

# Operation Cyclone

For the Allied invasion of Noemfoor in 1944, also known as Operation Cyclone, see [Battle of Noemfoor](#). For the commando operations during the [November 2008 Mumbai attacks](#), also known as Operation Cyclone, see [Operation Black Tornado](#).

**Operation Cyclone** was the code name for the [United States Central Intelligence Agency \(CIA\)](#) program to arm and finance the Afghan *mujahideen* prior to and during the [Soviet war in Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989](#). The program leaned heavily towards supporting militant Islamic groups that were favoured by neighbouring Pakistan, rather than other, less ideological Afghan resistance groups that had also been fighting the Marxist-oriented [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan](#) regime since before the Soviet intervention. Operation Cyclone was one of the longest and most expensive covert CIA operations ever undertaken;<sup>[1]</sup> funding began with \$20–\$30 million per year in 1980 and rose to \$630 million per year in 1987.<sup>[2]</sup> Funding continued after 1989 as the mujahideen battled the forces of [Mohammad Najibullah's PDPA](#) during the [civil war in Afghanistan \(1989–1992\)](#).<sup>[3]</sup>

## 1 Background

In April 1978, the communist [People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan \(PDPA\)](#) seized power in Afghanistan in the [Saur Revolution](#). Within months, opponents of the communist government launched an uprising in eastern Afghanistan that quickly expanded into a civil war waged by guerrilla mujahideen against government forces countrywide. The Pakistani government provided these rebels with covert training centers, while the Soviet Union sent thousands of military advisers to support the PDPA government.<sup>[4]</sup> Meanwhile, increasing friction between the competing factions of the PDPA – the dominant [Khalq](#) and the more moderate [Parcham](#) – resulted in the dismissal of Parchami cabinet members and the arrest of Parchami military officers under the pretext of a Parchami coup.

By mid-1979, the United States had started a covert program to finance the mujahideen.<sup>[5]</sup> President Carter's National Security Adviser, [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), was later quoted as saying that the goal of the program was to “induce a Soviet military intervention”,<sup>[6][7]</sup> but later clarified that this was “a very sensationalized and abbreviated” misquotation and that the Soviet invasion occurred largely because of previous U.S. failures to restrain Soviet

expansionism.<sup>[8][9]</sup> According to Eric Alterman, writing in *The Nation*, [Cyrus Vance](#)'s close aide [Marshall Shulman](#) “insists that the State Department worked hard to dissuade the Soviets from invading and would never have undertaken a program to encourage it, though he says he was unaware of the covert program at the time. Indeed, Vance hardly seems to be represented at all in [Gates's](#) recounting”.<sup>[10]</sup>

In September 1979, Khalqist President [Nur Muhammad Taraki](#) was assassinated in a coup within the PDPA orchestrated by fellow Khalq member [Hafizullah Amin](#), who assumed the presidency. Distrusted by the Soviets, Amin was assassinated by Soviet special forces in December 1979. A Soviet-organized government, led by [Parcham's Babrak Karmal](#) but inclusive of both factions, filled the vacuum. Soviet troops were deployed to stabilize Afghanistan under Karmal in more substantial numbers, although the Soviet government did not expect to do most of the fighting in Afghanistan. As a result, however, the Soviets were now directly involved in what had been a domestic war in Afghanistan.<sup>[11]</sup>

At the time some believed the Soviets were attempting to expand their borders southward in order to gain a foothold in the Middle East. The Soviet Union had long had a dearth of warm water ports, and their movement south seemed to position them for further expansion toward Pakistan in the East, and Iran to the West. American politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike, feared the Soviets were positioning themselves for a takeover of Middle Eastern oil. Others believed that the Soviet Union was afraid Iran's Islamic Revolution and Afghanistan's Islamization would spread to the millions of Muslims in the USSR.

After the invasion, President [Jimmy Carter](#) announced what became known as the [Carter Doctrine](#): that the U.S. would not allow any other outside force to gain control of the [Persian Gulf](#). He terminated the [Soviet Wheat Deal](#) in January 1980, which was intended to establish trade with USSR and lessen [Cold War](#) tensions. The grain exports had been beneficial to people employed in agriculture, and the [Carter embargo](#) marked the beginning of hardship for American farmers. That same year, Carter also made two of the most unpopular decisions of his entire Presidency: prohibiting American athletes from participating in the [1980 Summer Olympics](#) in Moscow, and reinstating registration for the draft for young males. Following the Soviet invasion, the United States supported diplomatic efforts to achieve a Soviet withdrawal. In addition, generous U.S. contributions to the refugee pro-

gram in Pakistan played a major part in efforts to assist Afghan refugees.

