

## **Civilian-led Projects Clashing with Military Operations – Experiences made in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 1980**

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My personal experience with international relief efforts by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the basis of this assessment, is determined by the following factors:

- the transformation of ‘solidarity movements’ supporting one side of regional conflicts, such as the support of Nicaragua’s liberation from dictatorship – until the 1980s
- humanitarian NGO work of a neutral or quasi-neutral nature, such as aid in disaster situations and providing relief for Afghan refugees, and, from the 1990s onwards
- the transformation of aid initiatives into professionalized ‘humanitarian businesses’, competing in a donation market, and often forced to act embedded in the military.

This structuring of humanitarian initiatives into distinct phases helps to clarify the otherwise confusing mixture of relief, support, business and military interventions, questioning the element of civil society in peace keeping and its relations with governments, diplomacy, and international organizations. Even in cases in which positive results are achieved, a real-economic impact only makes itself felt in the long term.

Taking a global view, the following changes have been of great importance to developmental and security interventions by governmental and non-governmental agencies:

- the Helsinki Movement for Human Rights, strengthening dissidents and NGO-activities especially in Eastern Europe (from 1975 onwards)
- the “Islamic Turn” 1978/79 (Chomeini, the massacre in the Mecca mosque, Saddam Hussein’s attack on Iran, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, the Mujahedeen movement). A Western parallel would be the influence exercised by John Paul II’s visits to his native Poland.
- the implosion of the Soviet Union 1989/91 (accelerated by Chernobyl

and the Afghanistan War), the end of the Cold War, and the continuing Palestinian Crisis amid the unsuccessful diplomatic and political efforts in the Middle East and Central Asia

- September 11<sup>th</sup>, the “War on Terror” (since 2001) and the Iraq War (since 2003)
- the global financial crisis (since September 2008) as well as possible future changes arising from the U.S. administration under Barack Obama, with a stronger focus on Afghanistan.

The current situation: Europe is surrounded by crisis regions in the south and the east. Any concept of ‘European identity’ is, or should be, influenced by this fact, especially as there is no discernable feeling of community with Europe within these regions. For my own generation, a road trip to India by car in the 1960s or 1970s, passing through Afghanistan and Pakistan, was still seen as unproblematic. Thousands of hippies took that road, surprising local populations with their notions of ‘Western freedom’, and welcomed by them with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran I worked as a consultant for the Iranian State Railways in Teheran for a time and traveled from Iraq to the Central Saharan region completely unrestrictedly. By now, nearly all of the – once friendly and developing – countries have become volatile and dangerous and exhibit an increasingly radical hostility towards Euro-American influence and ways of living. *What went wrong?* (as the middle-east expert Bernard W. Lewis titled one of his books)<sup>1</sup> is a basic question for coming to understand the situation and for avoiding the repetition of failure of relief efforts.

### **NGO-work for Afghan refugees**

In 1980, when the atmosphere in Afghanistan was still marked by an open-minded liberal attitude, a group of friends including myself set up the Austrian Relief Committee for Afghan Refugees (ARC) with the head offices located in Peshawar, Pakistan, an organization, which I

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard W. Lewis: *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response: Approaches to the Modern History of the Middle East*, Oxford 2002.

managed and later controlled from Vienna on a part-time, unpaid basis until 1994. We did not encounter problems in locating and establishing motivated groups of health workers, teachers, administration staff, including many very active, generally unveiled women. Religion was never seen as a source of conflict. We ran basic health care programs in camps with more than 50,000 refugees, built ambulance stations, implemented special mother-child-programs, TBC vaccination programs, separate schools for boys and girls, sewing projects for women, handicraft training, sanitation programs (toilets, water supply), and later also ambulance stations, reconstruction and farming projects in eastern Afghanistan – development-oriented care to address the basic needs of local populations in general. The staff on the ground, up to 300 persons including the local director, was almost exclusively made up of Afghans. The Vienna board acted in a consulting and supervising capacity only. For medical support and women’s agendas, specialists from Europe were brought in on a temporary basis. The initial budget was derived from private Austrian donations. The Austrian government doubled the initial amount and provided additional funds. When our work came to the notice of international relief organizations looking for implementing agencies for their own programs, we received further financing from Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, later also from UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Food Program. Our budget increased from € 100,000 in the first year to an unexpected overall sum of € 33 million, spent mostly on salaries and material in the region. Tens of thousands of lives were positively influenced by medical care and food supplies, others by project support, training provided and practical experience. I described this project in more detail in my book *Afghanistan, fragmentarisch* (2004)<sup>2</sup>, which also includes an earlier article of mine, *Neither of them will win* (1980) – a title which has inadvertently proven prophetic.

