of Islam' in these places.<sup>124</sup> Yet, none of these Soviet-leaning countries could be described as really 'Islamic' and represent an acceptable model for Afghans.

The problem had also to do with Karmal himself. A true communist, he was better at referencing Islam than at 'speaking Islamically' about everything.<sup>125</sup> His record on religion was problematic even before 1978. One rumor, apparently false,<sup>126</sup> accused him of burning a Koran while he was Member of Parliament in the 1970s.<sup>127</sup> In 1970, there was this time the confirmed story of *Parcham's* journal publishing a poem to celebrate the centenary of Lenin's birth that used for the communist leader the benediction reserved for the Prophet (*dorud bar Lenin*).<sup>128</sup> The episode had spurred street protests in Kabul and led to the closing of the journal. It is thus no surprise that Karmal tried to meld Islam into his revolutionary

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<sup>123</sup> Lobato, "Islam," pp. 114-115; Giustozzi, *War*, p. 59.

<sup>124</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 2, Otkrytie konferentsii NDPA. Rech' B. Karmalya na obshchenatsional'noi konferentsii NDPA," 14 March 1982, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 1615, Ll. 14-53.

<sup>125</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 136; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview.

<sup>126</sup> Darmanger, interview.

<sup>127</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 11, Interv'yu predsedatelya revolyutsionnogo soveta DRA Babraka Karmalya," 31 March 1980, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 43, D. 22320, L. 57.

<sup>128</sup> Olivier Roy, *Islam*, p. 47

Marxist project. Speaking to *Newsweek* in June 1984, he argued that the goal of the party was not ‘to get rid of religion, but to organically integrate it into the revolution’.<sup>129</sup> When asked by *Spiegel* in November 1985 if the fact that he now prayed at the mosque was meant to appease the conservative circles of the population, Karmal’s brief answer was that ‘the April Revolution had guaranteed respect of Islam’. Pressed further, he again was unable to offer a profession of faith.<sup>130</sup>

In 1984-85, major speeches by Karmal only made a cursory mention of Islam. This was characteristic of the way most PDPA cadres spoke of religion. As noted by a Soviet adviser, they actually did not ‘know the language of the people’ of Afghanistan.<sup>131</sup> During Karmal’s rule, Islam and loyal Islamic figures were meant to give the regime an Islamic façade but even in its rhetoric the PDPA remained a Marxist party. This in turn limited the effectiveness of its strategy to contest the mantle of Islamic legitimacy to the *Mujahideen*.

### **Islam and National Reconciliation**

In May 1986, Najibullah became the General Secretary of the CC PDPA instead of Karmal. A year later, the disgraced leader was sent in exile to the USSR. In Moscow’s view, pacifying Afghanistan required a leader committed to an inclusive policy and with a reputation for toughness. Supported by the KGB, Najibullah, the former head of KHAD, was the man for the job.<sup>132</sup> His promotion followed a change of leadership in the Kremlin. Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Konstantin Chernenko in spring 1985. In February 1986, Gorbachev publicly voiced a negative assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and made clear his wish to bring back the LCST as soon as a settlement that would secure the Afghan regime was reached. Because

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<sup>129</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 3, Interv’yu Babraka Karmalya,” 4 June 1984, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 4572, Ll. 18-21.

<sup>130</sup> M. Danesch, “Die Bundesrepublik mischt sich massiv ein”, *Spiegel*, 4 November 1985.  
<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13514325.html>

<sup>131</sup> Daurov, *Dnevnikovye*, p. 61.

<sup>132</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, pp. 72-9; Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, pp. 94-110.