## 2 The program



*A mujahideen resistance fighter shoots an SA-7, 1988.*

On 3 July 1979, Carter signed a presidential finding authorizing funding for anticommunist guerrillas in Afghanistan.<sup>[12]</sup> Following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December Operation Storm-333 and installation of a more pro-Soviet president, Babrak Karmal, Carter announced, “The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War”.<sup>[12]</sup>

President Reagan greatly expanded the program as part of the Reagan Doctrine of aiding anti-Soviet resistance movements abroad. To execute this policy, Reagan deployed CIA Special Activities Division paramilitary officers to equip the Mujihadeen forces against the Red Army. Although the CIA and Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson have received the most attention for their roles, the key architect of the strategy was Michael G. Vickers, a young CIA paramilitary officer working for Gust Avrakotos, the CIA’s regional head who had a close relationship with Wilson. Vicker’s strategy was to use a broad mix of weapons, tactics, logistics, along with training programs, to enhance the rebels’ ability to fight a guerilla war against the Soviets.<sup>[13][14]</sup> Reagan’s program assisted in ending the Soviet’s occupation in Afghanistan.<sup>[15][16]</sup> A Pentagon senior official, Michael Pillsbury, successfully advocated providing Stinger missiles to the Afghan resistance, according to recent books and academic articles.<sup>[17]</sup>

The program relied heavily on the Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, who had a close relationship with Wilson. His Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was an intermediary for funds distribution, passing of weapons, military training and financial support to Afghan resistance groups.<sup>[18]</sup> Along with funding from similar programs from Britain’s MI6 and SAS, Saudi Arabia, and the People’s Republic of China,<sup>[19]</sup> the ISI armed and trained over 100,000 insurgents between 1978 and 1992 . They encouraged the volunteers from the Arab states to join the

Afghan resistance in its struggle against the Soviet troops based in Afghanistan.<sup>[18]</sup>

According to Peter Bergen, writing in *Holy War, Inc.*, no Americans trained or had direct contact with the mujahideen.<sup>[20]</sup> The skittish CIA had fewer than 10 operatives in the region because it “feared it would be blamed, like in Guatemala”.<sup>[21]</sup> Civilian personnel from the U.S. Department of State and the CIA frequently visited the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area during this time, and the US contributed generously to aiding Afghan refugees.

The U.S.-built Stinger antiaircraft missile, supplied to the mujahideen in very large numbers beginning in 1986, struck a decisive blow to the Soviet war effort as it allowed the lightly armed Afghans to effectively defend against Soviet helicopter landings in strategic areas. The Stingers were so renowned and deadly that, in the 1990s, the U.S. conducted a “buy-back” program to keep unused missiles from falling into the hands of anti-American terrorists. This program may have been covertly renewed following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001, out of fear that remaining Stingers could be used against U.S. forces in the country.<sup>[22]</sup>

With U.S. and other funding, the ISI armed and trained over 100,000 insurgents . On 20 July 1987, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country was announced pursuant to the negotiations that led to the Geneva Accords of 1988,<sup>[23]</sup> with the last Soviets leaving on 15 February 1989. Soviet forces suffered over 14,000 killed and missing, and over 50,000 wounded.

### 2.1 Funding



*President Reagan meeting with Afghan Mujahideen leaders in the Oval Office in 1983*

See also: Reagan Doctrine

The U.S. offered two packages of economic assistance and military sales to support Pakistan’s role in the war against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The first six-year assistance package (1981–87) amounted to US\$3.2 billion, equally divided between economic assistance and military sales. The U.S. also sold 40 F-16 aircraft to

Pakistan during 1983–87 at a cost of \$1.2 billion outside the assistance package. The second six-year assistance package (1987–93) amounted to \$4.2 billion. Out of this, \$2.28 billion were allocated for economic assistance in the form of grants or loan that carried the interest rate of 2–3 per cent. The rest of the allocation (\$1.74 billion) was in the form of credit for military purchases.<sup>[18]</sup> Sale of non-U.S. arms to Pakistan for destination to Afghanistan was facilitated by Israel.<sup>[24]</sup> More than \$20 billion in U.S. funds were funneled into the country to train and arm the Afghan resistance groups.<sup>[25]</sup>

The program funding was increased yearly due to lobbying by prominent U.S. politicians and government officials, such as Charles Wilson, Gordon Humphrey, Fred Ikle, and William Casey. Under the Reagan administration, U.S. support for the Afghan mujahideen evolved into a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy, called the **Reagan Doctrine**, in which the U.S. provided military and other support to anti-communist resistance movements in Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

The mujahideen benefited from expanded foreign military support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other Muslim nations. Saudi Arabia in particular agreed to match dollar for dollar the money the CIA was sending to the Mujahideen. When Saudi payments were late, Wilson and Avrakotos would fly to Saudi Arabia to persuade the monarchy to fulfill its commitments.<sup>[26]</sup>