By end of the 1980s, we experienced a gradual increase in pressure by fundamentalist Muslim groups. They closed the girls’ schools. Women were forced out of their jobs. Pakistani authorities backed more restrictive policies and when the car of Dr. Rahman Zamani, our medical

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Reder: *Afghanistan, fragmentarisch*, Wien-New York 2004.

director, fell victim to a gunfire ambush, in which he was seriously injured, we had to accept that our 'liberal' policy, particularly the employment and support of women, was no longer welcome. The deaths of our chairman, the anthropologist Alfred Janata and of Ilona Seilern, the delegate of the liberal Catholic charity Caritas in our board, brought additional grief and led to a gradual winding down of business. In 1994, the beginning of the Taliban era, we ceased operating as ARC and handed over the main projects to Afghan and Pakistani successor organizations, where up to 50 employees found jobs. The international funding, however, was drastically reduced, partly because Europeans were no longer involved. Our former collaborators went their own ways. Dr. Zamani, for example, is now in a senior position at a hospital in San Diego, California; the former nurse, Jamila Zahma, has become a computer expert in the U.S., her sister Fahima, a pharmacist training, married an Austro-Afghan diplomat. Their lives also demonstrate how NGOs are capable of influencing life paths in the long term, not just in refugee camps but beyond. U.S. visas were often easier available than visas to European countries, and the current diaspora of millions of Afghans makes apparent that traditional nation-based thinking has to be transformed in this wider context. The dual role played by the United States – now an unpopular superpower (even enemy, especially to the Muslim World) and a dream destination for emigrants – is another important aspect of this phenomenon.

### **Humanitarian business**

Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, was certain, 'that we don't need the employee type for such challenges', only motivated staff, acting out of their own free will.<sup>3</sup> Solidarity movements and humanitarian NGOs followed similar ideals, often driven by a strong civic ethos. Amnesty International (since 1961), Greenpeace and Médecins Sans Frontières (since 1971, Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 1999) or Attac (since 1998) are impressive and influential examples of such initiatives of the non-governmental, civilian sphere. By now,

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Dunant in: *Krieger ohne Waffen. Das Internationale Komitee vom Roten Kreuz*. Zusammengestellt von Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 47.

thousands of non-governmental organizations address issues ranging from people in social difficulty to human rights and public awareness. They are not subject to governmental or economic interests and their work creates public awareness of humanitarian and environmental crises. In recognition of this, organizations such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Red Cross have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Aid work, however, is often carried out in conflict with state authority: ‘even Médecins Sans Frontières,’ as the Austrian branch’s director, Reinhard Dörflinger, writes in my *Lesebuch Projekte* (2006), ‘often has to act against established powers’ and ‘could employ many more qualified persons’, emphasizing, however, that the organization has a need for skilled personnel, not for adventurers.<sup>4</sup>

Times are changing: Today, the landscape of relief work is characterized by well-paid job hoppers, mission junkies, project nomads, moving from one disaster to the next. High UN or EU salaries create isolated communities and streamlined paths of communication, but are no guarantee for the motivation and qualification of the teams. External corruption is mirrored only too often by dubious internal affairs. Cynical approaches overshadow international interventions, as the fatal role of Dutch UN troops in the Muslim Srebrenica area showed all too clearly. The increasing uncertainty in the domestic job market in aid-giving countries makes it more difficult to leave well-paid positions in hospitals or other organizations for an extended period of working abroad. In addition to this, the authorities themselves have largely ceased to regard overseas experience as important for their staff. Relief work does not fit into career plans. Globalization and professionalism often create additional borders.

