

Anglo-Afghan Wars and State Building in Afghanistan

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Afghan concepts of political legitimacy were still firmly rooted in the past. Competition for state power was restricted to a small Durrani elite, and their replacement meant little to the ordinary people on the ground. The government structure was decentralized and fragmented, dependent largely on the feudal levies of troops and plagued by a shortage of resources. Much would change by the end of the century, however. Afghanistan became a nascent national state. A regular army replaced tribal levies and mercenaries. A centralized government with a national bureaucracy displaced formerly autonomous regional leaders and their feudal clients. The role of the Afghan people also changed. They became more involved in struggles to defend the nation against foreign invaders and yet found themselves more oppressed by their own governments in the aftermath. The crucible bringing about these changes was the two wars that the Afghans fought with the British (1839–42 and 1878–80), or more accurately the consequences of these wars.

But one thing that this crucible strengthened rather than destroyed was the domination of Afghanistan's existing political elite. Dost Muhammad initially lost his throne during the First Anglo-Afghan War, but then returned to rule the country again for another twenty years. By the end of his reign, Afghanistan was unified not only under a single government but also under one in which his family was paramount. Dost Muhammad's descendants continued to rule Afghanistan despite a new period of civil war and another British invasion. It was this Second Anglo-Afghan War that brought Afghanistan's so called Iron Amir, Abdur Rahman (r. 1880–

1901), to the throne. He so successfully centralized power that the national government in Kabul appeared all-powerful. For better and for worse, this model of administration would be the standard by which his successors judged themselves during the next three-quarters of the twentieth century. How so many changes could come about and yet leave the old ruling dynasty in place is the question I will explore here.

AMIR DOST MUHAMMAD AND THE KINGDOM OF KABUL

Dost Muhammad faced severe internal challenges when he declared himself amir in Kabul. The Sadozais disputed his right to the throne. His kingdom was much reduced in size and divided into regions that were all but independent, and his financial base was precarious. Externally, three new players arrived on the international scene and threatened Afghan territories. The Sikhs under Ranjit Singh (r. 1801–39) had shorn Afghanistan of its last Indian provinces, built a powerful state in Punjab, and looked prepared to advance further west. The Russians had arrived on Afghanistan's western borders and were supporting Persian campaigns to retake Herat. The British had sent envoys to Afghanistan and appeared to have possible designs of their own on the country.

The shakiness of the Barakzai claims to the throne was apparent in Dost Muhammad's choice of the title of amir rather than shah. The dynastic aura of Ahmad Shah Durrani was still so strong that only his direct descendants were believed to have the right to take the title of shah. From the time of the expulsion of Shuja in 1818, the Barakzais had respected this tradition by appointing figurehead Sadozai descendants to sit on the throne—a pattern common in Turko-Mongolian regimes. Dost Muhammad broke with that tradition in 1826 by ruling directly in his own name with the title of amir after being coronated as *padshah* in a ceremony designed to resemble Ahmad Shah's own elevation to rulership in 1747.¹ Despite this sleight of hand, many Afghans still considered the Barakzai Muhammadzai usurpers. Shah Shuja, the Sadozai who had received the first British embassy to Afghanistan, was still at large and continued to seek the restoration of his line from exile in India. Indeed, the legitimacy of the

Sadozai shahs remained so strong that, as we will see, the British asserted that they were only helping Shuja reclaim his rightful authority when they invaded in 1839. Of course, a more practical reason for assuming a title less grandiose than shah was that the kingdom of Kabul was only a pale reflection of the original Durrani Empire. Nor were its remaining territories under Dost Muhammad's secure control. Peshawar had been lost to the Sikhs in 1834. Herat was ruled by a Sadozai prince independent of Kabul. The Uzbek amirs of Turkistan maintained *de facto* independence. The Durrani heartland in the south was ruled by a set of Dost Muhammad's half brothers, the Qandahar sardars, who were themselves periodic rivals for the throne.

At the beginning of his reign, Dost Muhammad's financial base was quite small: around a half-million rupees, derived from Kabul and the plains to the north. By the 1830s, when he dominated most of eastern Afghanistan, his annual revenue had increased to about 2.5 million rupees.² By comparison with the Durrani Empire, however, even this figure was still low: less than 10 percent of the 30 million rupees in revenue that the Sadozai shahs had commanded forty years earlier. In part this was because the eastern provinces that had supplied the bulk of the Durrani Empire's revenue had been lost, and Dost Muhammad could collect no revenue from the provinces that he did not as yet control (Qandahar and Herat). But an even bigger obstacle was the structure of the revenue system itself—one largely unchanged from the time it was created by Ahmad Shah. It had liberally distributed land grants, jagirs, in return for military services, and these consumed between 50 and 60 percent of the state's nominal revenue, even before calculating the amounts needed for administration or payments for regular troops.³ Neither the rates of taxation on the Durrani elite nor the grants themselves could be altered without a much stronger military and political power than Dost Muhammad possessed.

More significantly, because the Durrani Empire had found it so much easier to extract revenue from its Indian provinces, it had never bothered to raise much money from more marginal areas within Afghanistan. Politically this was a good choice since it reduced local opposition to the government in areas where it had historically recruited irregular troops.

But Dost Muhammad did not have this luxury. Like a poor student searching every pocket, drawer, and sofa seat for whatever loose coins might turn up, Dost Muhammad focused his revenue-raising attention on areas that his predecessors had ignored. Since his government was confined largely to the Kabul River basin, he greatly increased the rate of tax collection on communities there as soon as he came to control them. Groups that had been lightly taxed by the Sadozai shahs (the Tajik Kohistanis north of Kabul; the Ghilzai tribes of Laghman, Jalalabad, and Ghazni; and the Hazaras in Bamiyan and Hazarajat) all found themselves targets of new government demands. The methods of tax collections were harsh. These often included the use of troops whose actions in the name of the amir differed little from those of a pillaging foreign army of occupation. Josiah Harlan, a military officer of American origin in Dost Muhammad's employ, described from firsthand experience the usual means of collecting such taxes in more remote regions:

A body of one thousand cavalry is annually sent to collect the revenue. This corps is dispersed over the district in small divisions, each one with orders to collect, and is quartered upon the husbandman, who is obliged to subsist the soldiers so long as the revenue is unpaid! . . . The accumulated mass is dispatched to Caubul, which is the nearest mart of general commerce; a portion is sold for necessary cash expenses, another part is traded off by means of reciprocal necessities and much of the grain is retained for family use. The slaves are sold by government contract, but the government levies . . . a percentage on the amount of sale.⁴

Not surprisingly, such methods provoked opposition and even periodic rebellions by unhappy subjects, particularly in those regions that had not been previously subject to severe taxation. Such a policy of "internal imperialism," however, was to be expected in a state that had inherited the expenses of an imperial structure yet retained only the resources of a small kingdom to finance them. Having few other sources of income, Dost Muhammad's policies were therefore heavily extractive.

The projection of state power into formerly autonomous regions to raise revenues came at a high political cost. Such tactics were thus employed more out of desperation than choice. This problematic trade-off of

raising revenue by risking rebellion forced regimes to make careful calculations. Depending on the period chosen, Afghan regimes seemed hell-bent on either forcibly extracting as much revenue as they could from the countryside or avoiding rural areas completely as a revenue base. The decision about which policy to employ rested on a simple equation: the degree of revenue sought by any Afghan government from its countryside was inversely related to the availability of other sources of income elsewhere. As we will see, this encouraged Afghan rulers to seek foreign revenue sources as a way to avoid political conflict with their own people.

For the first ten years of his reign, Dost Muhammad spent most of his time consolidating his limited power and extending it beyond Kabul. Initially he had to contend with troubles caused by the old Sadozai ruler Shah Shuja as well as rivalries within his own immediate family. He had external enemies too, most notably the Sikhs. He organized a jihad against them after they seized Peshawar both in hopes of recovering the city as well as to buttress his own legitimacy as a Muslim ruler. While he won a battle against them in 1836, he failed to restore Afghan control of the region. In further hopes of doing so, he sought a diplomatic alliance with the British as a counterweight to the Sikhs. He did not receive the alliance but did get British aid in defending the city of Herat from the Persians (1837–38), which brought the Russians in contact with Afghanistan. But the British position on Afghanistan had by that time moved away from helpful neutrality to a more aggressive policy that sought the domination of Afghanistan as a client state to create a large defensive buffer between its Indian holdings and the expanding power of Russia.

Dost Muhammad was willing to come to terms with the British, and their key agent in Kabul, Alexander Burnes, believed that he would be a more reliable ally than the aging and unpopular Shuja.⁵ But Lord Auckland, governor-general of India, thought otherwise and struck a deal to return Shuja to the throne with the help of a British invasion in alliance with the Sikhs. In 1839, the “Army of the Indus,” consisting of around twenty-one thousand troops and accompanied by thirty-eight thousand camp followers, crossed the Indus River and had reached Quetta by March in preparation for its attack on Qandahar. Of those who later remained to occupy Afghanistan, few would come back alive.

THE FIRST ANGLO-AFGHAN WAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Defeat and Surrender of Dost Muhammad Khan

Just how weak Dost Muhammad's position was became apparent when the British took his half brother's realm of Qandahar in April without opposition and then marched north. After taking Ghazni in a severe fight in July, the British were on the outskirts of Kabul a few weeks later. Unable to rouse a resistance against the British following the capture of Ghazni, even after invoking the religious necessity for all Muslims to come together in a jihad against an infidel invader, Dost Muhammad abandoned Kabul in early August. The British then occupied the city and reinstalled Shuja as the shah in the fortified palace complex of Bala Hissar. Dost Muhammad fled north seeking assistance from the amir of Bukhara, who instead made him a virtual prisoner. On his return to Afghanistan in August 1840, he raised Uzbek troops in the north, but these deserted him after a defeat by the British in Bamiyan. Dost Muhammad then moved to Kohistan, where the local Tajiks were already in rebellion against the British. In early November he led them to a victory in a battle north of Kabul. A day after this success, Dost Muhammad rode into Kabul and surrendered to the British, who promptly exiled him to India with all honors.

Interpreting Dost Muhammad's surrender has long presented difficulties for Afghan historians. How could the past (and future) amir, founder of the dynasty that would rule Afghanistan into the next century, desert his people and country at such a crucial time, particularly when his star now appeared to be in ascendancy? And after doing so, why did his reputation remain so untarnished that he was not only able to return and rule the country but also retain his place as one of Afghanistan's most respected leaders, even today? Part of the problem lies in an anachronistic view of loyalty, leadership, and nationhood in a time of change. The British invasion of Afghanistan was rooted in the belief that political legitimacy was the domain of an exclusive elite and the replacement of one Durrani leader in Kabul by another would not provoke a rebellion. Indeed, it was striking just how quickly the vast majority of the Durrani elite and their allies such as the Qizilbash (to whom Dost Muhammad was related through his mother)

fell in line to support Shuja's restoration. The argument that he, as a Sadozai descendant of Ahmad Shah Durrani, had a better right to the throne than any Muhammadzai was powerful. (Dost Muhammad had even told the British that he would step down as amir in favor of Shuja if he could retain the role of vizier, the political relationship that formerly existed between the Sadozais and Muhammadzais earlier in the century.) That Shuja was returning to power on the point of British bayonets was no asset, and in fact would eventually prove his downfall, but he had a sound claim to the Afghan throne. Even if his claim were less sound, nonelite groups were expected to accept his *fait accompli* and get on with their lives.

The early collapse of elite resistance and their co-optation by the British was probably instrumental in bringing about Dost Muhammad's surrender. On his return from Bukhara, he found himself leading a weak resistance composed almost entirely of marginal ethnic groups with no personal loyalty to him. The Uzbeks had abandoned his cause after their first encounter with the British, and the Kohistanis were more anti-British than pro-Dost Muhammad. (Only a year earlier they had revolted against him to facilitate the return of Shuja.) Perhaps most important, Dost Muhammad could not conceive of popular rebellions as anything more than nuisances to a foe who was overwhelmingly superior in arms and had a seemingly endless supply of money. After all, he had only recently put down rebellions by these same groups employing only a fraction of the resources now available to the British. And the British had used their initial advantages with skill. The advance of their army into Afghanistan and the defeat of all forces that opposed them proved their military might. Their political agents moved swiftly to buy the support of prominent Durrani notables in the south and Ghilzai leaders in the east while subsidizing the clergy. Dost Muhammad might have been able to win a few more pieces in this bloody chess match, but he could see no way of avoiding eventual checkmate and so resigned the game.

