

# The Ghost of Khost

## What History Might Tell Us about the Future of Afghanistan

DR. MEHMED ALI

As the August 2021 dissolution of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) illustrated, the United States and its allies' effort to transform the nation faltered along a similar path tread by others during previous eras. The GIROA's immediate collapse, preceding the full drawdown of US military forces, and the retakeover of the nation by the Taliban, have not led to a peaceful security environment, however. The growth of the Islamic State of Khorasan and its challenge to Taliban legitimacy have already been manifested in several attacks since the foreign forces' withdrawal, and concern for Afghanistan's future security will continue to weigh on the Afghan people, the military, and diplomatic minds in the international community—despite Taliban assurances of peace.

But even though Pakistan, Iran, China, and other regional players will undoubtedly still have influence at multiple levels, the basis for stability is in the hands of the Afghans themselves, especially at the provincial level, where the ground truth has always, and will continue to be, categorically played out. One of the most important stages of this drama will be in the Pashtun (or Pakhtun) regions of the country—areas that showed great resilience in opposing the GIROA and coalition forces during the entire two decades of war. The southeast in particular represents a serious challenge to any government of Afghanistan, with the area of Loya Paktya, which includes the provinces of Khost, Paktya, and Paktyka, traditionally holding a unique, semiautonomous status vis-à-vis the central government due to its locational remoteness, its heavily embedded tribal structure, and its close relationships to British India and later Pakistan.

Despite its apparent isolation, Loya Paktya actually represents the Pashtun region closest to the Afghan capital. Over decades, the province of Khost, a comparatively small area with an equally small population, has played an oversized role in the nation's politics. While some analysts have viewed this corner of the country to be of little strategic relevance, “tiny and inconsequential” in one author's words, Khost historically has been at the center of things. Seemingly inconspicuous and relatively detached, it is considered by some natives to be the “gate of Afghanistan.” Khost's position as a key province illustrates the complexities of how a sparse area or a small group of political actors with strong ideological or

tribal ties can affect an entire nation's stability, meriting attention as the political structures of postoccupation Afghanistan develop.<sup>1</sup>

Khost Province is a 1,600-square-mile (more than 4,100 square kilometers) bowl-shaped valley ringed by mountains jabbing into the heart of Pakistan's semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Territories—a counterpoint southern salient to its neighbor's "Parrot's Beak." Geologically linked more to Pakistan, with mountain ranges that are tallest on its boundaries with the rest of Afghanistan, Khost has a front seat on the Durand Line. Fertile, temperate, and once boasting significant rice cultivation, Khost is unlike most of the nation. Demographically unified in its overwhelmingly Pashtun ethnicity and Sunni faith, it hosts a vibrant economic center for the region due to its location on a trade route with Pakistan. Literacy rates in Khost are higher than in the rest of the southeast, and the province is home to one of the only university-level journalism schools outside Kabul.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the potential for great stability in Khost, security issues have always been at the forefront of the province's history. Serious rebellions against the Kabul-based government occurred in 1856–57 and in 1912. It was from here that the Khost Rebellion of 1924 nearly overtook the Soviet-leaning King Amanullah, who had initiated reforms such as ending child marriage and promoting education for women. And here again five years later the area was the staging ground for a successful regime change reportedly instigated by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), who spread his influence (and the inevitable British bribes) from his base in Miram Shah just a few miles south of Khost's boundary. While some have doubted that Lawrence was actually involved in the plot to overthrow King Amanullah, one author pointedly states: "Surely he didn't go all the way to the Afghan frontier just to translate the *Odyssey*." And what is certainly more than coincidental is that fact that, once Lawrence left Miramshah on 8 January 1929, the rebellion quickly grew across the border and led to Amanullah's resignation six days later.<sup>3</sup>

Friction with subsequent monarchs led to the Khost disturbances of 1932–33 and 1944–47. Later, in 1978, the communist-inspired Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) government took control of Afghanistan and under the aegis of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) attempted several unpopular reforms that caused the growth of a highly armed opposition. Beginning in 1980, the siege of Khost Province became the defining, decadelong battle within the larger war between the US-backed mujahedeen on one side and the Soviet Union supporting its Afghan National Army (ANA) allies on the other. Khost's strategic importance led to several key battles between the Soviet army

and the mujahedeen during the 1980s, including Hill 3234, the Battle of Jaji, Operation Magistral, and the Battles of Zhawar.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike under previous Afghan governments, Khost had substantial representation in the DRA, and because so many of the PDPA leadership came from there, Khost City was nicknamed “Little Moscow” or the “Second Moscow.” Symbolically and strategically, it was one of the most important areas to the DRA government, and both sides made it a top priority to put in their win column. The mujahedeen takeover of the province in 1991 broadcast in obvious terms the weakness of Kabul and bolstered the rebels’ momentum to defeat the government the following year.<sup>5</sup>