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of the ‘counterrevolution and imperialism’, Afghanistan had become a ‘bleeding wound’ for the Soviets.<sup>133</sup>

Gorbachev’s intention to withdraw meant that the task of building support for the PDPA had become more urgent. It did however not become easier. In November 1986, the Soviet General Staff assessed that there was no military solution in Afghanistan. The PDPA had ‘lost the battle for the Afghan people’. By Najibullah’s admission, the party had been unable to gain support from the peasantry because its land reform had been unsuccessful.<sup>134</sup> Under these conditions, a bolder strategy was needed to increase support for the regime. This assessment opened the way for Najibullah’s “national reconciliation” plan. In its context, Islam and pro-regime Muslim figures were to take on a political role. In his first week as General Secretary, Najibullah went to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs. He told religious leaders that the party saw the ‘patriotic clergy as one of the cornerstones of the revolutionary state’ and that he counted on them to help stop the war.<sup>135</sup> This message was in line with the PDPA’s propaganda department calls to not underestimate ‘the sacred banner of Islam’. It was the party’s role ‘to wrestle it away from the hands of the counter-revolution’ because the ‘calls of Islam for freedom, justice and equality were close to party slogans’.<sup>136</sup>

On the Soviet side, media reports and political briefings to the LCST also showed signs of a changing narrative with regard to Islam in Afghanistan. In June 1986, TASS published an article entitled ‘The Afghan Counterrevolution and Islam’. Following criticism of *Khalq’s* policies that had led ‘the clergy to become the main weapon of the counterrevolution’ because of ‘the religious fanaticism of the majority of the population’, the article noted that things had changed under Karmal who had ‘rectified the mistakes

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<sup>133</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, p. 75.

<sup>134</sup> “Rabochaya zapis’ zasedaniya Politbyuro TSK KPSS pp. 10, 11 O dal’neishikh meropriyatiyakh po Afganistanu; O Zakhir Shakhe,” 13 November 1986, in RGANI, F. 89, Op. 42, D. 16, Ll. 1-9.

<sup>135</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Vstrechi Nadzhiba,” 11 May 1986, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 7569, L. 1-3.

<sup>136</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 1, Seminar ideologicheskikh rabotnikov,” 14 January 1986, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 7565, Ll. 137-9.

committed'. Thanks to that, Afghan Muslims had supposedly realized who really 'respected religion' and who only instrumentalized it.<sup>137</sup> The TASS article was part of a more nuanced Soviet assessment that noted the importance of the progress achieved in integrating Islam to the regime.

These points were also reflected in a new brochure for Soviet political workers in the DRA. Claiming to show the 'real essence of the Islamic' "holy war for faith",<sup>138</sup> its authors argued that the insurgents' *jihad* only served imperialism and was thus a foreign import. By contrast, the 'majority of [Afghan] religious figures now supported the religious policy of the PDPA'<sup>139</sup> and were hence not part of the counter-revolution. In fact, the Soviets were now suggesting that two competing "Islams" had crystallized during the war. Accordingly, the handbook to brief soldiers of the LCST about the Afghan context now put the emphasis on Gorbachev's February 1986 speech and on Najibullah's national reconciliation.<sup>140</sup>

According to Soviet advisers, Moscow took time to integrate the importance of the religious factor in Afghanistan.<sup>141</sup> Henceforth, even the LCST military command started paying attention to religion. Vladimir Plastun, an adviser in the propaganda department of the Afghan military, narrates in his memoirs a characteristic episode from November 1987. In Kabul, he was approached by an officer from the staff of Varennikov. The principal Soviet decision-maker in Afghanistan urgently needed him to answer questions about Islam, including on: (i) the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims; (ii) the possibility of building mosques for Shia Muslims to gain their support; (iii) how religious ranks in Islam corresponded to positions in the Christian clergy; (iv) Ismailism; (v) the importance of the religious factor in DRA-Iran and DRA-Pakistan relations; and (vi) how Islam could be used

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<sup>137</sup> "Afganskaya kontrevolyutsiya i Islam," 7 June 1986.

<sup>138</sup> V. Shur, *Real'naya Sushchnost' Islamskoi 'Svyashchennoi Bor'by za Veru'* (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamennogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1987).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>140</sup> G. Arzumanov, V. Gubrii, and V. Sokol, *Sovetskomu Voinu ob Afganistane*, 5th ed. (Tashkent: Politicheskoe Upravlenie Krasnoznamennogo Turkestanskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1987).

<sup>141</sup> Snegirev, interview; Plastun, interview; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview. The KHAD officer also notes that Soviet advisers paid more attention to Islam closer to the end of the conflict.