The image of a chess game is more than metaphoric here. Rulers in Turko-Persia were professionals, and there was a political protocol open to losers—one that not only preserved their lives but also offered the possibility of a new game and their restoration to power. For example, at the lower level in the political hierarchy, leaders of tribal rebellions would often appear before the king with nooses around their necks or grass in their

mouths (like cows) to express their abject submission. If their tribe was powerful, they would likely be fined and forgiven unless the ruler was truly vexed. (It was considered shortsighted to execute too many of today's rebels since they might be tomorrow's allies.) For the rulers of fallen states the possibilities were broader since they (unlike internal rebels) had a duty to fight, and a valiant reputation was respected by friend and foe alike. On defeat, they might flee to a neighboring state for refuge and wait for better times. Or particularly when confronted with an expanding empire, they might simply surrender to their victorious foe with the expectation of becoming his feudatory. Both the ruling clans of the Durrani and Ghilzais had come to power locally as feudatories of Safavids in this way. The Durrani Empire itself had reappointed local rulers as their governors in India and Khorasan after first defeating them. Before they were sacked by the Sikhs, the Muhammadzai sardars in Peshawar had accepted such a position under Ranjit Singh. Because modern historians overlook the cultural nuances of the political hierarchy in central Asia that the participants of the period took for granted, they see defeat and surrender as moral failings rather than the occupational hazards of being a professional ruler.

By riding into Kabul alone and voluntarily tendering his submission to William Macnaghten, Britain's political representative, Dost Muhammad was recognizing that a new empire had emerged, in which the British now reigned as the regional hegemonic power. In such a changing world Afghan rulers needed to adjust their policies to adapt. As professional rulers, they were accustomed to making hard choices and taking risks. Dost Muhammad rightly concluded that the British needed the cooperation of the old ruling elite to maintain control of places like Afghanistan that were difficult or impossible to rule directly. He also accepted the principle that

like the Mughal Emperors whom they had supplanted, the East India Company now held the right to appoint the ruler of his country. As a monarch in his own right, Dost Muhammad Khan also indicated to Macnaghten, the supreme representative of the British civil power in Afghanistan, that he was prepared to co-operate with the "new world order," rather than resist it. However in doing so, he made plain that he would do so as a ruler in his own right and not like the quisling, Shah

Shuja, who required the presence of a foreign, infidel army to keep him on the throne.⁶

The British, also familiar with this protocol, treated Dost Muhammad with great respect. They refused Shuja's demand that he be turned over to him for execution as a rebel, and sent Dost Muhammad to India with a tidy pension. Macnaghten even wrote a letter to Auckland explaining that the British owed him more deference than their client king, Shuja. "I trust the Dost will be treated with liberality. His case has been compared to Shah Shoojah; and I have seen it argued that he should not be treated more handsomely than His Majesty was; but surely the cases are not parallel. The Shah had no claim upon us. We had no hand in depriving him of his kingdom, whereas we ejected the Dost, who had never offended us, in support of our policy, of which he was the victim."⁷

And Dost Muhammad was not wrong in seeing the realm of rulership as the preserve of an elite and not ordinary people—a position held as strongly by the British in India as it was by the Durrani in Afghanistan. Like the professional ruler that he was, he took his refreshment and awaited the start of the next game—one he knew was bound to come, and come soon.

Restructuring the Afghan State

One of the first priorities of the British occupation was the reorganization of the Afghan state and its finances. Shah Shuja proved an obstacle in this process because he was a product of the old system and not inclined to change it except under pressure. The British therefore gradually took control of the government in order to make administrative and military reforms that would increase state power. These reforms and the unanticipated consequences of their own occupation soon made the British position in Afghanistan less rather than more secure.

The Durrani elite acquiesced to Shuja's return to the throne on the assumption that the traditional system of military payments would continue. Indeed, Shuja's legitimacy as a ruler depended as much on his ability to shower his followers with money as it did on his royal descent. The existing

system was highly lucrative for both the officials who made such grants and for those who received them. Half the state's revenue was devoted to such payments, although the troops maintained in this fashion were of negligible military value and their numbers were inflated by adding fictional ones to the payroll. But this was not the point. Local chiefs used such funds and land grants to maintain powerful patronage networks, not to fight wars. In fact, their duties were largely limited to collecting the taxes needed to pay them. The British viewed the whole system as thoroughly corrupt and in need of reform. To increase the state's power, they planned to replace the old feudal cavalry with a professional infantry under the direct command of the central government.

This change would increase the power of the central government and reduce the autonomy of the chiefs—goals long sought by Afghan rulers too. Dost Muhammad himself had created an additional infantry force under foreign officers for this reason, but had not tampered with the organization of the costly irregular troops. At least some in the British command recognized the political trade-offs that had led to his hesitation in this matter. What the British condemned as the corrosion of corruption was unfortunately still the main glue that held the Afghan state in one piece. In 1840, Captain R. S. Trevor, the British officer given the command of these irregular forces, cautioned, “We must not look on the Irregular Cavalry merely as a military body. In that light 3 Regiments might annihilate it tomorrow, but as an instrument which enables H.M.’s principal subjects to appropriate a greater part of his revenues without making any return, and which has continued so long that its destruction would certainly be considered an invasion of private property.”⁸

Two new corps, the Janbaz (one thousand men) and Hazirbash (eight hundred men), were created in June 1840 over the objections of Shuja, who saw the distribution of patronage passing from his hands to the British. The immediate savings were substantial: the payments to chiefs for irregular troops fell by more than one-quarter, from 1.3 million rupees in 1839 to 1 million rupees in 1841.⁹ When the chiefs complained, Trevor was no longer sympathetic but instead bluntly expressed the view “that in the course of two years all the chiefs of the military class should be dismissed from his service, and that what support they may receive till that time they should consider as charity given to them.”¹⁰ Since it was the

supply of feudal military units and the tax revenues granted to maintain them that sustained the Durrani elite, the threat to abolish the system undercut both their prosperity and political power. This was a deliberate act, for as Malcolm Yapp explained, "British policy was aimed ultimately at the destruction of these forces and constant efforts were made to abridge their privileges."¹¹

Another blow to the system of redistributive allowances within the Afghan state was the sudden influx of vast sums of money into the economy. As part of the war effort, the British had flooded Afghanistan with silver rupees and letters of credit drawing on the Indian banking system to pay for their occupation, salaries for their soldiers, the administration of the country, and subsidies to influential Afghan leaders. (The total cost of the war to the British over three years was estimated at around eight million pounds, while Dost Muhammad's prewar income had amounted to less than the equivalent of two hundred thousand pounds annually, little of it in cash.) Influxes of cash money are always disruptive to any subsistence-based economy because they create new sets of winners and losers. In this case, it increased the power and influence of those engaged in trade, who provided needed commodities and services. It undermined the social and political standing of those whose influence was based on feudal obligations to the state, or who owned underproductive landed estates. Because the flow of British expenditures pouring into Afghanistan were so many orders of magnitude larger than those ever available to its Afghan rulers, their impact can be compared to plugging a table lamp into a high-voltage electric line.

The 4,500 troops and 11,500 camp followers who remained in Kabul put a huge burden on a poorly integrated Afghan domestic economy, and commodity prices rose sharply. Macnaghten complained that by June 1841, prices had risen by 500 percent. This may be an exaggeration or the result of a temporary supply problem, but even if prices had only doubled or tripled in two years, it would have justified Afghan complaints that the British had enriched the grain merchants, starved the poor, and made the chiefs destitute.¹² Inflation also hurt those classes of people, such as mul-lahs, who normally received fixed stipends for their services. In this context, the constant complaint that the British fostered immorality and prostitution among women in Kabul was also hardly surprising in a city now

awash in cash and beyond the control of the “traditional authorities.” The money economy penetrated the immediate countryside as well. The British reworked the tax system to make it more efficient, and in a single year increased tax receipts around Kabul from 225,000 to 900,000 rupees. This was done in part by selling tax farming rights to international fruit merchants, who encouraged the substitution of export cash crops like grapes for less profitable subsistence crops.¹³

The Defeat and Withdrawal of the British

Such rapid economic and political disruptions would likely have induced opposition under any circumstances, but the discontent was magnified by policy blunders and incompetence. With the restoration of Shah Shuja, the East India Company in Calcutta saw its costly invasion as a “mission accomplished” and soon put intense pressure on its officials in Kabul to reduce expenses. In response, these officials cut the annual stipends paid to the Ghilzai chiefs in the east from eighty to forty thousand rupees as part of a wide range of economies that included dropping stipends to the mulahs, whose support they had earlier paid for. The Ghilzai chiefs were outraged at this reduction, coming at a time when their original grants had already been eroded by inflation. They declared a jihad and revolted in September 1841, cutting communications with Jalalabad. Initially, this revolt was not designed to force the British out of the country but instead to restore their stipends. Troops from Kabul reopened the roads, but rather than conciliate the Ghilzai chiefs involved, Macnaghten threatened to replace them if they refused to accept the stipend cuts and deliver hostages for their good behavior as well.¹⁴

Meanwhile in Kabul disaffection was growing. The ulema complained that the British were interfering with their administration of justice in the name of fighting corruption. Such corruption unfortunately provided a great part of their income. The British were also seizing religious endowments (*waqf*) from local shrines and adding them to the state coffers. The Durrani elite at court, as noted earlier, were alienated by the rapid changes in government that reduced their income and influence. In such a volatile atmosphere, a riot by a small Kabul mob in November that resulted in the

murder of Burnes quickly evolved into a large-scale attack on the British cantonment, which the Ghilzais and Kohistanis joined in. There was no unified leadership, and the chiefs involved acted as independent agents, many of whom sought British bribes as their price for going home. (The Ghilzais, for example, were demanding two hundred thousand rupees to depart.) Only with the arrival of Muhammad Akbar, Dost Muhammad's favorite son, did the fight against the British become well organized. Akbar put such pressure on the poorly positioned cantonment that the British sued for terms in December. By this time, however, events had transformed their bad situation into a desperate one. A series of negotiations between Akbar and Macnaghten designed to come to some accommodation ended only in Macnaghten's murder. In January 1842, the British agreed to withdraw their army and camp followers unconditionally from Kabul in return for Akbar's promise of safe passage. Those who were not taken prisoner were either massacred by the Ghilzais en route or froze to death in the mountain passes. Only one British survivor made it safely to Jalalabad.¹⁵

The well-known story of the destruction of the Kabul expeditionary force has overshadowed the internal changes that the British implemented—changes that would remain even after they had gone. Historians have instead argued over what caused this famous defeat.¹⁶ According to most nationalist Afghan historians, reaction to the British occupation produced an inevitable and universal antifeign, pro-Islamic, popular rebellion whose success was never in doubt. British accounts have tended to see the various uprisings as uncoordinated, prompted by religious fanaticism, and exacerbated by British policy blunders and incompetent leadership. From the standpoint of changing concepts of legitimacy, the two most significant aspects of the revolts against the British in winter 1841–42 were its new religious justifications and tribal participation.

Until 1840 religion had played a minor role in internal Afghan politics because fighting had always been Muslim on Muslim. Raising the banner of jihad had been a popular way to mobilize Afghans outward for invasions directed at the polytheists on the Indian plain or their Muslim rulers. But the British occupation of Afghanistan in support of Shuja raised the question of whether his regime had lost the authority normally inherent to a Muslim ruler. If Shuja's government was just a cloak for the rule of foreign infidels, then rebellion against it would be justified. The charge that the

government had betrayed Afghanistan's Muslims and deserved to be toppled was therefore a constant theme in the propaganda directed against the British and Shuja. It had surprisingly little resonance when the British first invaded. It gained traction as the occupation continued, particularly as the British began to direct more of the government's workings themselves. Putting Afghan opposition in a religious framework also made it more difficult for the British to mobilize previously willing allies among the Ghilzai chiefs. These chiefs declared that it would be politically fatal to take a public stance against a popular jihad opposing foreign occupation when it was so strongly supported by their followers. Of course, as ibn Khaldun had observed, religion had always been the best way to unite tribes that were otherwise too divided to unite on any other basis. It also ennobled more self-interested political, economic, and personal motives. Shuja himself complained that "these men are not influenced by considerations of religion, they give their lives for the wealth of this world and do not fear death."¹⁷ That may have been true, but leaping to a "defense of Islam" to justify resisting a regime in Kabul or its policies would henceforth become a sword that was rarely sheathed in Afghan politics, regardless of whether foreigners were actually present on Afghan soil.