Khost was where Osama Bin Laden tested his battle skills against the Soviets in Jaji. It was the site of Zawhar Kili—the mountainside camp where Bin Laden later trained his followers and at which the United States fired 75 Tomahawk cruise missiles after the al-Qaeda bombings of their African embassies in 1998. Some authors believe that the name al-Qaeda—which translates to “The Base”—is actually derived from the center at Zawhar Kili.<sup>6</sup>

During the American intervention from 2001 to 2021, Khost’s troubled past and tradition of violence persisted. Insurgent forces opposing GIRoA, chief among them the Haqqani Network, actively used the area as a base of attack and travel. Khost was the location of the deaths of Specialist Pat Tillman in a troubled episode of friendly fire and of the seven CIA operatives who were caught in a double-cross, triple-agent suicide attack at Camp Chapman. Khost was also the province where US Army soldier Bowe Bergdahl was released by insurgents after nearly five years of captivity. An analysis of what makes the province tick from a historical perspective is essential for comprehending the current sociopolitical and security situations. And perhaps more pointedly, it is also imperative to understand Khostis’ history as shaped by tribal and ideological identities that might underpin the dynamics of the times ahead.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tribal Overlay**

Khost reflects a unique tribal makeup in comparison to other areas of the nation. The province has a far higher number of individual tribes—17—compared to its neighbors (reportedly, Paktya has four and Paktyka five) and most of the country as well (except for Ghazni). Khost reportedly has the second-highest population of the nomadic pastoralist Kuchi tribes throughout Afghanistan, illustrating how prevalent the traditional clan systems are in the province. And perhaps more important, none of Khost’s tribes, except for a relatively small group (the Ahmadzai Kuchis), are affiliated with the country’s two large Pashtun confederations—the Durrani and Ghilzai. The relative isolation resulting from the existence

of these smaller tribal groupings has created a sense of independence for Khostis, which symbiotically has reinforced their ideas on governance.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in return for supporting the installation of King Mohammed Nadir Khan in 1929, the local tribes around Khost didn't ask for cabinet positions or infrastructure projects. Instead, they extracted from the central government exemptions from taxes, military service, and compulsory education. For these tribes "less equaled more," and their goal was to be left alone from state apparatus—an idea that undoubtedly resonates with many Khostis today. As part of this agreement, they also maintained a special administrative tribal status that continued until the communists came to power in 1978. Despite the radical societal transformations the DRA rolled out, strong tribal identities remained. And during the Taliban rule of 1995–2001, Khost, Paktyka, and Paktya were ruled by their own local governors instead of the Kandahari Taliban who held power over the rest of the country. Due to these special historical conditions, Khost and its two neighboring provinces are today part of the "only area in Afghanistan where the tribes . . . remain to varying degrees the main recipients of power alongside the state."<sup>9</sup>

In retaining a significant level of autonomy, Khost tribal psyche holds what might be termed a "kingmaker" complex, a residual consequence of having helped to overthrow King Amanullah. In many ways, the relationship with the central government is a function of the Pashtun tribal code that continues to be predominant in Khost. One component of the Pashtunwali code is the concept of *seyal* (equality), which ensures that no single person becomes too powerful in the tribe, especially when power occurs at the expense of others. This ideal has worked its way on a larger political scale in the fact that tribes from Khost have periodically rebelled against governments when they think they are overstepping their authority or not demonstrating enough respect toward them.<sup>10</sup>

The Mangal tribe, located in Khost's Musa Kheyl, Sebari, and Qalandar Districts, provides an example of the concept of *seyal* on a broader scale. Historically, the Mangal have maintained a pattern of rebellion against local governors, appointees of the central government, and outsiders in general, which continues to this day. When the first reported Westerners came to Khost in 1879—a British army unit that was part of the invasion force during the Second Anglo-Afghan War—they found their most troublesome opponent was the Mangal tribe, who assembled an 8,000-man force to attack the British. After defeating the fleeing Mangals, British troops carried out the "Massacre in Khost," the retributive plundering and burning of 11 villages that was later investigated by Parliament. But the Mangals eventually returned, ousting the British-installed governor. The for-

eign forces then had to destroy ammunition stockpiles and evacuate the area, squashing dreams of incorporating Khost into the Raj.<sup>11</sup>