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to pacify Afghan society.<sup>142</sup> This episode was suggestive at several levels. It showed both the continued lack of awareness of the religious factor among Soviet commanders and their interest in it. It also pointed to the apparent absence of religious officials and documentation to explain basic notions about Islam. Ultimately, it showed that Soviet policymakers had started discussing about how to use Islam to prop the regime. Varennikov’s last question obviously echoed Najibullah’s national reconciliation program.

In September 1986, the General Secretary of the PDPA officially introduced his national reconciliation plan that was to function under the moribund NFF. Presented in details in a televised speech in January 1987, the plan included a ceasefire, as well as three measures to bring insurgents to the side of the regime: national and local coalition governments, amnesties for fighters who laid down their arms, and the departure of the LCST as soon as the situation was stabilized.<sup>143</sup> The goal was to find common ground with moderate Islamists, monarchists, and all groups amenable to talk with the PDPA. Najibullah and the Soviets then hoped to drive a wedge between such ‘moderates’ and the radical Islamists, the ‘irreconcilable, fanatical part’ of the insurgents<sup>144</sup> who wanted a military victory. In many ways, national reconciliation built on Karmal’s attempts to broaden the regime’s base by strengthening its Islamic credentials.

According to Kim Tsagolov, a political adviser to Varennikov, embracing religion was also the Soviets’ advice to the PDPA. For Tsagolov, who claimed to have had a hand in writing Najibullah’s speech on national reconciliation, that policy had to be promoted by ‘the clergy’ because the ‘PDPA had discredited itself as a political force’.<sup>145</sup> In any case, due to

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<sup>142</sup> Plastun, *Iznanka*, 309–10.

<sup>143</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 1, Obrashchenie Nadzhiba k afganskomu narodu,” 14 January 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8837, Ll. 214-21.

<sup>144</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Otvety Nadzhiba na voprosy o natsional’nom primirenii,” 12 May 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8841, Ll. 22-45.

<sup>145</sup> Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, pp. 195-98.

Soviet advice or not,<sup>146</sup> Najibullah made Islam into the tenet behind his new policy. Addressing the *Mujahideen*, he said that the parties to the conflict had to emphasize what was uniting them. These were according to him ‘the shared belief in Islam, the shared motherland, and the passionate love for the people’.<sup>147</sup> In this context, Muslim figures were to be mediators in the war. They were to join grassroots national reconciliation commissions, as well as play a role in government. One planned measure was for insurgents to ‘recommend representatives to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs’ through ‘Islamic committees’ operating across the country.<sup>148</sup>

As compared to his predecessor, Najibullah was better at showcasing the Islamic credentials of the regime. Unlike Karmal, a man of mixed ethnic heritage with support in multi-ethnic North Afghanistan, Najibullah was a Pashtun with personal ties in south-eastern tribal areas. When reaching to opposition groups, he relied on them. After he became General Secretary, Najibullah also dropped his famous moniker “Najib”. He was now referred in the Afghan media only as Dr Mohammed Najibullah, a more Islamic-appropriate name.<sup>149</sup> By all accounts, he was a more charismatic, ideologically flexible, and efficient leader,<sup>150</sup> though he was tainted by his years of running the state’s repressive apparatus. Also, Najibullah was a better orator. Often quoting the Koran, he managed to speak the language of Islam and Afghan nationalism while denouncing the insurgents for their ‘unrighteous war against [Afghans’] belief, against [their] country, tribes, and native land’.<sup>151</sup> This was indeed a crucial skill in a country where the information travelled mostly orally.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Adamishin, interview. Adamishin stresses that Najibullah was leading in shaping national reconciliation.

<sup>147</sup> “Obrashchenie Nadzhiba k afganskomu narodu,” 14 January 1987.

<sup>148</sup> “Zapis’ besedy M.S. Gorbacheva s General’nym sekretarem TSK NDPA t. Nadzhibom,” 20 July 1987, GF, NSA. [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text\\_files/Afganistan/1987.07.20.Gorbachev-Najibullah.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afganistan/1987.07.20.Gorbachev-Najibullah.pdf)

<sup>149</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 7, Interv’yu Nadzhibully.” 4 October 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8843, L. 236.

