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Foreword

Ali Ahmad Jalali is a professional soldier and politician as well as a noted scholar with an exceptionally acute analytical mind to complement his deep understanding of Afghanistan’s military and political history. An addition to his accomplished works on his country, A Military History of Afghanistan is magisterial in its scope and scholarship, yet highly readable to academic and lay historian alike. It is an absorbing account of a country that evokes emotion in most of us, whether because of a romantic understanding of the Great Game or as a result of more recent conflicts that have frequently dominated our television screens. Professor Jalali sheds fresh light on the Mujahedeen’s role in a war that contributed directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Taliban before finally examining the well-intentioned but often rather clumsy attempts to ensure the Taliban do not reassert their rule in Kabul after the post-9/11 invasion. The key to his analysis, placing recent conflicts in vital context, is the two thousand years of history that precedes the last 30, something I found of particular value and import.

Wars and warriors, armies and clannish fighters, foreign invasion and popular resistance all figure prominently in the long history of the land occupied by the modern Afghanistan. The distinctive geography of the country has shaped its history, which is in most part a military history.

As a crossroad of conquests, Afghanistan’s past is largely instilled with accounts of military developments and warfare as various armies from different areas using a multitude of different arms and tactics descended upon and invaded the country. From the Persians and Greeks in antiquity to the Mongols and Türks of the medieval period and the British, Soviet, and Americans in modern times, outsiders have led military conquest into the mountains and plains of Afghanistan, leaving their indelible marks on this ancient land located at the confluence of four geographic zones.

A Military History of Afghanistan is a survey of the geographic, social, and political foundations of wars as well as the social impacts of internal and external conflicts on the evolution of military organization, strategy and tactics, arms, and armed men in this multiethnic nation. The book encompasses
an immense panorama of wars, conflicts, and battles spanning the full length of Afghanistan’s extraordinary history from ancient times to the twenty-first century.

The book examines the nature and conduct of military action by different armies, with varying arms and equipment at different stages of history, offering insights into the politics and statecraft of each age, which was often decided by military exigencies. Political history has until very recent times been a narrative of military strength, hegemony, and dynamism. Yet history has witnessed powerful armies handicapped by nonmilitary factors such as terrain and hostile populations as well as their own faulty strategies and flawed tactics, let alone the impact of unanticipated adversaries. Since much of Afghanistan’s history is the story of wars, battles, generals, and the common soldier, this work undoubtedly sheds much light on the tumultuous and dynamic history of the country as a whole.

No work has hitherto chronicled the vast and rich accounts of Afghanistan’s military history in the comprehensive manner achieved in this work by Jalali. A series of books and professional studies focusing on separate wars and battles have been published in the past, particularly on Anglo-Afghan wars in the nineteenth century by British authors. Recently all published historical studies on Afghanistan either lack professional military focus or look at single wars and conflicts.

This volume provides general readers of military history, as well as scholars and professionals, with the definitive history of warfare in Afghanistan. While its principal focus is the era of British conquest, the Soviet invasion, the civil war and rise of the Taliban, and the subsequent US-led invasion, the book, broad in scope and based on authoritative primary sources, covers ancient conquerors and modern invasions with equal rigor. With its all-encompassing illustrative details and analytical features, in my judgment this book deserves to become a locus classicus in the annals of Afghanistan’s military history, and indeed of military history more generally.

David Richards
General the Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB, CBE, DSO
This work, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror*, is the culmination of my research and work on the military history of Afghanistan that began over four decades ago. In 1967 I completed a preliminary study in two volumes on the military history of Afghanistan, which was published in Kabul in the Dari-Persian language. It was an introductory work and did not cover much of the modern history of the country. My further research over the years enabled me to use a large number of primary sources in writing one definitive work on the military history of Afghanistan. This has been both a labor of love as well as what I perceive and hope will be a critical work at a time when the country has been the focal point for the international war on terrorism and accompanying military efforts. From the time that I first began exploring this subject, much change has taken place in the political landscape of the country. Decades of war have witnessed the introduction of new military tactics, innovations, and strategies. These new developments necessitate a thorough and all-inclusive analysis of the transformation of military history from ancient times to the present.

The work covers Afghanistan’s military history during the past two hundred years with an introductory chapter highlighting the major military developments from early times to the foundation of the modern Afghan state. The principal focus here is on the era of British conquest and Anglo-Afghan wars, the Soviet invasion, the civil war and the rise of the Taliban, and the subsequent US invasion. I also review the early history of the land, the ancient Persian, Greek, and other conquerors, the conquest of the Arab-Islamic armies, the rise of competing Muslim dynasties and imperial ambition in the region, the Mongol cataclysm, the Afghan tribes and the gunpowder empires, and finally the emergence of modern Afghanistan in the middle of the eighteenth century.