The Mangals themselves revolted against the Kabul government (itself seen as a foreign power in a way) several times during the modern formation of the Afghan state. The Mangals failed during a major uprising in 1912 but were nearly victorious in the Khost Rebellion of 1924. The tribe participated heavily in the 1929 overthrow of King Amanullah and then staged the Mangal Revolt in 1959, which occurred when the government went to build a road from Chamkani to Musa Kheyl and a tribal leader named Charka Baja (meaning “Dirty Water”) declared war. Outnumbered by mechanized government troops and by progovernment tribes such as the Jaji and Tani, who were brought in to work on the road, Charka Baja and many Mangals fled in exile to Pakistan. Almost like clockwork, 20 years later the Mangals were at it again—this time revolting against the new communist government.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the Zadrans tribe, part of a larger “Zadrans Arc” in the two neighboring provinces, is present in Khost’s Shamal, Nadir Sha Khot, and Spera Districts and has held an essentially antigovernment role over the course of history. Like its Mangal compatriots, the Zadrans tribe played a significant part in supporting the 1924 Khost Rebellion and the overthrow of Amanullah five years later. Later, the Zadrans revolted against the DRA in 1979 and blocked the Sitta Kandow Pass, which was the primary route connecting Khost to the rest of Afghanistan. Despite President Hafizullah Amin’s attempts to defeat the Zadrans that year, the government experienced “a crushing defeat” with “hundreds of burnt-out cars and armored vehicles” littering the road from Paktya to Khost.<sup>13</sup>

While there were representatives from many Khosti tribes involved in opposing the Soviets and the DRA, the mujahedeen derived most of its support from the two tribes discussed above, the Zadrans and the Mangals. From the two kinship groups, Jalaluddin Haqqani of the Zadrans was the most prominent mujahedeen leader to come out of the area. Haqqani grew up in Paktya but lived in Khost’s Mandozai District after the overthrow of the DRA and solidified his support base throughout the province, which persists today even after his death.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, while the Zadrans and Mangals have a history of opposition to Kabul and its representatives, certain tribes such as the Tanis and Jajis have historically been progovernment (or perhaps better defined as less opposed than others). For example, when the government of King Zahir Shah (1933–1973) formed *qawm-e kandak* (tribal battalions) to provide security to the border regions of the province, the Tani tribe provided hundreds of men for these units. This policy continued under the DRA government, when the Tani agreed to the overtures of tribal affairs minister Faiz Mohammed to supply the gov-

ernment with militiamen. The Tanis' relatively educated neighbors, the Jaji tribe, also supported the DRA, and many joined the government's security forces during the late 1970s and 1980s. This pattern continued during the last two decades, with the Jaji tribe being "unambiguously supportive of GIROA" and touted as having "always flown the government flag." In context, it might be reasoned that Tani and Jaji tribal support in the end might not derive from a full allegiance to the central state but rather as an offset to the larger and stronger tribes in Khost Province.<sup>15</sup>

As illustrated above, tribal allegiances to the government in Kabul are essentially standard over time, and those relationships often determined the success of either side during the 1970s–80s war between the communist government and the mujahedeen. A noteworthy example of this relationship between tribes and the central state is the case of DRA president Mohammad Najibullah. Ruling Afghanistan from 1987 to 1992, Najibullah originally hailed from Seyyed Karam District in Paktya. During his early days, he spent time in Khost discussing politics with friends, and he knew the area intimately, facilitating his subsequent "skillful manipulation of tribal divisions among the Mujahidin [that] helped keep the isolated Khost outpost on the Pakistani border in the regime column."<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, the defense minister for most of the 1980s and one of the most influential members of the DRA cabinet also hailed from Khost. Shahnawaz Tanai, from the Tani tribe, used his "tribal connections in the province to throw back Haqqani offensives," including rallying his own clan to defeat a mujahedeen takeover of their namesake district in December 1986. In the end, it was Haqqani's utilization of those same connections and the abandonment of the DRA by the tribal militias that led to the government's defeat. Ultimately, it might be viewed that, in the absence of support from the Soviets, the national government could no longer assist their local Khost supporters, and consequently the more powerful local tribes, the Zadrans and the Mangals, were able to defeat their weaker progovernment adversaries, the Tanis and the Jajis.<sup>17</sup>