<sup>150</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan, The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 252.

<sup>151</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 1, Zasednie revolyutsionnogo soveta DRA,” 3 January 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8837, Ll. 37-45.

<sup>152</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 136; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview; Kravtsov, interview.

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These qualities helped Najibullah present more convincingly the talking points that the regime had been promoting since 1980. In November 1986, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Plenum CC PDPA, Najibullah argued that the April Revolution and Islam had ‘one common rationale’ – Afghanistan’s ‘hardworking Islamic people.’ It was the role of the PDPA but also of the ‘patriotically geared mullahs to serve their revolutionary people’.<sup>153</sup> Najibullah’s approach was in re-framing the message about convergence between religion and socialism in a bolder way, recognizing that it was fundamental in Afghanistan to be an Islamic authority to remain in power. In May 1987, he thus stressed that ‘the PDPA fought for the interests of the Afghan people, the overwhelming majority of whom historically practiced the religion of Islam.’ The party had to admit that it ‘did not have another social base’.<sup>154</sup>

Aside from his rhetorical skills, Najibullah continued PDPA’s policies in support of Islam. By May 1986, the regime had helped restore 1,026 mosques, financed the construction of 231 new ones (though mostly in Kabul), and provided 147 families of *ulemas* with housing. At the beginning of national reconciliation, Najibullah boasted that his regime was in fact ‘building more mosques, than [the opposition] had time to destroy’.<sup>155</sup> Measures in support of religion were expanded afterward with the authorities for instance twice raising the salaries of religious figures.<sup>156</sup> Some 20,000 of them were allegedly receiving economic support by the late 1980s.<sup>157</sup> This was the sign of shifting priorities nationwide for the regime. In a meeting with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs in May 1987, Najibullah made that clear by stating that ‘party committees and state organizations were strictly instructed to pay special attention to the needs of mosques and the clergy’.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 9, Doklad Nadzhiba na Plenum TSK NDPA,” 22 November 1986, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 7573, Ll. 7-14.

<sup>154</sup> “Otvety Nadzhiba na voprosy o natsional’nom primirenii,” 12 May 1987.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 165.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>158</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Obzor ‘Khakikate Inkilabe Saur’,” 14 May 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8841, L. 75.

By that point, the situation had already dramatically changed as to the place of Islam in Afghanistan. The University of Kabul had a thriving Sharia faculty,<sup>159</sup> an Islamic Study Centre had been opened in February 1987 and promoted by the authorities,<sup>160</sup> newspapers were not published on Islamic holidays, *KNT* featured articles about *madrasas* in the country, the television had religious programming,<sup>161</sup> Kabul hosted a Koranic reading competition with participants coming from mostly pro-Soviet Muslim countries,<sup>162</sup> the leadership of the PDPA collectively participated in *namaz* for the end of Ramadan,<sup>163</sup> and the authorities were giving the honors of martyr, in the religious sense, to officers fallen in the war against the *Mujahedeen*.<sup>164</sup> Unlike before, the goal was to prove to the population that the PDPA not only tolerated religion but was itself truly Islamic and had the support of Afghanistan's Islamic authorities.

In February 1987, Najibullah summed up the measures taken to support Islam and emphasized the new political role played by religious figures in a landmark speech to the Special Commission for National Reconciliation:

The very word 'Islam' in translation from Arabic means 'living in peace'... In the course of the politics of national reconciliation, [the PDPA] will even more actively support and develop the respectful relation that the Muslim people [of Afghanistan] have towards Islam. Our commitment to Islam is enacted in the emblem and the state's flag; it is apparent in the restoration of Islamic values and the establishment of the conditions for the free practice of religions. Our adversaries cannot silence such undeniable facts as the election of 750 mullahs into our local organs of state authority,

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<sup>159</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 4, DRA-Primirenje. Dve chasti," 9 April 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8840, L. 18.