The rebellions against the British did not originate within Afghanistan's Durrani elite. Although those who had experienced a loss of power may have incited others to violence, they took on leadership roles only well after the fighting had started. Instead, the first rebellions were mounted by more marginal groups that had their own grievances. The most important of these were the Pashtun Ghilzai tribes to the east and south of Kabul, and the Tajik Kohistanis of the plains and mountains north of Kabul. Chiefs and clergy from these regions who mobilized their own fighters were at the center of the resistance, not the existing forces of the irregular cavalry that were commanded by the Durrani. The trouble was also localized. The Durrani in Qandahar did not rise at all until two months after Kabul had fallen and then failed to take the city. Nor were there uprisings among the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, or in distant Herat. But in spite of their crucial contributions to the success of the war, neither the Kohistanis nor the Ghilzais took the opportunity to put themselves into power. They instead sought out military and political leadership from the existing (and politically vacillating) Barakzai and Sadozai elite. For example, the Kohistanis initially

raised troops in the name of Shuja until he denounced them for using his name and forged seals to justify their rebellion. When it became clear that Shuja was sticking with the British, the Ghilzais and Kohistanis then rallied around Akbar when he took command of the forces besieging their cantonment in Kabul. Although it was he who took the lead in dealing with the British politically, Akbar's power then and in the months that followed depended more on his Ghilzai allies than his Barakzai kinsmen.¹⁸

The eighteen months after the British lost Kabul in January 1842 was a period of political complexity and rapid change, including the British re-occupation of Kabul in September 1842 and their departing the country for good before winter set in. It is therefore usually more convenient to take up the story when Dost Muhammad returned to Afghanistan from his Indian exile in June 1843 and began his second reign. But the period is worth examining briefly because it reveals just how tenacious the old patterns of political legitimacy and organization remained. In particular, it demonstrates that the return of the Barakzais was by no means a foregone conclusion, that defeating the British had done little to unite the Afghans internally, and that even the mobilization of a historically unprecedented range of people to fight the war had not dented the small Durrani elite's monopoly on power.

Shuja remained in Kabul after the British withdrawal in January 1842. In a political system where such concepts as patriotism or nationalism were as yet unknown, his previous actions may have been unpopular, but they did not trump his hereditary right to rule since a king cannot be a traitor to himself. Indeed, his political position actually improved over the next few months. Within the Bala Hissar fortress, a Hindustani and Arab garrison protected Shuja from attack. Still in possession of two million rupees that he had squirreled away during the previous two years, he could afford to maintain more troops than any of his rivals. Such resources were now critical in the renewed internal struggle for power between the Barakzais under Akbar and the Sadozais under Shuja, not to mention the large cast of more minor supporting characters still deciding which way (or on whom) to jump. Even as they both declared the necessity for Muslim unity to drive the remaining British forces back to India, they undercut each other politically at every turn.

Although now a hero of the jihad, Akbar's many problems included a lack of funds, competition with his elder cousin Zaman Khan over who should lead the Barakzais, and general opposition by many court factions to the restoration of Barakzai power. Shuja's main problem (besides the disappearance of his British protection) was his need to walk a dangerous tightrope. He had to prove that he was not "pro-infidel" while secretly keeping his ties to the British (who might return). Thus Shuja publicly proclaimed his support for the jihad and demanded the British withdraw from Jalalabad, but privately wrote to urge them to march on Kabul as soon as possible. His enemies suspected this double game and tested his fidelity by demanding that he participate personally in the war by leading reinforcements to Jalalabad. After receiving sworn promises from the Barakzais that they would be faithful to him, he emerged from the palace in early April and was promptly assassinated by a Barakzai. His son, Fath Jang, then declared himself shah. The struggle between the Barakzais and Sadozais now entered a new phase, which soon ended with Akbar's victory. Akbar captured Bala Hissar in June, garrisoned it with Ghilzai troops, and recognized Fath Jang (who was now his effective prisoner) as shah in a regime where he served as vizier and undisputed strongman. Akbar then fended off his cousin Zaman's bid for power by using his new government's resources to buy more allies and having a tribal council reaffirm that the exiled Dost Muhammad remained the true king.¹⁹

Installing a regime in which a strongman ruled in the name of a more prestigious though purely nominal head of state was a classic political ploy in Turko-Persian empires, where inherited hierarchy trumped mere talent. And seven centuries of experience within such empires had so deeply permeated Afghanistan's ruling elite's concepts of political legitimacy that they were uneasy about rewriting its rules. Afghan tribes might abandon their chiefs when they displeased them and refuse to recognize any inherited right to rule on principle, but the Durrani elite judged itself by the standards of a Persianate political system in which establishing the legitimacy of a new dynasty was much harder. Thus, the process of replacing the declining Sadozais with Barakzai rulers first begun in 1815 still lay uncompleted in 1842. In spite of all the opprobrium heaped on the Sadozais for their cooperation with the British and Akbar's own prestige as a leader of

the jihad, the legacy of Ahmad Shah Durrani's dynastic charisma adhered so strongly to his direct descendants that removing them was politically dangerous. With so many factions still in play, the nominal recognition of a Sadozai shah as head of state had too many political advantages to dispense with. It allowed Akbar to avoid the charge of usurpation that had long plagued the Barakzais, isolate his cousin Zaman, and conciliate the Popalzais in Qandahar, and proved useful in negotiating with the British. It also neatly avoided the question of whether he was superseding his father as amir. Instead Akbar justified his own right to rule in terms of religion, putting himself above existing tribal and dynastic politics. He explained his actions this way in a letter to the Shinwari Pashtuns of the Khyber area after he took power in Kabul:

As it was an object of paramount importance that in the contest with the race of misguided infidels the whole of the members of the true faith should be united together and the attainment and perfecting of this object appeared indispensable, therefore did the whole of the devoted followers of the true faith consent to choose me as their head, and to place themselves under my counsel. All the tribes and leaders of the Douranees, Ghilzyees, Kuzzilbashies and Ka[b]julees and Kohistanees have submitted to me.²⁰

This political restructuring might have had a more significant impact on Afghan history had the British withdrawn at this time, as the Afghans learned they had been ordered to do. But the situation changed dramatically when Calcutta reversed course and dispatched reinforcements to Jalalabad and Qandahar in August with instructions to retake Kabul. Akbar's troops were no match for these forces, and he had to flee, leaving the British to reoccupy the capital in September. They then lay waste to the city and the surrounding countryside. When Fath Jang, who had remained in the Bala Hissar palace, learned that the British had no intention of staying in Afghanistan or giving aid to any regime in Kabul (a new government in London having sworn off such adventures), he abdicated and left with them. A younger brother took his place, but this last of the Sadozai shahs fled to Peshawar before the year was out. The British then allowed Akbar's father, Dost Muhammad, to return to Kabul to rule again as amir.²¹

Dost Muhammad's Second Reign

Amir Dost Muhammad's second reign took place within a new political and economic environment. The Sadozais were now gone for good, and the structure of government was stronger. The amir was the main beneficiary of the domestic reforms that the British had put in place, particularly their creation of a more professional army and an improved tax structure. The Durrani tribal chiefs also had far less political influence at court—a goal that Dost Muhammad had long sought. The power of other groups also fractured once the British left. Following the expected pattern in segmentary political systems, once the enemy that united them was gone, the old internal disputes among the Ghilzais and Kohistanis came to the fore, allowing Dost Muhammad to follow a policy of divide and rule until his power became strong enough to subdue them directly. The proven superiority of a disciplined and well-trained army—a type of army that Dost Muhammad had long hoped to employ—finally gave the central government enough military power to exert its authority over the whole country. Externally, Dost Muhammad came to an understanding with the British not to interfere in Afghan affairs if he did not bother them. A disgruntled Akbar opposed this last policy and wanted to send Afghan troops once again to the plains of India. But he died, perhaps poisoned, in 1847, and none of Dost Muhammad's other sons had the same will to oppose their father.²²

Whereas during the fourteen years of his first reign (1826–39) Dost Muhammad was barely able to control the region between Kabul and Ghazni, by the end of the twenty years of his second reign in 1863, he had retaken control of almost all of today's Afghanistan. During this process, he increased his annual revenue base from 2.5 to 7 million rupees. His first targets beyond Kabul were Jalalabad and Bamiyan. He then invaded northern Afghanistan. By 1849–50 most of the north fell under his control, although Badakhshan retained nominal independence until 1859, and Maimana remained in the orbit of Herat. Dost Muhammad subdued and taxed the powerful Ghilzai tribes around Ghazni in the early 1850s as he pushed Kabul's influence south. This put him in conflict with his half

brothers, the Qandahar sardars, who had ruled the south (off and on) since 1820. The death of the last of these brothers allowed Dost Muhammad to dispossess their heirs and seize Qandahar in 1855. Herat, long under the nominal rule of a Sadozai prince, was finally annexed by Dost Muhammad in 1863, only a few months before his death.

Dost Muhammad was cautious in his external relations in a time of rapid change. Following the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Sikh's power declined. They lost two wars with the British (in 1845–46 and 1848–49), after which Punjab and other Sikh holdings became part of India. Since the British maintained the old Sikh frontiers, Afghanistan now had the British as its immediate neighbor in the east. British policy toward Afghanistan (and the Pashtun tribes of the NWFP) during this period was famously described as one of “masterly inactivity.”²³ The same might be said of Dost Muhammad as well. While he was constantly on campaign internally, his attitude toward the British was wary but nonconfrontational. For example, when the Sikhs abandoned Peshawar, the Afghans reoccupied it in 1849, only to withdraw when the completeness of the British victory over the Sikhs became clear. Afghanistan's formal relations with British India resumed in 1855 with the Treaty of Peshawar. It promised peace and friendship as well as the respect of existing borders, along with a vague promise of mutual aid against common enemies. The recognition of existing borders meant that the amir was tacitly accepting Britain's occupation of Peshawar, formerly seen as an integral part of Afghanistan. Although not as a *quid pro quo*, Dost Muhammad did get British support for Kabul's claims on Herat and the west. That region was still ruled by strongmen in the name of the Sadozais. These individuals allied with the Persians, who occupied Herat in 1856. In response, the British first provided Dost Muhammad with four thousand muskets and five hundred thousand rupees to resist the Persian takeover. In 1857, they agreed to a second treaty that included another four thousand muskets and a hundred thousand rupees a month to last as long as the Persians remained a threat. The Persian threat soon vanished, though, after they lost a three-month war with the British, agreeing to withdraw and renounce their claims on Herat by treaty in 1857. Yet the amir's payments continued to arrive for an additional eighteen months after the war ended and eventually totaled 2.6 million rupees. Although not part of any formal agreement, the extra funds

rewarded the amir for not assisting the Indian Mutiny of 1857, an earthquake that almost toppled the British raj.²⁴

Dost Muhammad's failure to assist in what the Indians would later see as a war for independence was not popularly viewed by most Afghans. They saw the uprising by the raj's sepoy troops as an opportunity to follow up on their own victory, retake Peshawar, and perhaps expel the British from India entirely. Given the difficulties that the British faced, this result was not beyond the realm of possibility. The British representative then in Qandahar, Henry Bellew, certainly feared the consequences of an Afghan intervention because "a word from Dost Mohammad would have sent the tribes in a wave of fanatical irredentism to overrun and possess the rich valley of Peshawar and the Derajat."²⁵ But Dost Muhammad, ever the conservative realist, thought that outcome was unlikely. The British had just aided him in dealing with Herat, and far from expecting them to exit the stage, he believed they were not yet finished expanding their empire. He said so directly in response to a plea to intervene by the amir of Bukhara:

How can I . . . believe the word of the King of Bokhara and break so good a union as one I have made with the British? If I had known the King of Bokhara to be true, I would have never joined with the British, and I well know that my own kingdom, and that of Bokhara, will one day be annexed to the British territories. I have therefore entered into an alliance . . . with the view to keeping my country as long as possible.²⁶

Such an admission might appear surprising in the afterglow of the Afghan victory against the British a decade before. Dost Muhammad was, of course, also wrong about the threat to Bukhara, or at least about what country would do the annexing. It was Russia that went to war with Bukhara and added it to its empire in 1868. But Dost Muhammad was not wrong in foreseeing that the days of masterly inactivity would eventually end as British memories of their Afghan defeat faded and their fears of Russian expansion grew. Twenty years after Dost Muhammad's death, the British would indeed shift to a new and more aggressive "Forward Policy." This policy aimed to incorporate Afghanistan into the British Empire to create a "scientific frontier" that would preempt any danger to India from the north.²⁷ As to its inevitability, however, Dost Muhammad may have

underestimated both the ability of the Afghans to resist and disrupt their plans and the growing British willingness to substitute rupees for bayonets to achieve their strategic ends when dealing with Afghanistan.