### **Communist versus Mujahadeen Identities**

The long-rooted status of division between Khost and the central government eventually went through a metamorphosis of sorts during the rule of King Zahir Shah. As the country stabilized after the tumultuous times of the 1920s, the royal government enacted policies attempting to bring the Loya Paktya region closer to the fold. As early as 1941, Kabul rewarded Khost with some agricultural initiatives to win over the populace. By the 1960s, numerous Afghan ministries had brought several development projects to the province, including a trade school, a vast sapling orchard, a 50-bed hospital, a meteorological station, a reconstructed

road over the mountains to Paktya, and a pilot health, education, and agricultural extension program in Tani District. Several of these initiatives were funded via international donors—especially Germany, which worked in Afghanistan because it was “one of the countries that didn’t go to war with them.” As a sign of further outreach, the king personally viewed some of the projects and met with tribal leaders in visits to Khost in 1962 and 1963.<sup>18</sup>

As part of its goals to centralize power and attempt to fashion a unified sense of Afghan nationality, the government embarked on another strategy toward societal unification through the schooling of Pashtun students in Kabul. The government, with the help of Soviet and US advisors, established an education system that brought young people from all around the country to study in the capital. For example, Rahman Baba High School (named for the historic poet Abdur Rahman Baba) was opened for young men from provincial Pashtun tribes, with instruction in their native Pashto language as opposed to the commonly used Dari. The boarding school recruited many people from Loya Paktya and became the most prestigious lycée for the Pashtun people. By the 1950s, the sons and grandsons of the warriors who had fought to ensure that Khost would not pay taxes, face conscription, or require compulsory education went off to school to learn about how they could be an integrated part of the nation.<sup>19</sup>

But as Soviet aid and influence rose under the time of Prime Minister Daoud Khan, so did radical leftist ideologies in Afghanistan. And ironically, some of the expanded schools in Kabul created to help unify the country instead became foundries for factious politics. At Rahman Baba High School, which many young people from Khost Province attended, lectures about communism were not part of the official curriculum; however, several of the instructors promoted the subject in informal discussion groups after regular classes. At collegiate-level schools, several educators from Khost were instrumental in bringing about a new political identity for their younger kinsmen as well. Mahmud Alumgal Suma, a teacher of political science at Kabul University, and Pohanmal “Professor” Guldad from the Kabul Polytechnic University were notable left-wing influencers of fellow Khostis and others who came to be educated in the capital.<sup>20</sup>

Although Khost traditionally believed in maintaining a distant association to the central government, attitudes began to change during this period. As a consequence of their exposure to relatively new ideologies concerning the relationship between the state and its role in the lives of its citizens, some prominent Khostis began advocating for radical change in the Afghan kingdom. Despite the investment in provincial development projects during the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the king in Khost actually increased. There were many public demonstrations in Khost City expressing opposition to the monarchy and calling for more government-

provided services and educational opportunities. A reason for discontent, according to one protester, was that no one from the region held any significant position in the government during the king's time. But because of the significant ideological undertones and Khost's traditional (yet now modified) opposition to Kabul, another activist related that perhaps these early protests were not reflective of popular ideological activism but rather the historical antagonism between Khost and Kabul and that in fact "people were finding any reason to protest."<sup>21</sup>

The growing opposition to Kabul helped foster "various forms of political opposition and radicalism" in Khost. At this time many Khostis joined the Khalq (Masses) faction of the PDPA when it was formed in 1965. Khalq, which predominantly derived its support from a rural Pashtun population base (as opposed to the Parcham faction, which attracted greater numbers of urban and educated members), was known for its more radical stances and for propaganda "so strong that people would follow them to their death." Most Khostis were part of the "Red Khalqis" faction connected to Nur Muhammad Taraki (who later became president) with a smaller group, the Paktia Khalqis, connected to Khost leader Dr. Abdul Karim Zarghun, a Marxist from Mandozai. Their dedication to the communist cause led Taraki to have said that "the friends we have from Khost Province, we have nowhere else."<sup>22</sup>

As Afghanistan's political stability unraveled in the 1970s, Khostis played key roles in Afghanistan's coups, countercoups, and coup attempts over the years. Afghan Air Force officer Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi was active in the events leading to the overthrow of King Shah in 1974 and the installation of former prime minister Daoud Khan as president of Afghanistan. While the Khalq faction was sidelined during the rule of Khan, communists from Khost were instrumental in the Saur Revolution of 1978, which in turn ousted Daoud Khan. Just one year later, when the Soviets entered Afghanistan in 1979, one of the three Afghan leaders that guided the invading forces in overthrowing President Hafizullah Amin was again Gulabzoi. And ironically, the head of the elite guard who attempted to defend the ill-fated president from the Soviets was an officer named Jahandad who also came from Khost.<sup>23</sup>

