Interview with Ali Ahmad Jalali*

Distinguished Professor at the National Defense University, Washington, DC.

For this issue on understanding armed groups, the Review *considered it important to invite someone who could give the inside perspective of an armed group. Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, currently Distinguished Professor at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, is uniquely placed to do so in the context of Afghanistan: he has at once the experience of a former member of the Mujahideen during the war against the Soviet Union, a former Colonel in the Afghan National Army, and a former Minister of the Interior for Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005. Minister Jalali has published extensively on political, military, and security issues in Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia.*

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In the face of the current armed opposition, how would you, based on your experience both as a former member of the Mujahideen and as former Minister of the Interior, compare the two types of armed groups?

On the ground, the fighting is maybe the same, but politically and strategically these two conflicts are two different things.

When the Mujahideen were fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the majority of the international community was with them, supporting the armed opposition of the time.

The Soviet invasion actually tried to prop up an unpopular regime, against which the people were fighting. Even before the invasion, there was an uprising against the attempt by the communist government of Afghanistan to impose its lame ideology on the country. It was a kind of nationwide uprising. Therefore, that

invasion was very different from the one you see today. The Mujahideen were popular.

The factions received a lot of support inside Afghanistan, but the problem was that they were fragmented. They did not have a unified command, a unified political leadership. Their action was more tactical than strategic.

Another difference is that at that time there was a cold war, a bipolar confrontation in a bipolar global situation. Afghanistan was the last battlefield of the cold war: it was a superpower war. The countries helping the Mujahideen were in fact also advancing their own interests. Many countries in the West supported them because they thought that the Mujahideen could give a bloody nose to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. They thought that the Soviet Union was not going to leave Afghanistan until it had turned it into another satellite country, that the Soviet Union would not renounce easily, and that it would be a long war. They calculated that only fundamentalists, religious groups, would fight the Soviets efficiently because there would be several generations of them. The West thought that even nationalists would not have that same ideological fervour impelling them to continue and prolong the war.

So there was a tendency to favour the fundamentalist groups. And then all the religious extremists who wanted to support a cause, a religious cause, came to Afghanistan. And that is what created the problems after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan. It was that kind of a war.

The situation today is very different. The international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 was the opposite of the Soviet Union's intervention. While the Soviets came to *prop up* an unpopular regime against which people were fighting, in 2001 the international community came to *remove* an unpopular regime against which people were fighting, or against which part of Afghanistan was fighting.

One indication that it was again a popular uprising is that the intervention actually included only a few hundred ground troops from the international community, but in less than two months the Al Qaeda network was on the run and the Taliban was removed from power. It was the desire of people to remove that regime, and the international community supported that desire.

Another indication is that during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan close to five million Afghans left their country and became refugees, whereas after the intervention by the US-led coalition more than four million[1] returned to Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation the occupying forces tried to impose the communist ideology from the top; during the coalition intervention in Afghanistan there was no forceful imposition of an ideology.

That is why armed groups were more acceptable to the people of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and received more attention and support from the outside world. Today the situation is reversed: the Taliban are a hated group internationally, and forty or more countries are fighting them in Afghanistan.

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1 Note from the Editor: the exact figure is still disputed. See e.g. the statistics on Afghanistan by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), available at: http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486eb6 (last visited 21 September 2011).

Do you see changes in the tactics and methods of today's armed opposition, compared with those of the Mujahideen?

Basically some of the tactics are the same in terms of raids, ambushes, or hit-and-run operations. However, the close relationship of the Taliban with international extremist organizations like Al Qaeda means that they get more sophisticated technical assistance from the outside terrorist networks. Because of this, new practices have appeared. Suicide attacks were unheard of in Afghanistan until recently, but are now becoming a weapon. Roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are used in a more sophisticated way. Terrorism was rarely used in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. Afghans wanted to fight the Soviet Union face to face; they did not kill women, they did not behead people. This is being practised today by the Taliban.