NEW FORCES IN AN OLD AFGHANISTAN

The interaction with the British had ended up strengthening the Durrani state and the elite who ran it, but at the same time it changed the nature of the relationship between the population and the central government. Part of this change can be explained in terms of the military technology available to both the central government and the rural population. It made rebellions far more dangerous than they had been in the past while also providing stronger tools for their suppression. The other change was more subtle, and took a longer time to develop or at least be recognized. This was the growing participation in politics by nonelite groups in the face of foreign intervention, which forced existing governments to make new calculations about what types of policies they should pursue.

The Changing Nature of Military Power in the Nineteenth Century

Through the beginning of the nineteenth century, the rulers of Afghanistan had measured their military strength in terms of controlling the horse cavalry. Expensive to maintain but overwhelmingly superior in battle, these forces made warfare the exclusive domain of elite groups. The categories of landed estates given to support these troops and their leaders consumed a major portion of a state's potential revenue. By contrast, the mobilization either of tribal mountaineers or rural peasants as infantry was militarily secondary. These auxiliaries could rarely turn the tide of war because they often had little or no experience in organized warfare, and fought on foot, armed only with shields, long knives, and spears. They were no match for the professional cavalry troops. While such groups frequently constituted the core of rebellions against the Mughal or Safavid rule, the best they could hope for was to keep these empires out of marginal regions, which were in any event unprofitable to occupy.

The First Anglo-Afghan War therefore marked a military watershed: nonstate forces that had previously played only a secondary role in the region's history had defeated the British. Whole sections of the Afghan population that had previously been excluded from politics had fought against the British in a national cause, even if they had not conceived of it as such. One reason they were able to do this was the changing technology and economics of warfare in south Asia, which made such a revolt far more dangerous than those in the past. Gunpowder weapons such as cannons and camel-mounted matchlock guns had been introduced into south Asia as early as the sixteenth century, but because they were expensive and needed professionals to operate them, they strengthened the hands of existing states. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, changes in the military strength of the people inhabiting marginal regions increased with the introduction of cheap muskets and later rifles. This allowed for wider (and more effective) participation in warfare by larger numbers of people.²⁸

The mountaineers now came to war with their own gunpowder arms and could fight effectively at a distance, particularly in ambush. As Rudyard Kipling observed in an often-quoted line from "Arithmetic on the Frontier":

A scrimmage in a Border station—
 A canter down a dark defile—
 Two thousand pounds of education
 Drops to a ten-rupee *jezail*.²⁹

Such tactics, of course, were hallmarks of a classic guerrilla war strategy, in which the aim was to make it more costly for the invader to continue the occupation than to leave. The British had been driven from Afghanistan by the losses suffered at the hands of such irregulars, not because they lost pitched battles with regular armies. To prove this point (if only to themselves), the British returned to Kabul in fall 1842 to take revenge and easily defeated every Afghan force that resisted them.

Succeeding Afghan governments took a lesson from this. Their old feudal cavalry forces were not a match for a European-style army; but they also were no longer as effective countering rural rebellions against the state. It was not just weaponry that was involved, though. Cavalry troops continued to make up about half of the army, but they were now better organized, and

combined with infantry and artillery. The real advantage of a well-trained and properly equipped army under professional officers was its consistency. Unlike the old feudal levies or tribal armies (*lashgar*), they did not depend on the cooperation of fickle chiefs, could regroup and fight again after a setback, and did not disperse seasonally. The creation of a European-style armed force therefore became a priority for all Afghan rulers in the nineteenth century. This military buildup was not designed to protect the country from invasion but rather to keep the rural population in line and the regions under Kabul's control. This marks an entirely new conception of warfare because in old Turko-Persia the fear was rebellion by subject princes, not subject populations. One simply ignored troublesome people in marginal areas. Yet in the wake of the expulsion of the British, Afghanistan's ruling elite could no longer dismiss the danger from these groups. The equations of power had altered, and this required a new and more complex strategy of government.

Postwar Reconsiderations and Recalculations

The political consequences of the First Anglo-Afghan War were profound, but the lessons that the British, the Durrani elite, and the Afghan people drew from it were quite different. As far as the British were concerned, the war proved that the Durrani elite were incapable of controlling their own people. Hence any future occupation of Afghanistan as a colony, even with the cooperation of its ruling class, would likely prove a questionable venture. At the very least, it would demand a military commitment far out of proportion from the value of the country. This strengthened those who favored a more indirect approach, in which British India would control Afghanistan's external affairs without actually occupying it through the support of compliant Durrani amirs. Since the Durrani amirs had always gotten along better with the British than their people did, establishing cordial relations with them by means of subsidies and military aid was certainly the easier objective to achieve. This policy proved remarkably fruitful, in part because it never demanded that the amirs act to help Britain overtly, only that they remain passive. As we have seen, the most no-

table example of this was Dost Muhammad's refusal to participate in the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, but it would not be the last.

The Durrani rulers drew a different set of lessons from the First Anglo-Afghan War. The first was that it was rebellions by its own population and not their own actions, government policies, or regular troops that had preserved Afghanistan's independence. This meant that unless they created a stronger state structure and a more centralized military, they too could fall victim to the same types of uprisings that had driven the British from the country. The second lesson was a corollary of the first: the Durrani dynasty needed to redefine its own political legitimacy in the eyes of its own people in a way that would command more popular support. To achieve the first objective, successive amirs solicited British aid to build a stronger state by arguing that only they could prevent a supposedly rebellious Afghan people from constituting a serious frontier problem for India and stand as a barrier to Russian expansion. The brilliance of this policy was that the amirs would receive payments to keep themselves in power while keeping the British out of the country. This helped in achieving their second objective of building internal political support by portraying themselves to the Afghan people as the necessary preservers of the nation's independence and Islamic religious identity against potential aggression by both the British raj and czarist Russia.

For the Afghan people, the First Anglo-Afghan War was a demonstration of a new political power. This was the first time that nonelite Afghan groups had taken a decisive role in national politics and proven their ability to remove a government. Because they were still culturally hobbled by traditional concepts of legitimacy, however, neither the Ghilzais nor the Kohistanis attempted to replace the old Durrani elite, or even force it into a power-sharing relationship. Instead, they continued to see themselves as mere allies of existing Sadozai or Muhammadzai Durrani factions, whose members they appointed as the leaders of their struggle. The clergy who framed their opposition to the British in terms of a religious jihad and not a national struggle reinforced this attitude. Therefore, almost all of the popular resistance was aimed specifically at the infidel British and only obliquely at their Afghan collaborators, including even Shah Shuja. Muhammadzai rulers would thus valorize the legitimacy of popular revolts

against outsiders in religious and national terms, while simultaneously condemning as treasonous and illegitimate any revolts against their own governments.

All these lessons were put more clearly into play during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–80) and its aftermath with the emergence of Amir Abdur Rahman and his project to build a centralized state.

THE SECOND ANGLO-AFGHAN WAR AND AMIR ABDUR RAHMAN

Civil War and State Building

Dost Muhammad's success at building up his military power was not accompanied by administrative centralization. His unification of Afghanistan merely incorporated the three most important regions that had previously been free of Kabul's control: Qandahar, Herat, and Turkistan. He was unable to rule them directly or change the structures of their administration. Indeed, his own style of administration was less sophisticated than his predecessors:

Apart from the formalities like striking coins and the insertion of the Amir's name in the khutba, the administration of Dost Muhammad Khan's nascent state showed little resemblance with that of the bygone Sadozai Empire and was extremely rudimentary in nature. As if to obliterate all traces of Sadozai supremacy, Dost Muhammad Khan even did away with the physical remnants of that era, such as the office for records. During his reign, as during that of his successor, there were no government offices, and the state officials worked in their homes, carrying scraps of paper around in their pockets when reporting to the king.³⁰

In other words, Dost Muhammad was not the ruler of a unified Afghan state but rather the last of its great patrimonial kings, who simply took regional administrative fragmentation for granted. His focus was on extracting revenue from his provinces (when he could), not ruling these regions from Kabul. His was a dynastic realm in which subjects had no role in government, despite the power they had demonstrated during the First

Anglo-Afghan War. Nor did the larger Durrani elite have much power for that matter; with few exceptions, Dost Muhammad's officials were all members of his immediate family.³¹ This was most apparent in his appointment of his sons as governors of various cities and provinces, where he let them rule as they thought best. Although his sons were in constant competition with one another and complained when rivals got a territory better than their own, Dost Muhammad was at least confident of their loyalty to him. But since each province came with its own military and tax revenue, the governors acted more as little kings than as obedient servants of the amir. As political actors in their own right, they built patronage networks and political alliances in the regions they ruled, so that their success or failure at the national level now had immediate repercussions at the local level.

The use of sons as governors created stability during the lifetime of the amir, but guaranteed trouble on his demise for reasons that Afghans understood through bitter experience: sons might be loyal to their father yet not to each other. I have already noted the intense rivalry in Pashtun society among patrilineal cousins (*tarburwali*), but this paled in comparison to the rivalry among half brothers. In fact, since only one of them could succeed to the throne, even full brothers did not always support one another. This tendency was exacerbated by the sheer number of royal heirs. While Muslim law restricted a man to a maximum of four wives, Afghan rulers such as Timur Shah and Dost Muhammad never applied such a restriction to themselves. When Dost Muhammad died at age seventy-two, he had twenty-seven sons and twenty five daughters born to sixteen wives.³² His children ranged in age from mere infants to mature men with sons of their own. Sons by different mothers (who varied widely in social rank and ethnic origin) saw their half brothers as deadly rivals, and the fragile ties that bound them broke with the death of their father.

The seeming unity of the Afghan state at the time of Dost Muhammad's death was more apparent than real. Even with the elimination of the Sadozais and the subordination of the Peshawar and Qandahar sardars, Muhammadzai cousin lineages, Dost Muhammad's immediate heirs were numerous enough to conduct a series of civil wars all by themselves. As at the death of Timur Shah, who also had an excess of wives and sons, bloody tanistry would once again rule the day and throw Afghanistan into another

period of turmoil. One difference from earlier civil wars was that because Dost Muhammad's prestige was so high, he achieved a goal that had eluded earlier Muhammadzai rulers: an institutionalized dynastic charisma. The civil war following his death was not a political free-for-all. It was a limited war of succession restricted to his sons and grandsons, who avoided killing one another when possible.

The death of Dost Muhammad in 1863 opened a period of five years of unrest. Sher Ali initially took the throne. The third son of Dost Muhammad's favorite wife, he had come to be heir designate after the death of his more famous brothers, Muhammad Akbar (1847) and Ghulam Haidar (1858). His major rivals were his two half brothers, Muhammad Afzal and Muhammad Azam, whose mother was the amir's first wife, but who had a lower social ranking. As Dost Muhammad's eldest surviving son, Afzal thought the throne should be his and revolted with the aid of his brother Azam. The threat to Sher Ali was real because Afzal had been governor of Turkistan for a decade and built up a well-trained army of twenty-five thousand there. Sher Ali attacked Turkistan but decided to come to an accommodation with his half brother after an indecisive battle there in June 1864. As Sher Ali walked with Afzal through Mazar's holy shrine to conclude the peace, he learned of a plot against him by Abdur Rahman, Afzal's only son. Abdur Rahman had opposed the reconciliation because it deprived his father (and by extension himself) of his legitimate right to the throne. He planned to arrest the amir and shoot the heir apparent, Muhammad Ali Khan. Instead, Sher Ali arrested Afzal and transported him to Kabul, forcing Abdur Rahman to flee to Bukhara.