<sup>160</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 1, Doklad General'nogo sekretarya TSK NDPA Nadzhiba," 1 January 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8837, Ll. 1-10; Rubin, *Fragmentation*, p. 166.

<sup>161</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 9, Obzor gazet," 30 December 1986, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 7573, L. 208.

<sup>162</sup> "Afghanistan Situation Report April 13-April 19, April 1987," 20 April 1987, Cable, US Embassy, Afghanistan, in NSA.

[https://search.proquest.com/dnsa\\_af/docview/1679075966/F4B773DDCE4945C0PQ/266?accountid=14624](https://search.proquest.com/dnsa_af/docview/1679075966/F4B773DDCE4945C0PQ/266?accountid=14624)

<sup>163</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 5, Obzor pechati," 12 June 1986, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 7569, L. 220.

<sup>164</sup> Pierre Centlivres, "Violence légitime et violence illégitime: À propos des pratiques et des représentations dans la crise afghane," *L'Homme*, 37e Année, Vol. 144 (1997), p. 61.

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and the nomination into the revolutionary council of 12 representatives of the clergy. [The] Afghan people and the clergy are convinced: Islam is in danger not from the side of the April revolution. Islam is threatened by the enemy of the liberation movement of the Muslim world – the international imperialism headed by the USA.<sup>165</sup>

Surely Najibullah’s embrace of Islam was partly forced by circumstances. However, it also showed that the PDPA had gone a long way since Amin’s time in recognizing that Marxist rhetoric and symbols were not gaining it any supporters. In a telling concluding remark, Najibullah noted that the party needed to understand ‘that mass work with the population was conducted in mosques’.<sup>166</sup> At odds with Taraki’s earlier promise to empty them, they were to be centers of PDPA’s activity. The climax of Najibullah’s “Islamicisation” of the party’s ideology was that the April Revolution itself was now associated with religion: it ‘had happened by the Will of almighty Allah’.<sup>167</sup> By then, the only thing left to do was for the PDPA to institutionalize its new political platform.

### The PDPA’s “Conversion” to Islam

In 1987, political reforms supported the transformation of the DRA into an Islamic-looking, if not Islamic altogether, state. In summer, the PDPA changed the law on political parties. The new law’s first article stipulated that ‘parties had to treat the holy religion of Islam with respect’.<sup>168</sup> By fall, the government created a Popular Islamic Party of Afghanistan in a transparent attempt at challenging the opposition with its own Islamic political party. The new party’s name was on purpose consonant to those of insurgents in Pakistan. In September, the regime launched *Ershad Islami* (Islamic Guidance), a weekly journal published by the

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<sup>165</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 2, Vystuplenie General’nogo sekretarya TSK NDPA Nadzhiba,” 5 February 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8838, Ll. 225-29.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> “Obrashchenie Nadzhiba k afganskomu narodu,” 14 January 1987.

<sup>168</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 6, Zakon o politicheskikh partiyaakh,” 6 July 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8842, L. 105.

High Council of Ulemas and the Clergy. Its proclaimed goal was to ‘unite Afghan Muslims for peace and national reconciliation’.<sup>169</sup> Some of these measures, including the creation of an Islamic party to support the PDPA, were discussed among Soviet advisers.<sup>170</sup>

In November 1987, the adoption of a new Constitution to replace the *Fundamental Principles* of the DRA, a de facto Constitution introduced in 1980, came as the culmination of the process of institutional “Islamicization”. By that time, Gorbachev had made up his mind about the need to start the withdrawal.<sup>171</sup> Najibullah was therefore under pressure to give the opposition some real concessions. These included a change to the country’s name. Instead of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, it became simply the Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, in another reworking of the country’s flag, the latter now dropped the red star entirely.<sup>173</sup> The Constitution also introduced new legislative and executive bodies. Instead of the Soviet-style Revolutionary Council appeared a parliament, the National Council. The leader of Afghanistan was now to be called President. An advisory council of Islamic figures was created by his side. While the preamble to the Constitution did not even mention the April Revolution, its second article stipulated that ‘the religion of Afghanistan [was] the holy religion of Islam’.<sup>174</sup> In fact, the new Afghan Constitution did not leave anything of *Khalq*’s proletarian revolution. After its adoption by a *Loya Jirga*, a traditional assembly with representatives from around the country, Najibullah promised that ‘as President of a Muslim country’, he would ‘protect the positions of Islam in the spiritual life of the people’.<sup>175</sup> Before parting the *Loya Jirga* repeated that it wanted the ‘patriotic

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<sup>169</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 7, Novye izdaniya,” 11 September 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8843, L. 158.