Following the black-and-white criticism of influential writers such as David Rieff (*A Bed for the Night. Humanitarianism in Crisis*, 2002), the difference between the approaches to NGO work in Europe and the United States have been made very clear. Rieff argues in favor of powerful ‘state humanitarianism’, echoing former Secretary of State

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhard Dörflinger in: Christian Reder (Ed.): *Lesebuch Projekte. Vorgriffe, Ausbrüche in die Ferne*, Wien-New York 2006, p. 223ff.

Colin Powell, who remarked: ‘The NGOs are such a force multiplier for U.S., such an important part of our combat team.’ Rieff observes that because official goals are ‘freedom oriented’, U.S. based relief organizations such as U.S.AID, IRC-International Rescue Committee or CARE operate in close contact with their government and even with the CIA. This leads Rieff to the conclusion that only embedded operations similar to those offered to journalists during the Iraq War can successfully combine humanitarian efforts and military interventions. Criticism, therefore, must remain strictly within the organization. In contrast to this, the author sees the much more liberal, less state-based approach of European NGOs as a playground for dreamers who follow a dubious ‘secular religion of human rights’. Antinuclear and anti-American positions were often identified as a source for such attitudes. Former exponents of the 1968 student revolts still are central figures of the NGO movement. Rieff singles out the ‘publicity-crazy’ Bernard Kouchner for particularly scathing comments, noting that the current French Foreign Ministers and co-founder of Médecins sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde used to be ‘a militant Communist’. Kofi Annan, too, is criticized for behaving like ‘a secular saint’. Rieff’s unforgiving summary: ‘There is plenty of evidence that state humanitarianism can get things done that independent humanitarianism cannot.’ ‘Call it politics, call it reason of state, call it nation building; but don’t call it humanitarianism’ because ‘humanitarianism is by definition an emblem of failure, not success.’ ‘To remain independent, seems almost perverse’, because ‘we are all liberal capitalists now.’<sup>5</sup> Idealistic positions are treated with great sarcasm.

## **From Cold War to War on Terror**

In his book *My Enemy’s Enemy* (2003), which deals with the largest covered operation in history – the arming of the Mujahedeen by the CIA – U.S. author George Crile gives a very critical evaluation of the secret service of his country and presents a sobering view of ‘state humanitarianism’ in practice. Written like a crime story, and reviewed

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<sup>5</sup> David Rieff: *A Bed for the Night. Humanitarianism in Crisis*, New York 2002, p. 236, 79, 47, 85, 105, 251, 261, 259, 21, 306, 123.

positively in the *The New York Times*, Crile describes personalities such as Congressman Charlie Wilson, 'a master manipulator of the system', the society lady Joanne Herring with her connections to the fundamentalist Christian movement in the U.S., and the CIA agents Howard Hart and Gust Avrakotos ('his sense of well-being: killing Communists') as central figures of a network, organising funds for covert U.S. operations with financial participation from Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Congress was never directly involved. 'Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Afghan leader who had been the largest recipient of CIA weapons during the jihad', was especially respected by Pakistani leaders and became an admired personal friend of his American sponsors. Joanne Herring's 1981 film *Courage Is Our Weapon* presents him as ideal freedom fighter.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, Hekmatyar has been put on the list of the 'most wanted' terrorists in the U.S. This episode is indicative of the naiveté of many aid initiatives, conducted in cooperation with the CIA. Within the NGO community, contact with a broader spectrum of informants had quickly revealed Hekmatyar to be one of the most destructive political figures in Afghanistan. But the concept of supporting 'my enemies' enemy' overruled any interest in supporting democratic groups and furthering long-term 'nation building'. The History of the CIA also details that 'Hekmatyar got weapons worth hundreds of millions of Dollars from CIA and hoarded most of them'.<sup>7</sup>

European agencies supported figures with a very different profile, notably Ahmed Shah Masoud, who was later murdered by Al Qaeda assassins. Now presented as hero of destroyed hopes, Masoud remains an ambivalent figure, partly because of his problematic coalitions and ideological orientation, as Conrad Schetter has argued.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, Masoud was the only Afghan leader who succeeded in building 'a new disciplined structure', as well as rudimentary public