In 1865 Sher Ali faced a revolt in the south by his full brother, Muhammad Amin Khan, the governor of Qandahar. Sher Ali suppressed that rebellion, but the casualties included his rebel brother and, worse, his own heir, Muhammad Ali Khan. This threw the amir into a severe depression. He went into seclusion at the famous "Shrine of the Cloak" in Qandahar and refused all entreaties to resume his public life. Azam and Abdur Rahman used the opportunity to return to Afghanistan from exile, mobilize their allies, and attack Kabul. In May 1866 they freed Abdur Rahman's father, Afzal, and made him amir. This finally galvanized Sher Ali to raise an army to oppose them. But Sher Ali suffered a series of defeats with large casualties in 1866 and 1867, and so retreated to Herat, where his son

Yaqub Khan ruled as governor. Afzal died that year and was immediately replaced on the throne in Kabul by his full brother Azam, causing Abdur Rahman to return to Turkistan. It fell to Yaqub to reverse the family's fortunes by taking Qandahar from Azam's sons and then defeating the amir himself near Ghazni in 1868. Azam fled to Iran but died en route, and Abdur Rahman was soon forced to seek asylum in Samarqand as Sher Ali's forces moved north. The civil wars now over, Sher Ali would rule as amir for the next ten years.³³

If Dost Muhammad was the last of the great patrimonial kings of Afghanistan, Sher Ali was the first of its state builders. He focused particularly on strengthening the army and making administrative reforms to support it.

Sher Ali's goal was to have a completely professional army. Dost Muhammad had built up some professional units, but now the new amir was determined to end the government's dependency on irregular troops led by the country's notables. When Sher Ali first visited India in 1869 he sought British aid to do this. Although the British agreed to make a few grants of arms to his government, they were otherwise disinclined to assist him directly or get involved in Afghanistan's internal politics. Yet they did permit Sher Ali to recruit retired noncommissioned officers from India who could train his soldiers and artisans who could provide these soldiers with weapons. By the end of his reign, he had fifty-six thousand troops divided into forty-two regiments of cavalry, seventy-three of infantry, and forty-eight of artillery batteries. It was still not quite a national army, since the units were identified by their region of recruitment and ethnic origin. Ghilzai and Wardak Pashtuns dominated the army, and also held high civil and military posts. By contrast, the Muhammadzais and the other Durrani aristocrats showed little interest in military service.³⁴ This was the beginning of a new pattern that would have significant consequences. In the past the Durrani had owed their preeminence to their military service; now they were becoming a more passive hereditary aristocracy.

Sher Ali sought administrative reforms to pay for his army. The army consumed a little more than 40 percent of the government's total revenue of thirteen million rupees. This burden was met by reforming the tax system so that it took in five million rupees more than his father had been able to raise. Sher Ali pushed to have some land taxes paid in cash rather

than in-kind. He also imposed austerity measures on the court by decreasing royal allowances so that “every penny saved would go to strengthen the country’s defense, which was that patriotic sovereign’s one and only desire.”³⁵ Despite increased military spending, the Afghan treasury continued to have a surplus in the years before he died. The organization of Sher Ali’s government rested with a set of ministers, none of whom was a member of the royal dynasty. There was still little evidence of a bureaucratic structure, however, and the impact of Sher Ali’s changes should not be exaggerated. New tax policies might have a direct impact on those districts from which it could actually be collected, but Hasan Kakar concluded that the average Afghan of the time remained only weakly within the orbit of Sher Ali’s government and in many cases beyond its control entirely:

Even after it had been reformed the government was still unable to rule directly over the entire country. It controlled only the cities, towns and their dependencies as well as those areas where contingents of troops were stationed. Tribal communities, especially those of the frontier regions, remained self-administered as before, and their affairs were settled by elders mainly through the *jirgas* in accord with the Shari’a and Pashtunwali (Pashtun code of behavior). In cases in which disputes between individuals and tribes were unsettled the conflicting parties often resorted to violence. Thus, in these communities anarchy and order co-existed, and the government intervened only when general order was disrupted.³⁶

Nor did the reforms free Sher Ali from the typical political problems created by the competition among sons by multiple wives to succeed him. His eldest two sons, Yaqub and Ayyub Khan, used Herat as a base from which to project their own power. They threatened outright revolt or secession when their father appointed their much younger half brother as his new heir in 1873. Following a series of threats and reconciliations, Sher Ali gained the upper hand in this dispute. Yaqub found himself imprisoned in Kabul, while Ayyub sought exile in Persia.

In addition to buttressing his government’s domestic power, Sher Ali was the first amir to judge Afghanistan by any international criteria. When he visited India in 1869, he came away with the strong impression that, in the words of his grandson, “all people are advancing in the arts of peace

and civilization. It is only we Afghans who remain the ignorant asses we have always been.”³⁷ Without making substantial changes he believed that the country would never command respect in the world and would not be treated in terms of equality by its powerful imperial neighbors, Russia and Britain. This was the earliest expression of two themes that would grow in influence among the rulers of Afghanistan in the twentieth century: a concern about how outsiders viewed their country, and the desire to change Afghanistan’s economy and society to make them more progressive and modern. Previous rulers had been worried about what outside powers might *do* to Afghanistan, but they expressed no concern about what they might think of it. Similarly, previous rulers had made changes with an eye to strengthening their power, particularly in the army, but they never saw themselves as social engineers. Of course, accomplishing changes in either of these two areas would require the Afghan government to alter radically its relationship with its people as well. Whether such changes were necessary or desirable would become a recurring flash point in Afghan politics—and it remains unresolved even today.

Second Anglo-Afghan War

During Sher Ali’s reign, the Russians expanded rapidly into central Asia. They reached the historic northern border of Afghanistan after annexing Samarqand and making the amir of Bukhara their client in 1868. Beginning in 1869, the British and Russians began engaging in discussions on their respective interests in central Asia. They finally came to an understanding in 1873 that the area south of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) would be considered Afghan territory. (This was the same boundary set earlier by Ahmad Shah Durrani and the amir of Bukhara in the mid-eighteenth century.) Russia also agreed that Afghanistan fell within the British sphere of influence. In this way Afghanistan became a buffer state between their two empires. While this agreement was made without Afghanistan’s cooperation, it served the amir’s interests by setting a limit on Russian expansion without forcing him to make new concessions to the British. But it did not entirely set his mind at rest. Saint Petersburg might have been satisfied with the agreed-on limits, but Russian expansion into

central Asia was more often the product of aggressive local commanders than official policy. These commanders' definition of protecting Russia's frontiers included the right to expand them, with or without orders. General Constantine von Kaufman, the Russian governor general in Tashkent, was particularly aggressive in such matters. He made the Khivan khanate a protectorate in 1873 and occupied Kokand in 1876. The Russians then began attacks on the Turkmen tribes in Merv. Kaufman also sent letters to the amir in Kabul that implied that Russia's acceptance of Afghan sovereignty over its northern territories was conditional as well.³⁸

The renewed Russian advances in central Asia coincided with a change in British foreign policy that was partly in response to them. Benjamin Disraeli had become Britain's prime minister in 1874 and he favored the Forward Policy. At a minimum, that policy demanded more direct control over Afghan affairs; at a maximum, it foresaw the dismemberment of Afghanistan into its component regions and their incorporation into British India. Evidence of this new policy became concrete in 1876, when the British occupied Quetta in Baluchistan, formerly an Afghan feudatory. At the same time, the British demanded that Sher Ali accept the appointment of an English political agent in Kabul. The new and aggressive British viceroy in India, Lord Edward Robert Lytton, saw this as a way to rule Afghanistan from within as a protectorate. Although Lytton was willing to make some concessions to the amir, such as protecting his dynastic rights against rivals, the loss of independence was too high a price, and Sher Ali refused to comply.

As tensions mounted, an uninvited Russian diplomatic delegation sent by Kaufman arrived in Kabul in July 1878. This infuriated the British, who immediately demanded equal treatment and insisted on the reception of their own delegation. When the Afghans refused, the British issued an ultimatum and then invaded Afghanistan in November. Kakar is of the opinion that Kaufman deliberately provoked the British in order to draw them into a costly Afghan conflict to facilitate Russia's own war with the Ottoman Turks, with whom Britain was allied. Of course, since Lytton was looking for a fight after Sher Ali rejected his demands, another excuse would have undoubtedly been found had not the Russians provided this one. If it was a ploy, Sher Ali was its main victim. Assuming he had a reliable ally, the amir evacuated his troops from Kabul to make a stand in

northern Afghanistan, declaring, "I am leaving in order to unite with the Russians and acquire financial and military assistance so that I may return to avenge myself."³⁹ When he reached the north, however, Kaufman refused to provide him the promised aid. Sher Ali sought to appeal to the czar directly, but Kaufman foreclosed that option by refusing him entry to Russian territory. He instead recommended that the amir make his peace with the British. Frustrated and long debilitated by chronic illnesses, Sher Ali died in Mazar in February 1879.

The Second Anglo-Afghan War, like the first, began well for the British and ended badly. By January 1879, they had occupied Jalalabad with a force marching up the Khyber and Qandahar with a force from Quetta. Yaqub became amir on Sher Ali's death. He had only recently been released from prison to serve as regent in Kabul during his father's absence. With no Russian alliance in hand to stop further British inroads, Yaqub agreed to make peace on British terms. In May 1879 he signed the Treaty of Gandamak, which formally ceded various border territories to India (including the Khyber Pass), permitted a permanent British mission in Afghanistan, gave the British control of Afghanistan's foreign affairs, and made Afghanistan part of a free trade zone with India. It returned to the amir's sovereignty the areas under military occupation, and granted him and his heirs a subsidy of six hundred thousand rupees annually.⁴⁰

With the hostilities now concluded, Sir Louis Cavagnari was dispatched to Kabul in July with a small escort to serve as the head of the British mission in Afghanistan. Housed in a less-than-secure part of the Bala Hissar palace complex, he proceeded to act like the proconsul that Lytton expected him to be. Ordinary Afghans welcomed neither Yaqub's treaty with Britain nor Cavagnari's presence in Kabul, but initially there was no overt opposition. As in the First Anglo-Afghan War, trouble began over a side issue that escalated out of control. In September, three regiments of unpaid Afghan soldiers from Herat took their grievances to the mission, seeing the British as the true rulers and paymasters of the country. Rioting broke out when they received no redress, and joined by a local mob, they overran the residence and murdered Cavagnari and his guards. The British responded quickly. General Frederick Roberts occupied Kabul in October. Yaqub was held prisoner, forced to abdicate, and eventually sent to India. Roberts sought to hang or shoot anyone involved in the uprising, and was none too

particular about trials or evidence of guilt. The British also blew up the Bala Hissar palace complex, the historic seat of Afghan rulers.⁴¹

The British now ruled Afghanistan directly and gave every indication that this state of affairs would be permanent. Lytton concluded that if he could not rule Afghanistan through a compliant amir, he would dismember it first by establishing British India's line of defense at its scientific frontier on the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush, then severing Qandahar from Kabul, and perhaps giving Herat to the Persians. Since the empire was at the peak of its Victorian glory, the colonial hubris that underlay his confidence was perhaps inevitable. General Charles MacGregor, the chief of staff of the British military in Kabul, suggested that force was the only thing that the Afghans understood and recommended the following line of argumentation to bring them to their senses:

You shall give in, you have killed Cavi, and his hundred men, but we are sending another representative with 10,000 men, and he shall stay there whether you like it or not. We wish one thing from you, and that is friendship, but whether we get this or not, we will have your obedience, you may chafe as much as you please, but we will be your masters, and you will find that the only escape from our heavy hand will be your entire submission.⁴²

Instead of compliance, the imposition of direct foreign rule provoked regional revolts by the Ghilzai Pashtuns and Kohistani Tajiks, who together attacked Kabul in December. This tribal army was large—about fifty thousand men—but had no unified command. Having a better-organized and better-led army than in 1841, the British successfully held off the besiegers, who withdrew to Ghazni in the spring after looting the Qizilbash, Hazara, and Hindu sections of Kabul as well as those Muhammadzais they deemed pro-British. This Ghazni faction, or National Party, wanted the British out, and a return of one of Sher Ali's sons to the throne. At the same time, Amir Afzal's son, Abdur Rahman, had left Samarqand to raise an army of his own in the north in January 1880. Since his family had long supplied Kabul's governors in Turkistan, Abdur Rahman had established connections there. The continued resistance to their direct rule had convinced the British that they should seek a quick agreement with some Afghan ruler who would respect their interests after they left. Unsure of the

reliability of Sher Ali's sons, they opened negotiations with Abdur Rahman, offering to make him amir of "Northern Afghanistan" (i.e., Kabul, eastern Afghanistan, and Turkistan). As Sir Lepel Griffin wrote the amir in June:

With regard to limits of territory, I am directed to say that the whole province of Kandahar has been placed under a separate ruler, except Pishin and Sibi, which are retained in British possession. Consequently the Government is not able to enter into any negotiations with you on these points, nor in respect to arrangements with regard to the north-west frontier, which were concluded with the ex-Ameer Mahomed Yakooob Khan. With these reservations the British Government are willing that you should establish over Afghanistan (including Herat, the possession of which cannot be guaranteed to you, though Government are not disposed to hinder measures which you may take to obtain possession of it) as complete and extensive authority as has hitherto been exercised by any Ameer of your family.⁴³

Abdur Rahman delayed accepting such an agreement since he would be sacrificing half of the country's existing territory. During this delay, Lytton was replaced as viceroy by Lord Ripon, who proposed returning the ex-amir Yaqub or his brother Ayyub to the throne. This possibility was foreclosed when Abdur Rahman, in concert with his cousin Ishaq Khan (Azam's son), arrived on the outskirts of Kabul in July 1880 and accepted the amirship on British terms.