<sup>170</sup> Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, pp. 348-49.

<sup>171</sup> Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, pp. 122-47.

<sup>172</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Vystuplenie Nadzhibully,” 29 November 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8844, Ll. 177-81. It is worth noting that TASS reports also now used “Najibullah” instead of “Najib”.

<sup>173</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 6, Proekt konstitutsii Afganistana,” 17 July 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8842, Ll. 199-200.

<sup>174</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 7, Obsuzhdenie proekta konstitutsii DRA,” 9 September 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8843, Ll. 140-41

<sup>175</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Loya dzhirga zavershila rabotu,” 30 November 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8844, Ll. 191.

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clergy’ to play a role in Najibullah’s ‘great, historical, peacebuilding mission’, in accordance with ‘Islam, the heavenly precepts of the Koran.’<sup>176</sup>

As compared to Karmal, Najibullah went farther in changing the fabric of the DRA. He accepted compromises not only on symbols but also on ideology to retain power in a context where the LCST was about to leave. Perhaps, one of the most striking changes was in education. As noted by an opponent of the regime in early 1988, ‘religious subjects’ were ‘now taught six times a week’ instead of three before in schools.<sup>177</sup> In fact, attacks on Islam even disappeared from lectures on Marxism-Leninism.<sup>178</sup> This was tantamount for the PDPA to renouncing to forming a new generation of Afghans who would be open to socialist ideas, as the Bolsheviks did in Central Asia in the 1920s, and was a major change as compared to the Karmal era. This was accompanied by more measures aimed at returning religion to a dominant place. Hence, the regime’s program of ‘Islamization’ included the return of a column stating the person’s religion on Afghan identity cards, a compulsory rule ‘for high-ranking party members to attend prayers in the mosque’, and the replacement of the title ‘comrade’ by ‘honourable’ or ‘dear’.<sup>179</sup> These last three measures were especially significant, affecting every Afghan in a direct and visible way.

While seemingly opportunistic, Najibullah’s policies to Islamicise Afghanistan were launched with Soviet backing. Hence, Moscow apparently helped finance the Islamic Study Centre in Kabul as a way to showcase that Soviet aid was ‘not only in the areas of economics, culture, and technical development, but also religion’ according to a PDPA official.<sup>180</sup> Another symbolic gesture was the gift by the USSR of a plane dedicated to bringing pilgrims

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<sup>176</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Obrashchenie Loya dzhirgi k narodu Afganistana,” 1 December 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8844, L. 200.

<sup>177</sup> Afghanistan Information Center (AIC), *Monthly Bulletin*, No. 84, March 1988, p. 5, in Fonds Centlivres (FC) FA 104, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID).

<sup>178</sup> AIC, *Monthly Bulletin*, No. 85, April 1988, pp. 14-20, in FC FA 104, IHEID.

<sup>179</sup> AIC, *Monthly Bulletin*, No. 85, 14-20.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Tasar, "Central Asian Muftiate," p. 219.

to Mecca in January 1988.<sup>181</sup> More crucially, the Kremlin was also on board with the key transformations that challenged the core attributes of the PDPA. Discussing national reconciliation in May 1987, the politburo, after noting its ‘modest’ success, repeated that there could be ‘no Afghanistan without Islam’. It accordingly advocated for a more ‘realistic approach’ that would entail, ‘if the name of the [Afghan] party was kept’, to add ‘the word “Islamic”’ to it.<sup>182</sup> The latter cue was picked up in Kabul. In October, Najibullah proposed to think about a ‘more accurate name for the PDPA’.<sup>183</sup> In July, 1987, in another discussion with the Afghan leader, Gorbachev again advised him to ‘not forget about the religious aspect.’<sup>184</sup> By 1988, it was clear that Moscow was ready to agree to whatever measures it believed would help Najibullah stay in power after the withdrawal.