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<sup>6</sup> George Crile: *My Enemy's Enemy. The story of the largest covered operation in history. The arming of the Mujahideen by the CIA*, London–New York 2003, p. 169, 154, 213, 223.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Weiner: *Legacy of Ashes. The History of the CIA*, New York 2007 / *CIA. Die ganze Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, p. 551.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad Schetter: *Ethnizität und ethnische Konflikte in Afghanistan*, Berlin 2003, p. 434, 453, 459.

services. ‘If he had lived, there is no doubt that many of the early difficulties faced by the Afghan interim government and the international community would have been mitigated’, as Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistan expert on Muslim extremist movements, points out. After the defeat of the Taliban forces, the chaos in Afghanistan worsened not the least because warlords such as Raschid Dostum and Ismael Khan received continuing U.S. support (as well as the extremely dubious Abdul Rasul Sayyaf from Saudi Arabia). They ‘were seen as a cheap and beneficial way to retrain U.S. allies, who might even provide information about al Qaeda in the field’. Ill-informed strategies implemented by Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld – ‘U.S.’ warlords’ as Ahmed Rashid calls them – and supported by Zalmay Khalilzad, President Bush’s ‘most powerful man in Afghanistan’ and a leading ‘neocon intellectual’ (married with the Austrian sociologist Cheryl Benard), underline the necessity of ‘cultivating a new image for America’ incumbent on the next U.S. President.<sup>9</sup> NGOs often took a much broader view of how the civilian society could be strengthened – but most of the ‘investments’ on the ground were guided by short-sighted military and strategic interests and aggravated by the fatal role of Pakistan, the U.S.’s main ally in the region, and its Secret Service, the ISI.

There was a strong tendency that ‘the CIA overestimated the Soviet Union’, as a tactical ruse to expand its own power. Criles’ detailed analysis convincingly demonstrates that even during the last phase of the Cold War a realistic assessment of Soviet strength was never a subject of critical discussion, because ‘old-fashioned anti-Communists’ made the rules. ‘The CIA’s Directorate of Operations is like the mafia. You rise and fall with your friends.’ Strategy was made for a future moment ‘when the big war broke out on the NATO frontier’, a scenario of ‘all-out war in Europe’.<sup>10</sup> No forecast took into account the possibility of the enemy’s sudden demise due to unsolvable and obvious economic

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Rashid: *Descent Into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, London 2008, p. 127, 22, 129, 401, 133, 188.

<sup>10</sup> George Crile, l.c., p. 245, 176, 89, 219.

problems. Russian sources of this time such as Artyom Borovik (*The Hidden War*, 1990)<sup>11</sup> and Swetlana Alexijewitsch (*Zinkjungen, Afghanistan und die Folgen*, 1992)<sup>12</sup> made unequivocally clear just how poorly the Soviet Army was equipped; even a basic lack of food supplies and ammunition was common among the troops. In recent years, other methods of CIA manipulation have come to public attention, particularly after the exposure of the role the Agency played in creating the myth of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. At the same time, military units acting as peace forces are discredited as occupying powers and cast as brutal and cruel oppressors by documented incidents, such as the torture photos from Abu Ghraib, by the existence of the Guantánamo prison camp, and by the early support for Saddam Hussein and for Muslim fundamentalists.

In practice, it proves very difficult to separate such images, known in any village of the involved areas, from the beneficial presence of serious peace and reconstruction initiatives. An embedded NGO is automatically a target for rejection and contempt and is not seen as independent unit. Further problems are caused by factors inherent in today's relief and development culture. Opportunities for mutual transfer of expertise and resources between groups representing initiatives from within civil society are being replaced by professional pragmatism. The inflation of pseudo NGOs is a further unwelcome result of outsourcing designed to stimulate privatization and reduce costs to governments in the long term, with the result that commercial concerns such as profitability are exercising increasing pressures on quality and transparency of aid work. In business-networks all constructive questioning degenerates into internal affairs squabbling; only occasional scandals reach the mass media and therefore the public debate. In addition to this, mercenary forces run on behalf of Western governments by private security contractors regard war not as a humanitarian catastrophe but as their core business. In Afghanistan, where police units have by now received

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<sup>11</sup> Artyom Borovik: *The Hidden War. A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, New York 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Swetlana Alexijewitsch: *Zinkjungen, Afghanistan und die Folgen*, Frankfurt am Main 1992.