With the Saur Revolution, Khost Province had a seat at the table of power for the first time, and during the subsequent reign of the DRA, several Khostis held central positions in the PDPA-led government. Among the leaders were the aforementioned Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoi, minister of the interior and minister of communications from Nadir Sha Khot District; Shawnawaz Tanai, minister of defense from Tani; and Faqir Mohammed Faqir, minister of the interior, also from Tani. Other important Khostis included Habib Mangal, a member of the PDPA politburo and ambassador to the USSR; Ghafar Lakan, minister of



agriculture; Mahmud Alumgal Suma and Pohanmal “Professor” Guldad, both ministers of higher education; and Mir Ahmed Gorbuz, ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Except for Mangal, all these individuals hailed from the districts of Matun, Tani, or Gorbuz.<sup>24</sup>

Aside from Kabul and Jalalabad, Khost was one of the few places in the country that was considered a “bastion of the regime.” And the loyalty to the DRA cause led to Khost receiving status as a de facto province in the Afghan year 1365 (1986/87). This included the establishment of a *tashkil*—a force of paid provincial staff—and an annual budget separate from its neighbors.<sup>25</sup>

But the new designation didn’t win over any friends from the mujahedeen, who were steadily gaining the support of the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, those countries helping to funnel funds and weapons to the rebels. And of the religious fighters, it was Jalaluddin Haqqani of the Zadran tribe that was considered by the United States to be “the most impressive Pashtun battlefield commander of the war” and who received a substantial share of the foreign-supplied war materiel. Stinger missiles, first tested by men under Haqqani subordinate commander Mawlawi Hanif Shah of Khost, proved potent in keeping airlifts away from Khost City, causing shortages of food and armaments as the mujahedeen maintained a siege of the city during a period of more than 10 years throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

As things grew tough in the province, a new kingmaker moment arose at the national level with another son of Khost at its heart. In 1990, General Shawnawaz Tanai attempted a coup against President Mohammad Najibullah in collusion with mujahedeen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and with the support of politburo member Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi. The aptly named Tanai Coup was a failure, however, and the general escaped on a commandeered helicopter, arriving in Pakistan to a warm welcome from Hekmatyar. The peculiar alliance of a hard-line communist with a major religious fighter bluntly illustrated Tanai’s interest in pursuing power over his commitment to ideology. And his proclamation, a week after fleeing, that the DRA forces at Khost would immediately surrender to the rebels “when he gave the order” spoke to the idea that personal and tribal loyalty to individual leaders was maybe more important than allegiance to the state.<sup>27</sup>

As the mujahedeen continued to lay siege to the city, secret negotiations were undertaken between DRA supporters Azzizullah Zaland and Amir Shah Karger and insurgent leader Mawlawi Hanif Shah to allow for the capitulation of government forces. But talks stalled, and an extensive ground attack, which even utilized Iraqi tanks captured in the Persian Gulf War and smuggled into the country by the US Central Intelligence Agency, spelled the dénouement. In March 1991, the communist garrison flew the white flag and yielded up some

2,000 soldiers and seven generals who were all miraculously accorded decent treatment as prisoners of war.<sup>28</sup>

Aside from the great fighting the mujahedeen carried out, the fall of Khost was also linked to the thousands of tribal militiamen on the government payroll who apparently refused to support the communists at the critical moment. According to DRA general Mohammad Zahir Solamal, the militias fled to watch over “their houses instead of [their assigned] security posts inside the town,” while others reported that they merely “swapped sides when the going got tough.” Since the Tani tribe made up a significant component of this force and it was from their area that one of the main bodies of mujahedeen invaded the city, it is also quite possible that DRA defector and fellow kinsman Shawnawaz Tanai convinced them to take a walk at an opportune moment. Whatever the reasons on the provincial stage, it was a distinct foreshadowing of national events during the summer of 2021.<sup>29</sup>

When the mujahedeen took over Khost in 1991, some broke down doors and looted shops, even disassembling buildings and blowing up tanks for the scrap metal. About two weeks after the takeover, journalists reported that trucks laden with office equipment from the downtown were carrying their cargo over the hills to Pakistan. In many ways, Khost was old-fashioned tribal spoils at its best (or worst).<sup>30</sup>

Although some analysts have claimed that the fall of Khost was not a significant factor in ending the Najibullah government, the US Department of State declared at the time that “[t]his is definitely a major victory for the mujahedeen” and that the importance of Khost was that it “guards the vital supply routes connecting the capital, Kabul, to the north, with the southwestern provinces.” It was also perhaps more importantly a symbolic triumph, which rallied religious fighters all across the nation. Within a year, the DRA was dead, and in the next several years, as warring factions sought control of the nation, Khost was back in its historically default position—out of Kabul’s reach.<sup>31</sup>

During this time, Haqqani became the “quasi-warlord” of Khost and Paktya. Critics complained that provincial organizations were “dismantled rather than governed” and that the city fell into a scene of frequent crime, including thefts and kidnappings. One contemporary generously noted that the mujahedeen “were military guys, not politicians.”<sup>32</sup>

When the Taliban first came into the region in January/February 1995, they found it easy to enter Paktya and Paktyka, “but Khost was more challenging.” Many of the mujahedeen commanders were opposed to the Taliban, and Haqqani was hesitant to join the new movement. But once the group came across the mountain pass, they surrounded his house in Mattajina, Mandozai.