Today the tactics are more radical, more brutal, and at the same time are linked to the global Jihadist movement. That movement is using local insurgencies to advance its agendas, and local insurgencies are taking advantage of the assistance they receive from it in order to advance their own agenda. That link did not exist during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Do you think that the logistical aspect and the choice of weapons available also have an impact, or is there no fundamental difference?

The methods used by the Taliban and the other associates aim at creating terror among the population, particularly at a time when the government is not strong enough to protect them. For that very reason terror tactics are having a psychological impact on the population. As long as people believe the government cannot protect them, they co-operate, or they tolerate, or in some cases they sit on the fence without supporting the government. The majority of the people of Afghanistan do not want the Taliban to come back.

During the Mujahideen period most of the people wanted the Mujahideen to succeed. However, at that time the Mujahideen were not using these brutal tactics, so people could openly help them, or even support their operations. Today, because of the fear, the terror that is created among the population, they actually do not want to stand up against the Taliban on behalf of a government that cannot protect them.

How would you describe the differences in structure and organization of the groups?

In some cases their structure is similar. Take a look at the organization of these armed groups both vertically and horizontally. Vertically there is a hierarchy, an organization, and an ideology, and horizontally there are several groups and factions who fight for different reasons.

The Taliban has a kind of known leadership, or several leaderships. Vertically they all connect to the same kind of chain of command or political affiliation. But horizontally they fight for different reasons, using that vertical political affiliation to gain legitimacy.

During the Mujahideen period there were no vertical dimensions shared by the seven factions; each faction had its own kind of hierarchy – and Iranian groups had yet another hierarchy. People were fighting just because they thought it was the right thing to do. What really unified people was the hostility towards the Soviets and the communist ideology – that was the driving force behind them. Nobody wanted to compromise on this. That was the reason why all those fragmented factions and decentralized groups actually fought against a common enemy.

The seven factions in Pakistan were only giving general guidance to their groups; all major tactical and operational decisions were made locally. It was a village war; today it's not. At that time, each village had to fight for itself because they believed that was the right thing to do. Today it's not a village war but a kind of provincial war or a wider territorial war. Today it is a national war, a war of a whole nation. It's even a regional war.

Would you say this fragmentation helped or hindered the fighting?

The whole Jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was, as I've said, decentralized; it was a 'village war'.

As such, it had its strengths and weaknesses: its strength lay in the close relationship of the fighter to his home – they were defending their homes, they fought for their homes. Secondly, because there was no centralized structure, the Soviets had to fight for every village if they wanted to defeat the leadership and make the resistance fall apart, and even when they destroyed a village, it would rise again. They were not short of enemies! That was a war of 'one thousand cuts', as they call it.

But a first weakness was that the Mujahideen could not exploit tactical successes or turn them into operational and strategic successes. Because there was no connection between all their small gains, it was not possible to transform them into a major operation and a strategic achievement. Furthermore, there was no vision for the future: when you had forced the Soviets out, what were you going to do? Many believed that once the Soviets had gone, those factions would fight each other because they could not agree on the kind of government, the policies, or the leadership that should be established.

Secondly, since they were competing with each other, factions always tolerated corruption so that corrupt members would not defect and turn to other factions. So the corruption you see today in Afghanistan actually started at that time. It became a culture of impunity.

Thirdly, another weakness was that in many areas there was infighting between the Mujahideen because of excesses committed by some of them. For example, in Helmand province two factions – Harakat-e-Inqelab-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami – fought very brutally for many years. The Jamiat-i-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami factions likewise fought each other in some areas in the north.

Infighting or turf battles also took place for control of an area and lucrative economic resources. But, despite all this, the hostility against the Soviets prevailed.

Some people actually wanted to use the Soviets against another faction, but this did not mean they would not simultaneously fight against them!

You say that the Mujahideen were supported by the population. How did the Soviets react to that?