rudimentary training, accusations of torture, political manipulation and tribalism are commonly leveled at both police and at the court system. Critical Afghan journalists live in permanent danger;<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schweich, a former official of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, even accuses the Afghan president Hamid Karzai's government of being, just like the Taliban, involved in drug trafficking and of blocking efficient strategies against the drug trade for their own profit.<sup>14</sup>

### **Military budgets and civilian relief efforts**

David Rieff's figures demonstrate the connection between war, public opinion and the extent of relief efforts: 'Before September 11, 2001, the annual humanitarian aid budget for Afghanistan provided by Western donors either through NGOs or through UN agencies was approximately \$ 180 million. By the time the bombing began, \$ 800 million had been pledged.'<sup>15</sup> Such an increase of relief is impressive, but the results remain poor. The U.S.S.R spent \$ 13 billion per year for the Afghan war, the U.S. financed the Mujahedeen with some \$ 1 billion per year – amounts which put the pledged payments of \$ 180 million annually for humanitarian relief at the time into perspective. (The Austrian committee contributed about one percent to this amount.)<sup>16</sup>

Since the beginning of the war against the Taliban, the imbalance between military budgets and civilian relief efforts has opened up to a staggering extent. "Since 2001, the U.S.A. spent 127 billion dollars on the War in Afghanistan," Ulrich Ladurner reports in the German print medium *Die Zeit*. The daily costs amount to nearly 100 million dollars. The combined donor countries spend just 7 million dollars per day on reconstruction. Of the 25 billion dollars promised as a reconstruction budget, just 15 billion dollars have arrived so far, but an incredible 40

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<sup>13</sup> Tillmann Schmalzried: *Zwei Journalisten im Fadenkreuz afghanischer Innenpolitik*, pogrom, Göttingen, Nr. 2/2008.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Schweich: *In der Opium Hölle*, Frankfurter Rundschau, 15. 8. 2008.

<sup>15</sup> David Rieff, p. 296.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Reder, p. 188.

percent of this amount flow back to the donors as profits and salaries.’ On the positive side, ‘six million children, 50 percent of all children of school age, visit schools, one third of them are girls. This is five times more than in 2001. 85 percent of the population now have access to basic health services. Child mortality has decreased by 25 percent.’<sup>17</sup> Michael Schmunk, a high-ranking German diplomat, estimates that nearly 30.000 NGOs, often de facto free-lance consulting and humanitarian businesses masquerading as charities, are active in the country. The streets of Kabul, as I witnessed during my 2003 stay, are full of advertisements for charities, and officials vented their irritation about the lack of coordination between them. During the 1980s we had assured such coordination in close cooperation with the UN through the ‘Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief’ (ACBAR). In today’s more professionalized aid landscape the picture is considerably more confused and confusing. Enormous sums are paid, but never reach people in need. This confusion leads to dangerous instability: reputable independent organizations are leaving the country amid increasing danger and volatility: Médecins Sans Frontières threw in the towel after 24 years of continuous presence after five staff-members had been murdered. During our earlier NGO work, no foreign relief worker was ever attacked.

### **Increasing Taliban and al Qaeda support**

Among my Afghan contacts there is considerable anxiety at the prospect of an end of the international presence in the country, which in their opinion would lead to further civil war and eventual Islamist theocracy, as the Taliban have made no effort to hide their total unwillingness to be part of any form of democratic government. Chaos would return. At the same time, however, the new expansion of radicalism ‘and the burgeoning failure of the Karzai government to deliver services and sustain its popularity among the Afghan people coincided with an even larger crisis in NATO,’ as Ahmed Rashid points out. The Taliban are “a lumpen population”, the product of the refugee camps, militarized

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<sup>17</sup> Ulrich Ladurner: *Nato sollte Truppen abziehen*, Die Zeit, Hamburg, Nr. 42, 9. 10. 2008.