Abdur Rahman's success came at the expense of the elite Durrani groups that favored Sher Ali's family. The new amir had bypassed them by appealing directly to the Ghilzais and Kohistanis, whose desire to see the British out of the country outweighed their existing loyalties to the heirs of Sher Ali. By getting first to Kabul and appealing to the people while striking a deal with the British, Abdur Rahman showed himself to be a more skilled politician than his rivals. Kakar notes, however, that his success came at a cost that both the amir and later historians of the dynasty would do their best to obscure, because "by accepting only 'Northern Afghanistan' he went along with the British scheme to divide Afghanistan. Furthermore, he surrendered the independence of the country for which his compatriots had fought."⁴⁴ That Abdur Rahman would in fact rule over an undivided

Afghanistan was a welcome but unexpected gift from his greatest rival, Sher Ali's son Ayyub, the ruler of Herat.

Even before coming to an agreement with Abdur Rahman, the British had recognized an independent *wali* (governor) of Qandahar in May 1880. Drawing on an obscure line of Sher Ali's cousins, the British proclaimed his rule to be hereditary, provided him with arms, had coins minted, and had the khutba read in his name. In return, they would control Qandahar's foreign relations and station political agents at court. But the stability of the new principality was challenged by Herat's governor, Ayyub, who had moved his army (forty-five hundred infantry, thirty-two hundred cavalry, and four thousand irregular ghazis) east. In July 1880, the army encountered a strong body of twenty-eight hundred British troops supported by two thousand followers at Maiwand. Although the British had superior arms, the Afghans were able to close on their formation by taking large casualties and they annihilated the enemy in fierce combat. If Ayyub had immediately followed up on his victory, he could have easily captured Qandahar. Instead he delayed ten days before besieging the city, giving the British enough time to regroup and fortify their position. Yet even without occupying Qandahar, had Ayyub chosen to march north on Kabul, the country would have risen with him.⁴⁵

To get troops south to deal with Ayyub's siege of Qandahar, the British agreed to withdraw their army of ten thousand from Kabul if Abdur Rahman would convince the Ghilzai to allow it unhindered passage south. Abdur Rahman did this by presenting the British withdrawal from Kabul as an Afghan victory—an evacuation of the country that was not to be resisted. Perhaps surprisingly (given that a similar promise made by Akbar in the First Anglo-Afghan War had led to a massacre), Roberts covered the 324 miles to Qandahar in a record time of twenty-three days unhindered by attacks along the way. In September 1880, Roberts relieved the siege at Qandahar, and Ayyub retreated back to Herat. Afghanistan was now divided between the British in the south, Ayyub in the west, and Abdur Rahman in the east and north. The British had no intention of staying or maintaining an independent Qandahar, however, and were determined to completely evacuate the country before the summer heat set in. The amir opposed such a rapid withdrawal because Ayyub still remained at large, but he was given no choice since the government in London had ordered

its Indian officials to withdraw. Qandahar was therefore turned over to Abdur Rahman's officials in April 1881. The war with the British was over, but the Afghan conflict that it spawned moved into high gear.

Abdur Rahman may have been named amir in Kabul, but his hold on power was precarious. The British had recognized his government, but would not move to sustain it in a civil war. Ayyub, as the victor at the Battle of Maiwand and Sher Ali's son, had both a stronger claim on the throne by descent and better nationalist credentials than Abdur Rahman. Ayyub also had more troops at his disposal. But Abdur Rahman had a number of assets to his credit. The new amir had spent much of his youth involved in military campaigns in northern Afghanistan and was therefore an experienced field commander who rarely hesitated to press home an attack if he sensed vulnerability. He was also a ruthless personality who might well have adopted Henry V's motto of *carpe diem* ("seize the day"). By contrast, Ayyub and his brothers had been powerful governors who had delegated military affairs to their Ghilzai officers. As was typical of conservative third-generation dynastic princes who had grown up with inherited power, they had a tendency to put off hard decisions and could rarely move themselves to take advantage of singular opportunities. In times of crisis they tended toward vacillation rather than resolution.

Ayyub reclaimed Qandahar in July 1881, well after the British evacuated the city. He had not done this earlier because Herat had revolted against his rule and it had taken some time to suppress this insurrection. (Heratis of many different ethnic groups had all agreed that this would be a good time to throw off Kabul's domination and become independent themselves.) His advisers urged him to take the offensive and march immediately on the amir in Kabul, but Ayyub preferred the defensive course, in part because his Durrani followers favored that as well. In Qandahar, he convinced important clerics to issue fatwas justifying the war on the grounds that the "*farangi* amir" was an infidel. In response, Abdur Rahman had his own clerics issue fatwas denouncing Ayyub as a rebel, but their cooperation was more grudging since the amir was forced to distribute gifts or money to them. Not content to let the situation become stalemated, Abdur Rahman consulted with Ghilzai and Kohistani leaders, and then marched south to Qandahar in August. Along the way, he distributed food and money lavishly to the Ghilzai tribes to win them over to his side.

While he had some success in this, there were also many Ghilzai in Ayyub's army as well, so this war of succession did not split entirely along tribal lines. As had happened during the First Anglo-Afghan War, the Ghilzais acted as allies of Durrani pretenders on both sides and did not see themselves as possible rulers.

When Abdur Rahman arrived at Qandahar, he commanded around fourteen thousand troops facing Ayyub's army of seventeen thousand. Such odds should have favored Ayyub, who had a prepared line of defense and a more secure line of retreat. But his army was disorganized and poorly led. Nor did Ayyub intend to put himself in harm's way by getting close to the action, taking up his view of the coming battle from the high ruined ramparts of the old city. By contrast, the amir led his troops in battle personally and routed Ayyub's army. Showing the temper that would characterize the next twenty years of his reign, Abdur Rahman then sought out one of the clerics who had issued a fatwa condemning his "blasphemous aid to infidels." Although the cleric had taken refuge in the sacred Shrine of the Cloak, where violence was forbidden, the amir confronted him with a raised sword, and "with one stroke severed his head from his frail body and threw it out like a football."⁴⁶ Ayyub fled west, but Herat too revolted against him on learning of his defeat, and he had to seek asylum in Persia. In 1887, the British would offer him permanent asylum and a pension in India.

CREATING THE AFGHAN STATE

During the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British recognized that their own occupation of Afghanistan in support of Yaqub's weak regime had destabilized the country. They therefore sought to find a new cooperative ruler who, in exchange for large subsidies and the right to rule an unoccupied Afghanistan, would agree to let Britain control the country's foreign affairs and respect British interests in India. Abdur Rahman was willing to meet these criteria, but he knew that securing his own power would be a longer-term project. His most immediate objective was to win the civil war with Ayyub. In achieving this goal, Abdur Rahman not only removed the most significant Durrani rival challenging his elevation to the throne but also gained control over the entire country (with the exception

of Maimana, which would fall to him in 1884). What then distinguished Abdur Rahman from previous amirs was that after winning the by-now-customary war of succession, he began a series of new wars, which Louis Dupree labeled “internal imperialism,” designed to destroy the old state structure in which the major urban centers and the tribal regions were autonomous.⁴⁷

Abdur Rahman’s goal was to rule Afghanistan directly and autocratically without relying on intermediaries.⁴⁸ His initial policy of consultation and largesse, which had characterized his civil war days, was now replaced by a policy that depended more on force than persuasion and grew harsher as his reign progressed. But imposing direct rule and taxes over a people who appreciated neither naturally raised opposition. During the course of his reign, the amir experienced over forty uprisings against his government. Had these been better coordinated or come all at once, Abdur Rahman would have undoubtedly been toppled. One of the amir’s political strengths was that he aimed his attacks at specific targets and thereby kept conflict from spreading too widely against him at any one time. He also took on hostile tribes and regions in sequence, often rewarding victims of earlier repressions with opportunities to gain wealth and political influence by allying with him in later attacks on others. By the end of his reign, he had created a powerful police state in which even subversive talk that might offend the amir could land a person in jail or worse. The level of violence it took to bring Afghanistan to such a state has frequently been overlooked by historians and later political leaders, who instead lauded the amir’s ability to bring order to such a fractured land.

Abdur Rahman’s internal wars were designed to reduce the autonomous political authority and military power of three main groups: the eastern Pashtun tribes that had been the core of the anti-British resistance, his rival cousins who ruled Turkistan, and the non-Sunni ethnic groups in rugged parts of the country that had historically fallen outside Afghan state control. Over the course of the next fifteen years he would crush every autonomous group in Afghanistan one by one, aided by British subsidies that financed the creation of a powerful national army equipped with modern weapons that were purchased abroad or produced in his own factories.

Even more than Dost Muhammad, Abdur Rahman looked with suspicion on the tribal resistance that had led the British to withdraw. If the

rebellious Tajiks or Ghilzais who attacked Kabul had leaders with more vision, or ambition, they could have seized power for themselves when the British left. Yet they appear to have been satisfied with the withdrawal of the British and once again left national politics to the Durranis. Abdur Rahman made sure they would not have the chance to change their minds. His campaigns began in the early 1880s, when he took control over a number of eastern Pashtun districts and tribes that had gained some autonomy during the war. He then fought a major war against the Ghilzais, who had revolted against his rule (1886–88).

The amir sparked this war by first arresting many influential Ghilzai leaders and then introducing a new tax scheme. As members of the National Party in Ghazni, the tribal leaders and clerics had come to wield great influence during the occupation, and many had supported the amir's rival cousin, Ayyub, in the civil war that followed. When in 1883 the amir had earlier arrested some of the most prominent and popular of these war leaders, including General Muhammad Jan Wardak, on trumped-up sedition charges, he was condemned by the most important Ghilzai cleric, Mullah Mushk-i-Alam: "Three thousand men who took defense during the British occupation and endured hardship in protecting the honor and the country of Islam are today in prison in Kabul. Therefore all people, including me, consider us in danger."⁴⁹

The amir also changed the tax system applied to the Ghilzais. Formerly it was assessed as a fixed quota for each tribe and paid through the tribes' elders. The new tax was much higher (one-third of the agricultural produce from irrigated lands) and was collected from individual landowners. Adding insult to injury, the Ghilzais who had helped drive the British from Afghanistan were now expected to pay much higher taxes than the Durranis in the south. Although their role in the occupation was less than glorious and they had been fully supportive of Ayyub, the Durranis continued to benefit from the tax-free land grants they had inherited from the time of Ahmad Shah. The Ghilzais revolted against this treatment by the amir beginning in October 1886. Not wishing to be seen as pure rebels, they fought in the name of the exiled prince Ayyub. The amir appeared to have the upper hand when his best general, Ghulam Haidar, defeated the Ghilzais within weeks and dispatched two thousand heads to Kabul to build an exemplary "tower of skulls" to impress the populace. The amir's

army also seized land from rebels and treated the inhabitants harshly. Such tactics only sharpened Ghilzai anger, though, and led to renewed attacks in spring 1887. The number of rebels exploded from twenty thousand in March to one hundred thousand in April. But they stood little chance against the amir's better-organized troops, which were armed and equipped with more modern weapons. More significantly the amir was able to constantly reinforce his army from Kabul, giving the Ghilzais no respite. By winter, the revolt waned after the loss of an estimated twenty-four thousand Ghilzais dead—far higher Afghan losses than ever experienced in their fighting with the British. The amir's postrevolt policy was designed to impoverish the Ghilzais on the theory that “when they have no money left with them, [they] will not raise disturbances.”⁵⁰ And in fact, they never raised another large-scale revolt again.