The way the Soviet Union tried to deprive the Mujahideen of local support is another difference between now and then. The Soviets wanted two things: first, to destroy the sources of support for the Mujahideen; and secondly, to induce people either to leave the country or to come to cities, which were easy to control.

To do that, they applied Mao Tse Tung's idea that the guerrilla lives among the population like fish in the sea. They wanted to drain away the water in order to kill the fish. Consequently, during the Soviet occupation 1.5 to 2 million Afghans lost their lives through the carpet bombing of rural areas and major cordon-and-destroy operations.

In cities where they could control the people, they tried very hard to win their hearts and minds; they would help them and give them coupons to enable them to live there. Outside, in areas they could not control, they used violence.

When the Soviet Union started devastating the countryside to deprive the Mujahideen of logistical and popular support, then the Mujahideen went to establish *markaz* (strongholds) or bases in destroyed areas.

They set up these small mountain bases like Sharafat Koh in Farah to support long-distance operations because the countryside was destroyed. By the mid-1980s, some areas were so devastated that the Mujahideen had to take everything with them, even food, from their staging areas or outside bases to carry out their raids, so it became very difficult for them to sustain an attack. They would fight in what I called in my writings 'a short hit and a long run' tactics. The fighters would travel long distances on foot in order to attack one post, and then come back to resupply.

How did you see the role of humanitarian organizations in the conflict against the Soviets?

Well, it helped a lot, but later on it was also hijacked by people in the resistance who were much stronger. In many areas and in many places, their support for the humanitarian organizations was conditional: okay, you help me, and then I will protect you, something like that. But still, I think all the humanitarian organizations did not reach out to the needy populations because the local Mujahideen groups actually became a surrogate government in many areas and influenced humanitarian assistance to provide some basic services which could not be provided by the government.

I think that humanitarian assistance can take place in areas where humanitarian organizations feel safe. It is physically safe to go when the armed groups accept or support you. But unfortunately the support the local armed groups give to humanitarian assistance is often very selective. They would probably accept it

only if it helped their own agenda. So although humanitarian assistance should be separate from military operations, in many cases that is not possible, for two reasons. First, because of the security situation, as in some areas only the military can deliver humanitarian aid. Secondly, because during military operations the military wants those operations to become connected with humanitarian aid to facilitate their success.

In a conflict area there are usually two sides fighting each other, and a large population in between. If the one side controls the area and delivers services there, they are militarized services, so in one way or another they will be biased. I think the ideal conditions would be for both sides to say: 'Okay for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, we will let it go through and we will not control it.' But that will be very difficult. They will always try to control it somehow.

However, if there are neutral organizations that can be allowed to deliver at all times in a conflict area, that's the best way to deliver services to the public. In that regard, the ICRC has played a very, very effective role in Afghanistan.

Today the armed opposition has produced its own code of conduct.[2] Did the Mujahideen at the time have a code of conduct too, or a similar document?

Well, the Mujahideen movement was fragmented and conduct varied from place to place. For instance, the Mujahideen factions in Pakistan could not control the behaviour of their groups inside Afghanistan, so it was very decentralized. It depended on who was in charge in any one area. There were good commanders who used to stick to certain rules and treated the population well, and there were people in some parts of Afghanistan who were not that good. They abused their power, and that's why in some areas people actually joined government militias against them.

Because of Mujahideen excesses or atrocities some people fled; they either migrated to Pakistan and Iran or went to major cities. Many went to cities because they could not tolerate living under the control of certain Mujahideen groups.

Misconduct or crimes were rarely punished because, as I said, there were seven factions and no faction wanted to treat any of its members very harshly, except some groups, otherwise they would go to another faction. And most factions wanted to keep all their men, whether good, bad, or ugly.

A code of conduct would indeed have been useful, as I saw later on when I found myself involved in counter-insurgency. In such an insurgency/counter-insurgency war the two opposing sides are only two minorities. The people constitute the majority and they are in between the two. The prize goes to whoever wins the support – the hearts and minds – of the people.