Levels of support to the various Afghan factions varied. The ISI tended to favor vigorous Islamists like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of **Hezb-i-Islami**, and Jalaluddin Haqqani. Some Americans agreed.<sup>[26][27]</sup> However others favored the relative moderates like Ahmed Shah Massoud. These included two **Heritage Foundation** foreign policy analysts, Michael Johns and James A. Phillips, both of whom championed Massoud as the Afghan resistance leader most worthy of US support under the **Reagan Doctrine**.<sup>[28][29][30]</sup>

### 3 Aftermath

The U.S. shifted its interest from Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. American funding of Afghan resistance leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his **Hezbi Islami** party was cut off immediately.<sup>[31]</sup> The U.S. also reduced its assistance for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

In October 1990, U.S. President George H. W. Bush refused to certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device, triggering the imposition of sanctions against Pakistan under the **Pressler Amendment** (1985) in the **Foreign Assistance Act**. This disrupted the second assistance package offered in 1987 and discontinued economic assistance and military sales to Pakistan with the exception of the economic assistance already on its way

to Pakistan. Military sales and training programs were abandoned as well and some of the Pakistani military officers under training in the U.S. were asked to return home.<sup>[18]</sup>

As late as 1991 Charlie Wilson persuaded the **House Intelligence Committee** to give the Mujahideen \$200 million for fiscal year 1992, and the Saudi agreement to match dollar for dollar brought the budget to \$400 million.<sup>[32]</sup>

## 4 Criticism



*Critics assert that funding the mujahideen played a role in causing the September 11 attacks.*

The U.S. government has been criticized for allowing Pakistan to channel a disproportionate amount of its funding to controversial Afghan resistance leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,<sup>[33]</sup> who Pakistani officials believed was “their man”.<sup>[34]</sup> Hekmatyar has been criticized for killing other *mujahideen* and attacking civilian populations, including shelling Kabul with American-supplied weapons, causing 2,000 casualties. Hekmatyar was said to be friendly with Osama bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda, who was running an operation for assisting “Afghan Arab” volunteers fighting in Afghanistan, called **Maktab al-Khadamat**. Alarmed by his behavior, Pakistan leader General Zia warned Hekmatyar, “It was Pakistan that made him an Afghan leader and it is Pakistan who can equally destroy him if he continues to misbehave.”<sup>[35]</sup>

In the late 1980s, Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, concerned about the growing strength of the Islamist movement, told President George H. W. Bush, “You are creating a Frankenstein.”<sup>[36]</sup>

The U.S. says that all of its funds went to native Afghan rebels and denies that any of its funds were used to supply Osama bin Laden or foreign Arab mujahideen. However, even a portion of those native Afghan rebels would form parts of the Taliban, fighting against the US military.<sup>[37]</sup>

While there is no evidence that the CIA had direct contact with Osama Bin Laden<sup>[38][39]</sup> and US funding was



directed to Afghan Mujahedin groups,<sup>[40]</sup> critics of U.S. foreign policy consider Operation Cyclone to be substantially responsible for setting in motion the events that led to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001,<sup>[41]</sup> a view Brzezinski has dismissed.<sup>[42]</sup> William Hartung argues that the early foundations of al-Qaida were built in part on relationships and weaponry that came from the billions of dollars in U.S. support for the Afghan mujahadin during the war to expel Soviet forces from that country.<sup>[43]</sup> According to Christopher Andrew and Vasily Mitrokhin, there is “no support” in any “reliable source” for “the claim that the CIA funded bin Laden or any of the other Arab volunteers who came to support the mujahideen.”<sup>[44]</sup> Peter Bergen writes that “[t]he real problem is not that the CIA helped bin Laden during the 1980s, but that the Agency simply had no idea of his possible significance until the bin Laden unit was set up within the CIA in January 1996.”<sup>[38]</sup>

## 5 See also

- Ahmad Shah Massoud
- Allegations of CIA assistance to Osama bin Laden
- Afghan Civil War
- Afghan training camp
- Badaber Uprising
- CIA activity in Afghanistan under William J. Casey 1981-1987
- CIA Activities by Region: Near East, North Africa, South and Southwest Asia (see: Afghanistan 1978)
- *Charlie Wilson's War*
- Gary Schroen
- Howard Hart
- Jalaluddin Haqqani
- Joanne Herring
- Milton Bearden
- Soviet war in Afghanistan

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- [6] Gibbs, David (June 2000). “Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Retrospect” (PDF). *International Politics* **37**: 233–246. Retrieved 2013-04-27. The key revelation is that Brzezinski had urged Carter to send aid to the Mujahiddin knowing that this would probably cause a Soviet invasion.
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