Having extinguished his most dangerous tribal threat, the amir immediately turned his attention to his cousin Ishaq Khan, governor of Turkistan. As Azam's son, his cousin Ishaq would be the likely successor had Abdur Rahman died, because the amir's own sons were still children and he had no brothers. But a greater threat was their disagreement on how Afghanistan should be ruled. Ishaq was of the opinion that as in the past, Afghanistan was best ruled as a set of regions loyal to, yet autonomous from, Kabul. This view was shared earlier by Ayyub: he had proposed a political solution to the civil war in which each of the six remaining princes whose fathers had been an amir would get a province. Abdur Rahman wanted a true centralized state with himself as the only ruler. At the beginning of his reign he did not have the power to realize this goal. He was forced to recognize Ishaq's virtual autonomy in the north as governor of Turkistan because he commanded a strong provincial army and had his own revenue stream. It was a system that the amir was determined to limit, however. He first refused Ishaq's request to appoint his younger brothers to the newly opened governorships in Herat and Qandahar in 1881. Tension mounted again when the amir annexed Maimana in 1884 and then kept it out of his cousin's jurisdiction in Turkistan. Over the next few years the amir repeatedly requested Ishaq's presence at the court in Kabul, but Ishaq refused, fearing (rightly) that they were only ploys to remove him from office. In August 1888, Ishaq's passive resistance turned to rebellion when he permitted his subjects to declare him amir in open opposition to his

cousin. This revolt was a far greater threat to the Abdur Rahman's authority than any other since his opponent filled the hereditary requirements to replace him. Not waiting for Ishaq to cross the Hindu Kush, the amir's army under Ghulam Haidar moved north. His outnumbered troops made contact with Ishaq at Ghazniak in September. The battle shifted back and forth, but ended suddenly when Ishaq took flight on hearing that his key regiments had been defeated. This news was false, yet Ishaq's loss of nerve at that critical moment led to the collapse of his army and its retreat from the field. Abdur Rahman now had direct control of the north, an area he knew well from his youth, and had driven the last of the possible royal pretenders out of the country.⁵¹

Abdur Rahman's final major campaigns were wars of conquest against non-Sunni areas that the Kabul government had never directly controlled: Hazarajat in central Afghanistan (1891–93) and Kafiristan in eastern Afghanistan (1895–96).⁵² Previous Afghan governments had controlled only the edges of Hazarajat and ruled the rest indirectly. Abdur Rahman received the formal submission of the tribes there in 1890, although the terms to which they agreed remain open to dispute. It was the behavior of the officials and troops that the amir sent to the region that sparked rebellion in 1891. The war quickly took on a religious overtone when the amir had the Shia Hazaras declared infidels. This allowed both his army and the tribal levies that he raised to ignore the usual Islamic laws of war. In particular, the army could enslave those that they captured, and keep their land and property. This was especially important in recruiting Pashtun tribes, which agreed to participate in hopes of plunder. The amir mobilized a hundred thousand troops for this campaign—more than for any other. The army broke the power of the Hazaras, many of whom were enslaved, while a large number fled to Persia and Baluchistan, where they formed refugee communities. The amir's government reaped a large dividend from taxing this slave trade. Hazarajat itself was impoverished as neighboring Pashtun tribes expanded their territory into lands formerly controlled by the Hazaras. The war also opened vast new stretches of summer pasturelands to Pashtun nomads.

The campaign against the Kafirs, an ancient society that still maintained its pagan religion in mountainous eastern Afghanistan, was by contrast fought mostly for symbolic reasons. The amir had been portraying himself

as a paragon of Islamic leadership, and the opportunity to engage in a war against true (and relatively powerless) infidels was too good to pass up. He also feared that if he did not assert his direct control there, the British or Russians might do so. A winter campaign in 1895 when the region was snowbound led to a quick victory. Unlike the incitement to violence in the Hazara campaign, the amir prohibited the enslavement of prisoners or the pillaging of property. The mass conversion of the region went quickly, and the region was renamed Nuristan, "Land of Light." The war had some surprising consequences. The amir recruited about ten thousand former Kafirs into the army, and this small ethnic group retained an important military role in Afghan governments for the next eighty years, much as the Qizilbash had done in the time of Ahmad Shah. The amir also built a pack animal road running through the Afghan territory that separated the Russian Pamir base at Khorog from British-controlled Chitral. He had the bright idea that if Russia was determined to invade India, then he would ease their way by building a road to make it easier—a road that would also direct the Russians away from any crucial Afghan territory.

These wars centralized political and economic power in Kabul, and made Abdur Rahman the undisputed ruler of Afghanistan. Previously major provinces such as Qandahar, Herat, and Turkistan had been autonomous because they had rich sources of revenue that could finance local armies. And because the relatives of the amir in Kabul usually administered them, they also became major sources of dynastic tension when the governors used them to create independent power bases, often by allying themselves with regional non-Muhammadzai political elites against the central government in Kabul. Abdur Rahman destroyed this autonomy by appointing governors that he could remove at will rather than immediate relatives. He also began a policy of subdividing provinces into smaller units so that they would never be large enough to serve as a base for revolt. This reduced the importance of the regional elites. For the next century, all national politics would be centered in Kabul, and the regional cities wilted in its shadow. The other notable aspect of these campaigns was how frequently they were directed at whole populations and not just their leaders. The destruction of life and property was severe, and at a level previously associated only with foreign invasion. This was magnified by the amir's regular policy of moving populations from their home regions to distant

parts of the country to reduce their power. After the defeat of Ishaq, large numbers of defeated Ghilzais in the south were uprooted and exiled to northern Afghanistan. So many Shia Hazaras were deported to Kabul that they became a significant part of Kabul's population for the first time. Aimaqs in central Afghanistan and Nuristanis also found themselves in new places. It was becoming less and less possible to remain neutral in political struggles.

This inability to avoid state power extended into the economy as well. Direct taxation was imposed on tribes and regions that had previously been taxed only indirectly, if at all. In 1889, the amir had an annual income estimated at around fourteen million rupees. But by 1891 the figure had risen to fifty million rupees—four times higher than anything Sher Ali had ever raised. The bulk came from land taxes in an economy that remained subsistence based, and from populations that had not increased in number, so the sudden surge in government revenues came at the expense of ordinary Afghans, who were left destitute. Even members of the elite were targets. The amir found ready excuses for confiscating property and money from refugees, rebels, government officials, clerics, or indeed anyone whose wealth came to his attention.⁵³ He also increased his control over foreign trade. While previous Afghan governments had taxed trade running through their territories, they had not attempted to control the organization of the trade itself or its financial infrastructure. By contrast, as Shah Mahmud Hanifi has shown, Abdur Rahman attempted to monopolize both in a way that eventually isolated and impoverished the Afghan people.⁵⁴ Such high levels of revenue collection inside Afghanistan were unprecedented, and went to fund the amir's professional army and nascent bureaucracy. But just how rudimentary the state administration remained could be seen in the fact that the amir was never able to determine his real income or expenses, only how much was taken in and how much was spent in any one year.

The increased tax burden was not offset by government investment in education, infrastructure, or communications, which were transforming neighboring Iran and India at the end of the nineteenth century. The amir refused foreign offers to construct railways and telegraph lines that would link Afghanistan and its economy to the outside world. He also forbade

foreign investment in the country and made no attempt to develop Afghanistan's rich mineral deposits. The amir's arms factories that produced the bulk of the weapons for his army could not operate without importing iron from India, even though Afghanistan had much vaster ore deposits on its own territories. The amir feared that any economic or transport development would only make the country vulnerable to outside interference. He may have been correct about the danger, but such a strategy was like eschewing the acquisition of wealth because it might attract thieves. Abdur Rahman thus laid the foundation for the country's long-term economic stagnation and poverty, even though in terms of population density and available resources it had a stronger potential for growth than many of its neighbors.

The amir could ignore the country's structural economic problems because he received regular subsidies from the British. This began with an allowance of 1.2 million rupees annually in 1883, and it was raised by a third in 1893 to 1.8 million as part of the Durand Agreement. Altogether, with the addition of special grants and arms in 1880, 1881, and 1887, the amir collected 28.5 million rupees from the British during his reign.⁵⁵ This money alone was not enough to make Afghanistan a true rentier state (given the amir's high rate of internal taxation), but with the subsidy came access to the international arms market, which supplied the amir with all the guns and ammunition he needed to subdue his own people. It also paid for the machines and raw materials necessary to run his government-owned workshops, which were Afghanistan's only factories. But access to such arms and equipment came only with the cooperation of the British raj, since even if the amir had wanted to spend his own funds, all his international imports into Afghanistan by sea came through Indian ports.

The receipt of British subsidies returns us to a problem that Afghan rulers faced from the time of Dost Muhammad: how to justify their close relations with a non-Muslim power while maintaining their status as a defender of the faith and protector of Afghanistan's national integrity. The Durrani elite had always tied their fortunes to their alliance with the British. Yet this alliance was only effective to the extent that the British avoided a direct occupation of Afghanistan. The Second Anglo-Afghan War had convinced the British that the indirect approach was more fruitful in creating

a barrier to Russian expansion. As a result, Afghanistan became a buffer state, and its northern and western borders were defined in international agreements, over which the Afghans had little influence. Although these borders were arbitrary, they were not artificial. They included the core areas of Herat, Turkistan, and Badakhshan, which had always constituted long-standing political and economic units. Although at the margins the Afghans may have lost some territory in some places, they gained it in others. These agreements, whatever their imperfections, protected Afghanistan from Russian expansion and Persian irredentism. In return, the amir not only received a large British subsidy but access to needed imports through India as well. The amir's dependence on this relationship became clear when the British imposed the Durand Line, which severed Afghan control over the territory that would become the NWFP. The amir vehemently opposed relinquishing his nominal sovereignty over the Pashtun tribes in the region. It took an economic embargo at the time that he was fighting the Hazaras in 1892 to force his compliance.⁵⁶ It was this economic embargo that exposed the amir's weakness: the British subsidies might now constitute a much smaller percentage of government revenue than they did early in his reign, but without the cooperation of the British he could import no arms and ammunition, or even the raw material with which to make them. Without having to mount a new Anglo-Afghan war, the British split what had been the Pashtun core of the Afghan state. This seems to validate in a more global context ibn Khaldun's belief that turbulent populations on their margins were easier to control economically than militarily.

The British got the obedience they demanded but left a sore that never healed. If changing the borders in the remote mountainous Pamirs or the deserts of Siestan had only minor consequences for a ruler in Kabul, this demarcation cut too close to the heart, even though it was not officially a border. Technically the Durand Line simply demarcated each country's zone of influence in the Pashtun tribal areas that neither directly administered at the time. But while the other borders were accepted without question, if only as a *fait accompli*, this frontier remained so problematic that no successor government in Afghanistan of whatever ideological persuasion was ever willing to recognize it as permanent.

Transforming the Afghan Polity

Abdur Rahman used force to centralize the state, but at the same time tried to give the government a broader political base. He did this in three ways. First, by the end of his reign he convinced the Pashtuns, at the expense of other ethnic groups, that they were part of the same governing elite that had oppressed them. Second, in spite of his own close alliance with the British, he made defense of Islam and jihad a feature of Afghan national identity when dealing with the outside world. Abdur Rahman made himself the arbiter of domestic religious and national ideology in a way that championed his primacy while hiding his compromises. Third, the modern Afghan state as currently constituted was his creation. The amir stressed the pure Islamic character of the Afghan state while creating a fundamentally secular government that dominated the religious establishment. He was the nationalist who declared the necessity of defending Afghanistan's borders to the death and never ceding Afghan land. Yet this was the same man who initially accepted the amirship of *northern* Afghanistan in 1880, knowing that it would mean the loss of Qandahar and Herat. Although he was politically vulnerable then, even at the height of his power in 1893 he was unwilling to risk war with the British to prevent the imposition of the Durand Line. He instead accepted the increased subsidy in compensation and moved on to finish the last of his internal wars.