Now, if you look at the population in Afghanistan today, you realize that hearts and minds are divided between the two opposing forces. At heart,

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2   See 'The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: the Layha (code of conduct) for Mujahids', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 881, March 2011, pp. 103–120.

the population won't support the return of the Taliban, but in mind it makes practical decisions regarding what is good for it. I see that you have to work for hearts and minds at the same time; for instance, you can win the heart of somebody but at the same time you have to protect him so that you win his mind too.

At the time, did the Mujahideen know the law of armed conflict?

I think the Mujahideen used several sources. One was the Islamic Sharia, which in fact laid down the guiding principles for dealing with the population. Another source was the customary law, tribal and non-tribal, of the different regions. And the third was some kind of residual continuation of the past government laws.

In my opinion, the law of armed conflict is important only when you are dealing with educated populations. For whom were those Mujahideen fighting in Afghanistan? Many of them were villagers; they'd never even heard about the laws of their own country, let alone international law or the Geneva Conventions. Nobody had except for some people, maybe the educated ones, but the others behaved on the basis of the sources I just mentioned. Since all the judges and enforcers of the law were gone and the people only knew Sharia law, and the influential members of the tribe knew the customary law, that was all.

Based on your experience, how do you see today's trends in the evolution of armed groups?

The armed groups include not only the Taliban or the Haqqani network or Hezb-e-Islami. There are non-state patronage networks led by powerful figures inside and outside the government in Afghanistan, such as militias and the residual continuation of the old Mujahideen groups like Jamiat-i-Islami and others. And there are the drug-trafficking networks and old factions, old armed groups, disguised as private security companies legitimizing themselves by posing as such. Then there are all the many people in Afghanistan with bodyguards, who are very closely linked to the individual person; some may have as many as 150 bodyguards. And there are illegal armed groups or the private armies; of course they are not fighting each other now but they are armed, and that undermines the effectiveness and authority of formal institutions, namely law enforcement, the army, and others, because the state institutions are informally also linked to some of these patronage networks.

The same holds true for the use of local police. If you go and create a local police force somewhere, who is going to control it? The person who is powerful locally because of his guns and money. Unfortunately, during the past thirty years of this instability and the emergence of these patronage networks, the social structure of Afghanistan has changed. The traditional leaders are no longer in charge; people with guns and money or those with connections with insurgents and access to foreign money have become the local strongmen.

What are the main risks for Afghanistan today?

I think the main risks are the continued insurgency, the weakness of the government, and the unstable environment and corruption. Corruption has become a low-risk activity in a high-risk environment, and people in an uncertain environment want to safeguard their future. So if you appoint a police officer and he doesn't know how long he will be there or what the situation tomorrow will be, he will want to accumulate some wealth unlawfully for the rainy days ahead.

How would you compare the withdrawal of the Soviets to today's slow disengagement of the multinational forces?

To my mind, there are some issues to think about. First of all, during their time here the Soviets established a very strong army, police force, and intelligence service. Today, in comparison, the set-up is not that elaborate. Just take a look at the air force: the Afghan air force was one of the strongest in the whole area back then, whereas today Afghanistan has no air force at all. If you look at the equipment, this army appears much weaker than the one the Soviet Union left behind. However, ideologically that was a different time. I think the fact that the cold war was drawing to a close and the Soviet Union was collapsing gave some kind of reason for people inside the government to rise up against the central authority and to co-operate with the Mujahideen.

Today you do not see that reaction. First, today the army is maybe not so strong, and maybe when the US leaves Afghanistan there is a possibility of civil war. But above all, there is no possibility that the internal forces or the government forces join the Taliban. Secondly, I don't think the United States or the international community will just cut loose and leave. I think it will take a long time for the international community to completely withdraw all its forces from Afghanistan. And, finally, the Cold War is over.