madrassas, and the lack of opportunities in the borderland of Pakistan and Afghanistan'. People do not 'necessarily prefer Sharia law, but they were comparing it with the absence of any other kind of law.' 'The longer the war goes on, the more deeply rooted and widespread the Taliban and their transnational milieu will become.' Therefore Rashid is very critical on the arrogance of Western opinion: 'None of the agencies had the capacity or the contacts to be able to consult Afghans about their basic needs or development priorities.' The visible lack of reconstruction and the many 'stories about corruption, incompetence, and overcharging by U.S. contractors, Western NGOs, and government ministers' had a corroding effect on public confidence, while at the same time 'NATO had no overarching strategy for winning or for transforming military victories into development, reconstruction, good governance, and political strategies.' 'Neocons' even 'had shut down the army's Peacekeeping Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania – its only training institute for nation-building tasks'. All emphasis is focused on hunting al Qaeda; U.S., British and Canadian troops have the highest casualties, others are officially reported as accidents. Rashid's summary: 'The region of South and Central Asia will not see stability unless there is a new global pact among the leading players – the United States, the European Union, NATO, and the UN'. Up to this point, multiple failures have 'disillusioned millions of people and made too many Muslims ready recruits for al Qaeda'. 'But the peoples and regimes of this region have to understand that unless they themselves move their nations toward greater democracy, the chaos that presently surrounds them will, in time, overwhelm them.'<sup>18</sup>

### **Balancing the situation?**

Among these pressures satisfactory 'solutions' for Afghanistan are not in sight. Reconciliation? New strategies? Extending the fighting into Pakistan, which is de facto already done by means of drones? Retreat – but when? Negotiations with the Taliban and their ally al Qaeda (which are unofficially already taking place)? During nearly 30 years of war including seven years War on Terror, all institutions of state and civil

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<sup>18</sup> Ahmed Rashid, p. 393, 401, 363, 171, 191, 399, 173, 402, 404.

society have been destroyed or badly damaged and before the reconstruction efforts following the allied intervention in 2001 there was almost no remaining civil infrastructure. It will take decades until a peaceful, development-oriented balance can be achieved. Moreover, simple models and umbrella solutions are highly problematic for a mountainous and overwhelmingly agrarian country of the size of Germany and Italy combined, with no more than 30 million inhabitants scattered in different regions. Policy direction and the division of competence between individual organizations must be clear: security as domain of the military, police, and the judiciary; business transactions left to commercial organizations, social engagement in the hands of civil institutions and civil society.

As simple as it sounds, this division of interest and competence is difficult to implement. Today, military units, currently (2010) more than 100,000 men and women from outside the country (the unsuccessful Soviet Army had an expeditionary force of 150,000 max.), have little opportunity to concentrate on security, stabilization as well as reconstruction and, instead, are forced to engage in asymmetric warfare with an hardly discernable enemy, including fighting civilians. Any fiction of clean warfare must collapse in front of this reality. Thousands of killed and maimed civilians attest to the volume of collateral damage and the impossibility of surgical bombing, as the U.S. army would have the U.S. believe. It is always problematic to mix 'humanitarian interventions' with implicit geopolitical interests, especially when the powerful U.S. Army (the budget of which accounts for 50 percent of global military expenditure) is involved. In view of this situation, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt recently argued that even apparently unavoidable 'military missions just should be undertaken only when sufficient resources and instruments are available to reach the proposed goals'. If this premise is not heeded unsuccessful missions will result in forced retreats leaving behind new dilemmas without any possibility of speedy resolution. More important than taking such risks is a determination 'to act steadily against the common distrust and denial on the Western part against Muslim-oriented societies and governments'. Europe needs a more independent development policy, partly because 'NATO has increasingly become a strategic instrument of

the U.S.A', and might even tend to usurp the role of a shadow-government.<sup>19</sup> Such a pragmatic attitude represents an attitude common with many Europeans concerned with separating 'clean' from 'dirty' agendas. But humanitarian tasks and development policies are also in need of re-orientation. The current financial crisis, which is a crisis of confidence and regulations, makes clear that if the urgency is felt sufficiently strongly, billions of dollars are suddenly made available for balancing the financial system – despite this, a balancing of global interests and developmental inequality still appears to be impossible. This represents a lack of creative policy making and effective procedures and it is the main reason for increasing bitterness and aggression of the poor South against the rich North.