With no escape, associates reported that Haqqani was handcuffed and tortured by the Taliban before finally accepting an agreement to join forces with them. Governance continued along a similar path during the Taliban times. Observers related that “Khost was like a graveyard. There were no educational opportunities, no economic growth, no freedom for discussions.” Another lamented how “it wasn’t really a government. . . it was just gangs who killed a lot of people and tortured people.”<sup>33</sup>

Khost’s independent spirit (or hard-to-govern nature perhaps) continued under Taliban rule, which one journalist described as being a “big headache” for the new leaders in Kabul. Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I Islami group even attacked the Taliban forces in eastern Khost in August 1996 before retreating. In January 1999, the people of Gorbuz in Khost openly fought the government after six people, including a woman, were killed by the Taliban, who declared their traditional New Year egg-cracking game to be “un-Islamic.” The following year, tribal elders threatened to declare a jihad unless governor Sayed Abdullah was removed from office. After his sacking, it was reported that this was the first time since “the emergence of the [Taliban] movement in 1994 that the entire administration of a province has been changed due to pressure from the local population.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Khost during America’s Longest War**

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the old mujahedeen/communist and tribal enmities arose again as former DRA supporters (some who returned from exile) maneuvered into or reclaimed positions of power. In many ways this was a natural progression. The new government and the international community pushed for a return to emphasizing educated bureaucrats and a “professionalization” of the armed forces. On the other side, the mujahedeen for the most part were uneducated and didn’t value formal schooling outside of the madrasa, leaving them out of potential sources of power.<sup>35</sup>

The presence of US forces in the province after 2001 also altered the nature of power, allowing old groups to reform. Often following the path of least resistance, military units found those who were most like-minded for the immediate goal. One author has noted, “In an odd twist of history, the fall of the Taliban brought to power many of the old communists the United States had struggled against in the 1980s, and because they were often the most ‘anti-Taliban’ officials in the area, they were useful allies to the U.S. and Coalition partners.”<sup>36</sup>

In 2002, General Khailbaz, an exiled Khalq officer from Jaji Maidan, returned to Khost and established his own militia from former communist soldier forces. Eventually, the group was integrated into what became known as the Khost Protection Force (KPF)—a 3,500-member special forces unit. For keeping “rela-

tively close relations with provincial authorities and security organs,” these former communists were criticized by other tribes. Complaints ran the gamut from their “lack of accountability and perceived arrogance when returning to Khost City” to their harassment of former mujahedeen members and “ruthlessness and human rights abuses.” One observer related that the KPF, while “nominally subordinate to the National Directorate of Security [NDS, Afghanistan’s domestic intelligence agency], in reality operated autonomously from the Kabul government.” And in 2019, the United Nations reported that the organization was outside of the legal government structure and that “the continued widespread impunity for abuses its members enjoy remains of grave concern.” Reportedly, the KPF, until its surrender to the Taliban in August 2021, was funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>37</sup>

Opinion on the Khost office of the NDS was similar. Some Khostis alleged the agency was staffed with “many former communists” and targeted families who previously supported the mujahedeen. NDS brigadier general Abdul Wasi Ahmadzai was a former DRA officer, and when the US Department of State reported that there was “systematic torture” at the NDS facility in Khost, it didn’t surprise many locals.<sup>38</sup>

The divergence that Khostis maintain from the central government can also be attributed to the makeup of the other security forces in the province. For several years, the head of the ANA in Khost was General Nasir Hedayat, a Tajik, while the forces stationed there continue to be exclusively from outside of Khost—mainly non-Pashtun soldiers who speak only Dari. Their ability to connect to the local populace is substantially limited, and many Khostis consider them to be an “occupying army.” Within the ranks of the ANA in Khost there are also divisions between ethnic backgrounds as well as between those who fought with the mujahedeen and those with the DRA. As an example, for several years there was continual friction between General Nasir (former mujahedeen) and Lieutenant Colonel Nasarat (a former communist), commander of the subordinate 3rd Kandak. In the words of one former US Army commander, General Nasir continually attempted “to find any reason necessary to get rid of him.” The same commander also noted that “when things go sideways these guys go right back to ethnic politics.”<sup>39</sup>