In this context, initial assessments of national reconciliation were mixed. In Moscow, it was believed to be struggling.<sup>185</sup> In the West, Olivier Roy noted that Moscow and Kabul had to admit that their offer of ‘peace of the braves’ to the *Mujahideen* had been rejected. The refugees were not returning and the ceasefires were only on paper.<sup>186</sup> In fact, despite Soviet support, the changes Najibullah brought were not even accepted easily in the PDPA. Over national reconciliation, it remained more than ever affected by tensions between *Khalq* and *Parcham* and between supporters of Karmal and Najibullah.<sup>187</sup> This was the case even though the concessions made did not endanger the PDPA’s leading role.<sup>188</sup> Hence, national reconciliation helped the regime gain support in mostly non-Pashtun areas by giving local strongmen autonomy and economic incentives but it did not go as far as the Kremlin had

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<sup>181</sup> Plastun, *Iznanka*, p. 353.

<sup>182</sup> “Notes from Politburo Meeting,” 22 May 1987, in Gorbachev Foundation (GF), prov. by A. Chernyaev, in HPPDDA, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117236>

<sup>183</sup> “TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Doklad General’nogo sekretarya TSK NDPA Nadzhibully na obshchepartiinoi konferentsii,” 18 October 1987, in GARF, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8844, l.1-9.

<sup>184</sup> “Zapis’ besedy M.S. Gorbacheva s General’nym sekretarem TSK NDPA t. Nadzhibom,” 20 July 1987, GF, 9, in NSA. [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text\\_files/Afganistan/1987.07.20.Gorbachev-Najibullah.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afganistan/1987.07.20.Gorbachev-Najibullah.pdf)

<sup>185</sup> “Notes from Politburo Meeting,” 22 May 1987.

<sup>186</sup> Centre de recherches et d’études documentaires sur l’Afghanistan (CEREDAF), Bulletin, No. 31, May 1987, p.1 in FC FA 122, IHEID.

<sup>187</sup> Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, pp. 81-126; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview.

<sup>188</sup> Giustozzi, *War*, pp. 120-97

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hoped in sharing power. Najibullah continued to seek a dominant role for the PDPA in any national government. In a discussion with the Soviet politburo in April 1988, he made clear that he had no intention of resigning as President.<sup>189</sup> In this context, national reconciliation did not prepare a power sharing mechanism in Kabul while the local power arrangements it produced were conditional on Moscow’s economic support.<sup>190</sup> Most crucially, it did not increase disinterested support for the regime despite its Islamic peace message.<sup>191</sup>

For this reason, the PDPA’s policy to build a pro-regime Islam in Afghanistan did not matter so much until the Soviets left. One reason was that Kabul was unable to protect the people that moved to its side. As reported by a KGB officer from Kandahar, three successive Islamic leaders in charge of the local reconciliation commission were killed until the local authorities could not find anyone to take the job.<sup>192</sup> Another was related to continued Soviet presence that made the PDPA appear as both an un-Islamic authority despite its support to Islam and a puppet government. In fact, the war by 1988 was no longer about religion and the reforms brought by the PDPA but about the remaining in power of a discredited regime that had waged a brutal war against its own people. This was understood by all parties. In April, Najibullah jokingly reported to the Soviet politburo about his meeting with representatives of *Hezb-e-Islami*, one of the most radical insurgent Islamist parties. According to the Afghan President, they told him that ‘in Islamic issues [he] had gone so far that they could give [him] a membership card in their party’.<sup>193</sup> Yet, no amount of Islamic rhetoric could allow him to get their support.

This is not to say that the establishment of a pro-regime Islam did not bring some positive results for the PDPA. First, it helped the regime improve its international image. In

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<sup>189</sup> "Record of a Conversation of M. S. Gorbachev," 7 April 1988, in GF, prov. by A. Chernyaev, in HPPDDA, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117250>.