### **Understanding needs and realities**

For the British travel writer Eric Newby, Afghanistan was a country 'that will continue to exist more or less unchanged, no matter which disasters will come over the rest of the world' (*A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, 1958).<sup>20</sup> Later on, however, even Afghan people had to learn that global politics resulted in an immediate and drastic interference in their traditional way of life. The received opinion among Afghans is that foreigners were responsible for this interference. At the same time, however, foreigners (including Soviets and Saudi Arabians) came 'to help'. Many Afghans are puzzled about the connection between these seemingly disparate developments, and about the arrival of modernity through Western intervention. Powerful Western states and neighboring countries are involved in the attempted transformation. At the same time, however, the remaining warlords treat entire regions as personal fiefdoms. Partnerships are necessary, but integrity in such situations is rare on all sides. Only a broader view (generally neglected by specialized organizations) can create a picture sufficiently wide to understand the demands of the moment.

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<sup>19</sup> Helmut Schmidt: *Was uns wirklich angeht – und was nicht*, Die Zeit, Hamburg, Nr. 45, 30.10.2008

<sup>20</sup> Eric Newby: *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, London 1958 / *Ein Spaziergang im Hindukush*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 347

Salman Rushdie was among the rare commentators to remark early on that Pakistan is the main hinterland of Muslim radicalism, a fact quite unconnected with the original religious faith of people in the region, as Islamist structures were created and expanded in the interest of autocratic rulers (*Shame*, 1983).<sup>21</sup> Religion is commonly used as an instrument of polarization, as in ex-Yugoslavia, and as a vehicle of hatred as so many promises went up in smoke. The German author Navid Kermani is certain that Pakistan, ‘once a model of a newly formed modern nation’ has today become an exemplar of ‘all conflicts, tragedies and dangers of the coming decades’, a foretaste of the problems to come (barring concerted efforts to contain this problem through development and democratization) in all of Central Asia, the oil wealth of which is at once a huge opportunity and a gigantic danger. Over the next years and decades, power relations with and within this area will be redefined, but not necessarily in a way constructive for the local populations, or conducive to peace in the region and beyond. On the other hand, Kermani points out that local populations themselves are also working to re-establish a civil society by organizing local schools and transportation for themselves in the absence of governmental help; such realistic grassroots approach could integrate multinational NGOs in an effort to balance diversity and to create a civil infrastructure (*Schöner neuer Orient*, 2003).<sup>22</sup> For centuries before the current crisis, Afghan agriculture was famous, and famines only occasional blights caused by natural catastrophes. In my own experience, hardly any region of the world had such wonderful and fertile orchards (now mostly destroyed). Industrial societies would do well to learn from the ancient ecological traditions that existed in Afghanistan. Foreign military, however, still sources almost all of its food supplies from outside the country. A locally-grown apple is seen as possible cause of disease. Such prejudices on the side of the international forces are part of the wider cultural confrontation complicating the reconstruction and the building of trust with local populations.

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<sup>21</sup> Salman Rushdie: *Shame* (London 1983 / *Scham und Schande*, München 1996, p. 354.

<sup>22</sup> Navid Kermani: *Schöner neuer Orient. Berichte von Städten und Kriegen*, München 2003, p. 67, 90.

If Western institutions and local autocrats are the only partners involved in reconstruction and nation building – often meaning diversity in unity by decree – the perception of this effort as a postcolonial enterprise will create distrust among local population and discourage active participation. Cooperation with reputable Muslim agencies such as the Aga Khan Foundation could build bridges of trust. The Afghan diaspora is another important factor here, as well as openness to learn from Islamic cultures among Western aid givers. Loretta Napoleoni, who contributed to the debate also with her book *Terror Inc: Tracing the Money Behind Global Terrorism* (2004), is rare in arguing that ‘the Muslim financial system’ which grows fast and ‘forbids pure speculation’, as well as ‘investments in pornography, prostitution, drugs, tobacco and gambling’ should be taken more seriously in this context. According to Islamic law, only ‘profits out of rents, licenses, entrepreneurial success, goods turnover’, are legitimate, unlimited money-money gaming is not (*Rogue Economics*, 2008).<sup>23</sup> Until now, such arguments have been treated as taboo, but the current global financial crisis has led many Western commentators to espouse similar opinions. This confirms the necessity of sensitive trans-cultural cooperation, as communication between civil societies and knowledge input from various sides.