During the American intervention, US complicity, intentional or not, real or not, contributed to the perception that their forces favored former DRA supporters. Some religious leaders in Khost believed that coalition forces were preferentially hiring linguists and other workers who came from communist families. In turn, these employees were using their positions to encourage the military to target mujahedeen families, claiming they were insurgents, and causing innocent people to be arrested and detained. Some religious leaders have even incongru-

ously proclaimed that the mujahedeen were in “a better position during the Communist regime.”<sup>40</sup>

When in 2005 several of the former PDPA leaders returned to Khost to run for parliament, including Shahnawaz Tanai and Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi, it further refreshed the communist/mujahedeen division. Tribal elders declared, “In the last three years, the communists have tried to blackmail the mujahideen; they call us Al Qaeda. . . . We are a Muslim nation, and we will destroy them step by step.” Another former mujahedeen member was even more blunt: “The communists should be killed and the philosophy of communists should be killed. . . . I will not let Gulab Zoi walk into parliament. He killed 1.5 million Afghans.” Despite the tough talk, Gulabzoi (though not Tanai) won a seat and even topped the ticket of all candidates, illustrating that his tribal base and other connections to voters were still solid. Undeterred, Tanai and Dr. Habib Mangal both ran as presidential candidates in 2009 but were unsuccessful against Hamid Karzai.<sup>41</sup>

During the GIRoA era, the return of communists to “high positions” within the provincial government caused a myriad of issues. Perhaps most significant were their attempts to reclaim properties and other assets that were taken after the fall of Khost by the mujahedeen, which obviously created dissension between the two sides on a very personal level. After the US military pulled out of the province in October 2013, the political situation became murkier, and according to the US Embassy, one of “the most salient social and political division[s] in Khost remains the opposition between ex-communists and ex-mujahideen.”<sup>42</sup>

Issues of trust between the different constituencies as well as the nature of governmental structures also caused persistent problems. While most of the GIRoA-appointed provincial governors and most of the district governors had affiliations with the mujahedeen, most of the important provincial-level ministry directors were former communists. And as the governor and district governors had very little influence over the ministry officials, who reported directly to Kabul, the situation led to frequent tensions. The elected provincial council was also split along similar lines, and the former communists, including leader Daoud Shah Makenzoi, were at the forefront of criticizing the governor over the years.<sup>43</sup>

At other levels, GIRoA suffered from the age-old Khost malady of unrequited amity. The feeling of disenfranchisement by the Khosti people was perhaps more enhanced in light of their political status in previous regimes. The days of the communist rule were a boon for Khost primarily because it had solid connections within the government. The few individuals from Khost with significant positions during the GIRoA interregnum were ANA chief of staff Sher Mohammed Karimi and the deputy minister of higher education, Wali Zai, both from Mandozai District. But other influential players were missing, and the sense around the province

was that “no one speaks for Khost on the national level” and that the parliamentarians were “not perceived to have influential contacts within the regime.”<sup>44</sup>

Many Khostis held a common belief that the province was not represented in positions of power, especially during President Hamid Karzai’s tenure. One critic related: “There are no ministers, no ambassadors from Khost while in other places there are many. There are 16 ambassadors from Panjshir and there are four ministers from Wardak which is a tiny place. Karzai does not like Khost!” Another observer believed that there was “no foreign intelligence agency supporting the Khalq people [and] that’s why there is no minister or deputy minister in government representing them.” And this criticism comes not just from people who supported the DRA—a former rebel commander, Mawlawi Hanif Shah, noted that while in office Karzai did not give any major government position to any mujahedeen.<sup>45</sup>

For several years Khost was considered the “crown jewel in the American counterinsurgency” efforts, but the withdrawal of troops in 2013 led to increased attacks around the province. An attack against a presidential convoy delivering election ballots caused the death of Associated Press photographer Anja Niedringhaus in April 2014. Other high-profile strikes against the government were the November 2018 suicide bombing in Ismail Khel District, which killed more than 25 security force members, and a brazen roadside assault targeting Khost governor Mohammad Halim Fidal in April 2019.<sup>46</sup>

In the leadup to GIRoA’s fall, rebel leaders capitalized on the divisions that existed in Khost and strengthened their movements through the recruitment of a disenfranchised rural base as well as from their own tribal connections (in the case of the Haqqani Network, it is from the Zadran group that provides much of the material support). In many ways the notable tribal, geographic, and class distinctions that existed between the former mujahedeen and the communists were replicated between insurgents and GIRoA. And from that juncture, one can understand that much of the original mujahedeen structure transformed itself into the anti-Kabul insurgency between 2001 and 2021.<sup>47</sup>