<sup>190</sup> Giustozzi, *War*, 64, pp. 154-85; Anonymous KHAD Senior Officer, interview.

<sup>191</sup> Halliday and Tanin, "Communist," pp. 1369, 1374; Fred Halliday, "Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War: From 'Second Mongolia' to 'Bleeding Wound'," *Review of International Studies* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1999), p. 684; Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya*, p. 327.

<sup>192</sup> Kravtsov, interview.

<sup>193</sup> "Gorbachev," 7 April 1988.

August 1987, a mission of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights noted that freedom of religion had been restored and there was no limitation on the performance of religious rites in areas under PDPA's control.<sup>194</sup> Second, it prepared the ground for the period after the Soviet withdrawal when the PDPA changed name to become the Homeland Party (*Hezb-e Watan*) and ended up entirely discarding the legacy of the April Revolution. With Soviet support, Najibullah then managed to stay in power until 1992 and might have been able to do so longer if Boris Yeltsin's Russia had not cut ties with him at that point.

### Conclusion

The Soviet-Afghan War saw the PDPA undergo deep transformations. Initially a vanguard Marxist movement, it modified its message and platform to meld Islam and socialism, and ultimately completely Islamicised its rhetoric in an attempt to retain power. At the same time, it achieved some success in building a body of loyal Muslim figures and making the DRA's institutions Islamic-looking, if not truly Islamic. By 1989, it had done away with Marxism and adopted measures that unambiguously supported religion. Hence, it arguably successfully prepared the ground for after the Soviet withdrawal when it claimed to be itself an Islamic bulwark against the arrival to power of 'fundamentalists' who wanted to return modern Afghanistan 'to practices of the Middle-Ages' and fight 'social progress'.<sup>195</sup>

The PDPA's transformation occurred with the sanction of Moscow. That is not all that surprising. Despite the talk about 'internationalism' in Soviet propaganda, ideology was only one of the several factors that motivated the USSR to intervene. Still, by accepting for the PDPA, a party it had groomed since the 1960s, to "Islamicize", the Soviet Union had to admit that communism was not a mobilizing factor in the conservative and religious Afghan

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<sup>194</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 7, Press-konferentsiya Ermakory ob Afganistane," 19 August 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8843, L. 60; This report was then obviously criticized by the *Mujahideen*. Jamiat-e-Islami, *AFGHANews* Vol. 3, No. 24, 15 December 1987, p. 8, in FC FA 80, IHEID.

<sup>195</sup> "TASS Afganistan, t. 8, Press-konferentsiya Afganskogo Prezidenta," 1 December 1987, in GARF, F. R4459, Op. 44, D. 8844, L. 212.

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society. In this sense, while the Soviet-Afghan War is often seen as having contributed to the collapse of the USSR by the economic burden it placed on the country and the negative reports it generated in the media during *glasnost*, it has perhaps, as importantly, contributed by showing that the ideological appeal of the Soviet Union and of the type of modernity it proposed was running out of steam. It arguably stimulated ‘Soviet disillusion in internationalism’ and questioned the ‘idea of a transition to socialism in the Third World on which the whole system rested’.<sup>196</sup>

On the insurgents’ side, the Soviet-Afghan War marked the dawn of the radical Islamist movement that ushered Afghanistan into a period of chaos. On the global stage, *Mujahideen*, veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War, scattered to take part in radical Islamist-inspired revolts across the world in the 1990s. In August 1990, Gorbachev told Najibullah that he suspected that the US, although it too was worried by ‘the spread of Islamic fundamentalism’, was not against using it if it were to become ‘the banner of 40 million Soviet Muslims’.<sup>197</sup> For Russia, Islamist radicalism would become a major security concern, tracing an interesting continuity between the end of the Cold War and the new world.

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<sup>196</sup> Halliday, "Soviet," p. 689.

<sup>197</sup> "Record of a Conversation of M. S. Gorbachev," 23 August 1990, in Gorbachev Foundation, prov. by A. Chernyaev, in HPPDA, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117254>.