### **Relations between rich and poor societies**

Cultural exchange, my main field of professional activity during the past years, relies on personal contacts based on mutual trust and long-term perspectives. Much can be done on small budgets, a fact that is often overlooked by large business and charitable organizations. As an illustration of this fact I would like to cite the example of Ahmed Rashid, author of *Descent into Chaos*, which is very useful for such debates, who provides start up funds for new print media in Afghanistan, as well as the following case study.

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<sup>23</sup> Loretta Napoleoni: *Terror Inc: Tracing the Money Behind Global Terrorism*, London 2004 / *Die Ökonomie des Terrors: Auf den Spuren der Dollars hinter dem Terrorismus*, München 2004 / *Rogue Economics*, New York 2008 / *Die Zuhälter der Globalisierung*, München 2008, p. 317, 314.

In 2003, at Kabul University, a beautiful garden campus (an early U.S. aid project, the U.S.S.R built a bread factory nearby) that was fortunately not damaged in the fighting, we discussed the printing of books urgently required for education in the country. Until then, the only literature available consisted of technical handbooks donated from abroad. Even during early discussions it became clear that works on Afghan culture and history, on policy and philosophy, immediately caused embittered disputes among all parties concerned. In view of these difficulties, my main partner then, professor Ali Mohammed Zahma, who had accompanied me from Vienna back to his country for the first time in 18 years, decided not to interfere with the list of published titles and renounced his own participation in an account of his political life, which was to include testimonies of his time in jail and his being brutally tortured. After our return to Vienna, we eventually published a volume with his poems in Farsi.<sup>24</sup> Poetry not politics – Zahma’s decision illustrates that Afghan culture has deep resources and impressive survival strategies, ‘they will continue to exist more or less unchanged, no matter which disasters will come over the rest of the world’, as Eric Newby wrote. It is crucially important to keep an open mind to acknowledge and appreciate this cultural dimension as a problem-solving potential. Professional structures too often do not admit such views. Many thousands of German-speaking members of military and civilian staff have been and are still working in Afghanistan, but they show little interest in understanding the culture of the country they are working to rebuild. My own account of my experiences with relief efforts and politics in the area, *Afghanistan, fragmentarisch*, sold only 170 copies over four years. Seen as an indicator of cultural interests, this is significant. Partly to remedy this apparent lack of information, I am in the process of publishing a new book on the subject, together with the Austrian anthropologist and traveler, Mr. Karl Wutt, a quiet but extremely well-informed authority on Afghan cultures, who has spent many months in communities in extremely remote areas.

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<sup>24</sup> *Sound. A Collection of Poems by Ali M. Zahma*, in Farsi with English editorial. Edited by Christian Reder, Vienna 2005.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize once again that projects designed to have a fundamental, socially constructive ‘economic impact’ on a broad range of issues and structures can only be viewed as long-term initiatives and can be seen as a touchstone for relations between rich and poor societies. Culturally sensitive support encourages aid initiatives such as infrastructure building (constitutional rights, political participation, empowerment of women; roads, communication, water supply, housing, waste disposal, clearing of landmines, microfinance) and networks of small regional projects. Normality requires basic stability: security in daily life, markets, jobs, education, hospitals. NGO projects – as space for highly motivated initiatives and innovative criticism – could stimulate wider humanitarian spheres and change the intercultural chemistry of cooperation: Effective relief programs, fairness, gender equality, Afghan project teams, efficient use of funds, small-budget policy, not overpaid (even unpaid) work of the privileged, intellectual profit for both sides, balanced knowledge transfer, long-term support for mutual understanding of complexity and change – these are the means of successful cultural aid initiatives.

Useful structures, visible projects and sensitive pragmatism are understood best when they are based on integrity, financial support, proper organization, and social sensitivity. Such unrealistic standards for productive services and exchange reflect automatically home-grown situations in our own countries, where gambling is promoted as main reason of success and patterns of modernity often do little more than cover up substantial similarities with so-called oriental paternalistic, xenophobic or anti-democratic mentalities.