One policy brief stated that, “in a somewhat ironic twist of history, it seems as though those tribes that sided with the PDPA government in the past are now less affected by insurgency infiltrations. Areas where tribes were stronger among the *mujahideen* factions, and in particular where factions struggled for power in the past, are some of the most insecure areas today.” But the situation as described is not paradoxical at all if one considers that the same pro- or antigovernment lineup existed during this century as it did in the 1980s. It is no surprise that the Haqqani Network viewed the coalition-backed GIRoA as essentially the same entity that the Soviet-backed DRA embodied—a government supported by foreign forces that was illegitimate in their eyes.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the touting of Khost as an example of American-backed resilience, the province fell to the Taliban on 15 August 2021—the same day that Kabul fell. The expected return to a harsher interpretation of religion's role in society and the age-old politics of Khosti “payback” came quickly, with the naming of Jalaluddin Haqqani's son, Sirajuddin, as the Taliban's minister of the interior, the arrest in Khost of several female leaders, further limitations on education for girls, and the imposition of a curfew in the city after hundreds of people came out to demonstrate against the new government. Sirajuddin's younger brother, Anas, returned to the province in August, declaring there was “no need to leave the country and now it was time to bring back refugees from other countries and these people should know that they [are] safe here.”<sup>49</sup>

But by early October, events indicated something else, as an explosive device at the Mazharul Alum Madrasa in Khost killed seven and wounded 15 others. This was followed a few days later by the arrest of eight members of the Islamic State in Khost who “confessed that they were planning to conduct attacks in the province.” The continued flying of the old GIRoA flag by some is a “fearless” display of Khostis' continued strive for autonomy and a public challenge that many “will not allow the new government's foot soldiers to remove the hallmark of the past until they have proven that rights for all will forge ahead.”<sup>50</sup>

In analyzing the reasons for Khostis becoming supporters or detractors of a certain political cause, the importance of personal connections cannot be underemphasized. Whether it is Western notions of democracy, the system of Soviet communism, or visions of an Islamic caliphate, the introduced ideologies form, for most players, only a thin layer of political identity over the long-prevailing competitive tribal structures and bonds of kinship.

It is believed that for some provincial elders' support for “the Taliban revolves around tribal interests, not through belief in the insurgency's inherent virtue vis-à-vis the Afghan government or foreign forces.” Another analyst even reported that “some people who have met [Jalaluddin] Haqqani over the past decades doubt that he is mainly motivated by religious feelings.” And on the other side one author believes that, for former PDPA supporters, “extreme nationalism is a stronger force among them than is Marxism. As for tribal affiliation, that comes first.”<sup>51</sup>

The departure of American soldiers from Afghanistan has opened both positive possibilities and potential dangers for the security of Khost. Either way, the Afghans themselves are now in command of figuring out the next step along the road toward stability for the province. And while the political structures of Taliban 2.0 are so new as to forestall an exact analysis on intertribal relations in the

province, the fluidity of beliefs will probably continue as a trademark of the ever-changing notion of Khost citizenry.

The superimposition of ideologies that are often morphed into an indigenous form of their own will doubtless be forever changing. A common denominator for much of the province, however, is that it has and will probably always be an outlier. For a multitude of reasons, Khost continues to engender a sizable minority that opposes the state structures in Kabul—for the vast majority of time that has been its legacy. However, when Khost has maintained strong connectivity to the central government, such as during the DRA days, it enhanced the split between the differing tribal alliances and illustrated a set of societal structures that pose challenges for peace in the province. And in reviewing all the historical narratives, it appears that these very similar patterns look poised to continue.

There is no claim, though, that tribal fidelity or loyalty to a certain military or religious leader is seamless. There are many instances where families or individuals have made a personal decision not to support one side or another. Likewise, after 40-plus years of almost continual warfare and refugee displacement, tribal power is not as potent as it was previously. And yet, there are still filial linkages that provide a sense of bonding and trust in a society that has vast experience with violent outsiders, whether those outsiders are from the neighboring valley or from thousands of miles away. It is those types of connections that must be at the forefront of everyone's understanding if Khost Province is to have a sense of peace for the future.<sup>52</sup> ✪

**Dr. Mehmed Ali**

Dr. Ali is director of Academic Services, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Connecticut. He previously served as a diplomat in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a team at the forefront of strategic bilateral public diplomacy, higher education, and development initiatives, including time in Khost.



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