Creating a Pashtun State

From 1881 until 1888, Abdur Rahman directed most of his campaigns against the Pashtuns, particularly the Ghilzais. Yet for the next ninety years, the Pashtuns as a whole would see themselves, and be seen by others, as the privileged ethnic group in the country. For if the Pashtuns were the prime victims of Abdur Rahman's early wars they were the beneficiaries of his later ones. For example, the amir's suppression of the Ghilzai revolt coincided with his recovery of Afghan Turkistan in 1888. This allowed him to punish large numbers of rebellious Pashtuns from the south by exiling



Map 6. Afghan state with modern boundary highlighting Durand line with Pakistan

them to Turkistan, a territory then inhabited primarily by Uzbeks and Tajiks. The deported Pashtuns were given rich agricultural lands and access to pastures for raising sheep in a territory that had been depopulated by wars among the former Uzbek amirs, slave raiding by the Turkmen nomads, and disease. Because these lands were generally much better than those they had lost, and because they were surrounded by other hostile ethnic groups, the former Pashtun rebels of the south became strong supporters of the government in the north.⁵⁷ Similarly, the war against the Hazaras employed large numbers of Pashtun tribesmen, who were given Hazara land and rights to sell captives in exchange for their participation. These Hazara conquests were particularly valuable to the Pashtun nomads, who were able to extend their summer range deep into the Hindu Kush, but also gave other neighboring sedentary Pashtun groups control over lands formerly owned by the Hazaras. The campaign in 1895–96 to conquer and convert the inhabitants of Kafiristan to Islam also benefited the Kunar Valley Pashtuns, who had long been in conflict with them. In the eyes of most non-Pashtuns, the Afghan government was now viewed as a Pashtun government and not just a Durrani dynasty. This created an ethnic status hierarchy that would typify Afghan society for the next century. In broad strokes it ranked Pashtuns at the top, followed by Persian-speaking Tajiks, who played a large role in the administration of government, and then Turks, who were largely ignored and rarely found outside their home region in the north. The Shia Hazaras fell at the bottom of this scale and bore the brunt of discrimination imposed by a Sunni majority.

Although the amir raised the status of Pashtuns as a group, he was not an ethnic nationalist. Unlike Sher Ali, who had attempted to make Pashto the national language, Abdur Rahman fell back on the use of Persian as the language of the government bureaucracy and court. Even among the Pashtuns, as Kakar notes, the main benefits went to a small Muhammadzai elite:

He likewise treated the Pashtuns differentially, raising the Mohammadzays to the top of the new polity. Even they he treated unequally, raising the descendants of his great-grandfather, Sardar Payanda Khan [Dost Muhammad's father], to a privileged position by providing them with regular allowances and making them partners of the state (*sharik-e-dawlat*). The Kabul Mohammadzays, who following the British intervention were

in a twilight period, began to emerge as aristocrats among a people who were more or less egalitarian.⁵⁸

Closing Ranks: Islam and Jihad

The amir referred to his country as the “God-granted State of Afghanistan” and proclaimed the religious necessity of defending its integrity against attacks by infidels.⁵⁹ Unlike eighteenth-century Afghan rulers, for whom jihad meant wars directed outward against Hindu India, the amir’s vision of jihad was defensive, protecting Afghanistan from invasion by the Christian empires now to its north and south. In this manner he created a xenophobic atmosphere in which all non-Muslim foreigners and their foreign ways were suspect. He also stressed the importance of a unified leadership in such a defensive jihad. Since he had already declared himself the “light of the nation and religion,” his Muslim subjects owed him double obedience to keep the infidels out. The amir developed these ideas in three treatises, which were widely distributed.⁶⁰ Although not a cleric himself, he had no hesitation about imposing his views forcefully. Fearing that any talk of harmony or brotherhood would undermine the spirit of jihad, he lashed out violently at any cleric who dared preach a softer line. For example, the amir once demanded that a mullah be put to death because he had preached that Muslims must regard Christians as brothers since they were a “people of the book.” The first council of clerics refused and found him innocent of any charge of heresy. A second panel called to try the case again could only muster two clerics willing to uphold the death penalty, even after the amir made his wishes clear. One would have probably sufficed, since the amir immediately used this minority judgment to have the offending cleric stoned to death.⁶¹

The amir’s focus on jihad served the purpose of directing aggression outward. For a man who fought all of his wars against his own people and who had killed many Afghan Muslims, but few if any infidel British, pressing his people to look outward for more evil enemies paid dividends. Only he could preserve the nation and thereby defend the faith. In the process, the amir linked elements of Islamic belief with Afghan tribal customs in ways that convinced his largely illiterate population that the two were

identical. The tautology was that since all true Afghans were devout Muslims then all their customs must be Islamic as well, otherwise they could not be good Muslims (which they were by definition). Anyone proposing to change tradition could therefore be accused of attacking Islam itself. In other Muslim countries there was debate over responding to the Western colonial challenge by changing old traditions and reforming Islam, but not in Afghanistan. The amir's retrograde view of Islam combined with his policy of xenophobic isolation preserved Afghanistan's territorial integrity, yet closed the country off to new ideas, even those coming out of the Muslim world.

The Afghan National State

Afghanistan was formerly a country composed of distinct regions and tribes. Whether Qandahar was ruled by the Safavid Persia or Mughal India aroused little concern in Herat or Turkistan, which themselves might be part of a different polity. Indeed identifying with Afghanistan, "the land of the Afghans," was a bit of a stretch for an Uzbek in Balkh or a Tajik from Badakhshan. Being part of a larger polity was of interest to the kings and khans who ruled them, not ordinary people. One might appeal to the common defense of Islam, but a national identity did not bubble up from below. It was the amir's standardized taxes, laws, currency, conscription, and administrative structure that put all Afghans into a single system. An individual might not identify with other regions of the country but he now shared their problems.

This administration was fundamentally autocratic and secular. Abdur Rahman centralized the government and destroyed the power of the regional elites. Heretofore Afghanistan's rulers had never wielded exclusive power. The local-level power structures had remained resilient, and their leaders worked within a divided system of government. Afghan amirs also had to deal with rival lineages and even family members who developed independent power bases. The clergy was largely independent of government control. By eliminating the existing class of khans and community elders, Abdur Rahman removed the layers of protection that shielded local communities from the demands of a central government. The ability of

these communities to organize was so debilitated that it was said that if the British invaded Afghanistan again, they would face no opposition.⁶² The amir also put the clergy under his control by demanding that judges pass examinations that he devised. Those clerics who made judgments that displeased the amir found their positions and salaries terminated. Abdur Rahman also nationalized the country's Islamic endowments (*waqf*), which had long supported religious institutions independent of the government. Despite his many references to Islam, the amir viewed his government as a secular one in which his new state laws were deemed to take priority over both traditional religious law (*sharia*) and customary law. For better or worse, Afghanistan became a unitary state under Abdur Rahman's rule, and its inhabitants came to see it as such.

Abdur Rahman versus the Longue Durée

Abdur Rahman is justly credited with laying the foundation for a modern national state through his establishment of a highly centralized government in Kabul. Unlike his predecessors, Abdur Rahman clear-cut the political forest that had impeded his path to absolute authority by reducing what had been a complex political ecosystem into a much simpler one, in which no internal actors could challenge him or his government. Chancing on this altered scene of weeds and stumps that stretched to the horizon, all observers (internal and external) seemed to agree that the old political forest was no more and would never return. For better or worse, Afghanistan had passed a watershed in which the model of government created by Abdur Rahman became the new standard by which future regimes would be judged. Much as the establishment of the Durrani Empire by Ahmad Shah in 1747 is seen as the beginning of Afghan history, Amir Abdur Rahman's reign is seen as the beginning of Afghanistan as a nation-state. In particular, it appeared that he had permanently eliminated the autonomy and economic significance of the country's distinct regions and qawms that I earlier posited as being the core structural elements of Afghan history.

But to what extent was this really true? In the first chapter of this book, I examined Afghanistan in terms of the *longue durée* aspects of material life and social organization, which had persisted for centuries and even

millennia. These included features of agricultural production, exchange relationships, ethnic groups, and cohesive geographic units. From this perspective, most of Abdur Rahman's achievements were ephemeral—political changes imposed from above at great cost that appeared transformative but were not. The amir had used his access to new military technology to outmatch his opponents, but he resolutely resisted the introduction of other new technologies (such as rail transport, steam engines, and telegraph lines) that were transforming the economic organization and social structure of his neighbors. As a result, the Afghan economy remained overwhelmingly subsistence based, and goods continued to move to markets as they always had—on the backs of donkeys, horses, and camels over unimproved caravan trails. Agricultural surpluses could not be profitably transported from one region of the country to another, let alone easily exported. The state industries that historians use as examples of the amir's innovations in fact simply equipped his military with modern arms and raised revenues for his government. They had no transformative impact on the Afghan economy because they were located almost exclusively in Kabul and required imported raw materials to function. Most significantly, while the amir had eliminated the old regional elites as political players and gained power over their territories by military force, he did not alter rural Afghan society. The social structure of qawms and the regional ties they represented still predominated at the village and provincial levels. They may have been subordinated to the Kabul government or displaced by warfare, but these social structures had not been eradicated or even greatly changed. Kabul therefore became the leading political and economic center of Afghanistan because it was the amir's capital and the exclusive seat of government. Yet it was a center only by default: Afghanistan's level of urbanization was higher in the fifteenth century under the Timurids, when Herat and Balkh were international centers of culture and commerce—something that late nineteenth-century Kabul (with a population of only fifty thousand) never came close to achieving.

Although the military and political successes gave Abdur Rahman supreme power over Afghanistan and its people, his centralized model of government went against the grain of Afghan tradition. Unlike Persia or the Ottoman Empire, where the authority of shahs and sultans was buttressed by a strong cultural tradition of autocracy, Afghan rulers were his-

torically forced to work within a political system that was more federal and consultative. Though this older system of politics did appear to have been wiped out during Abdur Rahman's rule, it had not really disappeared but rather reappeared in new guises. For the next century and more, successive regimes that attempted to model their governments and style of rulership on that of Abdur Rahman's inevitably found themselves challenged by this tradition—in some cases, resulting in state collapse. Returning to the image of Abdur Rahman as a clear-cutting logger helps us understand why. His wars to create a centralized Afghan state destroyed what ecologists would call a "climax state," a self-perpetuating stable relationship among species in which the community is in equilibrium.⁶³ It remains constant over time until it is disrupted by some outside force. When a stable climax relationship among species is destroyed, it is replaced by a series of transitory communities, which then succeed one another in a predictable sequence until the old climax state is restored. Because the species composition of each successive stage is usually quite different from its successor and the whole cycle may be centuries long, the sequence of relationships (and whether they are transitory or stable) is not obvious to the casual observer at any one point in time. If this sounds too complicated, let me use a more commonplace example that Abdur Rahman would have appreciated: shaving someone's head does not make him permanently bald. Although they might look the same, a bald head is a hairless climax state, while a shaved head requires constant barbering to prevent the hair from returning.

The stable climax state in the "political ecology" of Afghanistan was characterized by a center (wherever it was) dominating distinct regions, which had their own political elites. Whether it was the Achemenids from Persepolis, Mughuls from Delhi, Safavids from Isfahan, or Afghan amirs in Kabul or Qandahar, the building blocks of the state were remarkably similar. Ruling dynasties either appointed powerful local elite to rule as their agents when their power was limited or sent an agent of their own to rule directly when they were strong. It was a fairly robust system, which buffered the regions from the consequences of political collapse at the center. In such cases these regions might be reshuffled into new polities, become independent, or perhaps become dominant political centers themselves. Abdur Rahman destroyed this historic political climax state when he stripped the regions of their autonomy and deprived them of economic

resources. What he and his successors could not stop, however, was the tendency to revert back to that form, even if that took generations to become apparent. Abdur Rahman was a diligent barber, but the direction of change is clear if the perspective is a long-term rather than a short-term one. Of course, as human beings we tend to privilege the circumstances we experience in our own short life spans, so perhaps it is not surprising that current conditions are so readily projected into the future. In retrospect such assumptions often prove gravely mistaken. While Abdur Rahman may have viewed his centralized state as a permanent achievement, the next chapter will show how later governments that modeled themselves on his concepts of autocracy ended badly. The amazing thing is that to this day, governments in Kabul have emulated the Iron Amir despite the grief this has brought to the Afghan people. In some cases, it would appear that those who remember the past too uncritically are doomed to repeat it regularly.