This study encompasses an immense panorama of wars, battles, and conflicts spanning the full length of Afghanistan’s extraordinary history from ancient times to the twenty-first century. It also surveys the geographic, social, and political foundations of wars as well as the social impacts of internal and
external conflicts on the evolution of social and political order in the multi-ethnic nation. For the reader to follow the course of military campaigns and battles, I added simple battle sketches using modern military map symbols.

In completing this task, I am grateful to many whose support and assistance was indispensable. I would like to thank those individual Afghans who throughout the years added significantly to my own knowledge and experience of Afghan military history by sharing their personal stories and experiences during the course of my military career in the Afghan army in the 1960s and 1970s, while serving in the anti-Soviet resistance of the 1980s, during my stint as a cabinet minister of the post-Taliban Afghan government, and afterward. They have enriched this work. While this list of individuals is too long to mention, they know who they are and I thank them wholeheartedly.

My special thanks goes to General Lord David Richards, who has been extremely generous with his time, reviewing the manuscript and writing the foreword.

I am deeply grateful to my long-time colleague and friend Dr. Lester Grau for painstakingly reading the manuscript and offering valuable comments and editorial suggestions. I am also greatly indebted to US Army Reserve Captain Charles Bartles for his remarkable assistance with the battle maps. Chuck was extremely generous with his time and effort to improve my original sketches into high-quality, professional maps that are published in the book. This could not be done without his help. I wish also to thank my colleagues at Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) at the National Defense University, in particular professors Jack Gill, Bob Boggs, and Brianne Todd, who read the drafts and made thoughtful and insightful comments.

Finally, it was the love and support of my family that sustained my energy and allowed me to finish this massive work in a timely manner. I am especially grateful to my wife and partner of 45 years, Homaira, for her patience and endless encouragement even when she had to endure long hours of being alone while I was engaged in this work. I would like to thank my children, Waïs and Bahar, for their love and enthusiastic support of my career. Finally, I dedicate this work to the new generation of my family, my grandchildren—Sophia, Dean, and Roxana Bahar Jalali.

Ali A. Jalali
Glenwood, Maryland
Military history is virtually the history of Afghanistan—a country that has been constantly drawn into armed conflicts in response to foreign invasions or in support of its own conquests in foreign lands. Violent reaction to foreign invasions has become the hallmark of Afghanistan’s military history. Such reaction was not limited to the action of state armies and dynastical contingents but was a universal response, albeit fragmented, across a mosaic of tribal and community entities with their own martial capacities. Historically the collapse of the state army and central government has never resulted in the defeat of the nation or full control by invading forces. The people, relying on their decentralized political, economic, and military potential, often took over the fighting against the invaders. Local military potential was also the main source in fighting domestic tribal feuds.

The recent war in Afghanistan (2001–2014) spurred renewed interest in studying the military history of Afghanistan and the Afghans’ way of war. The subject is particularly fascinating as the US-led invasion in 2001—in response to the al-Qaeda–linked terrorist attacks in the United States from bases in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan—came a little over a decade after the failure of the Soviet military occupation of this central Asian country. Given this recent attention, many authors attempted to unveil the secrets of the fierce resistance of the Afghan people to foreign military intervention and typify the Afghans’ approaches to war. Many of these studies produced valuable reading. However, in their zeal to find easy and all-inclusive “truths” about the military culture of the Afghans, some analysts hastily presented concepts based on stereotypes, generalizations, anachronistic judgments, and geographic misplacements. Reference to certain clichés, like the designation of Afghanistan as “the graveyard of empires,” apparently inspired by a narrow focus on the Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century and the Soviet experience of the 1980s in Afghanistan, is one of the erroneous deductions. Such conclusions are far from being a comprehensive portrayal of the way of war pursued by both state and nonstate actors in Afghanistan against different domestic and foreign enemies, under changing sociopolitical and technological conditions at different times and different places.
The way of war in Afghanistan has been a far more complex phenomenon than has been epitomized by “The Young British Soldier” chant of Rudyard Kipling,¹ or the narrow understanding of foreign observers of the nineteenth century, whose judgments were subject to their particular experience at a particular time and place in Afghanistan and the Pashtun tribal areas. When Joseph Ferrier suggested that Afghans are born in violence and fighting becomes part of their way of life, he missed the larger picture, where deep-seated mechanisms of making peace coexist with the motives for violence. He characterized the Afghans’ mode of war as a bloody act of a parochial nature. “It is rare,” he wrote, “to see them make war for the simple purpose of defending their nationality, for this sentiment does not exist and can be considered applicable only to the tribe, its district or encampment.”² The assessment, even if justified by the circumstances, is limited in time and space. Or, when Winston Churchill wrote that “except at the times of sowing and of harvest, a continual state of feud and strife prevails throughout the land. . . . Every tribesman has a blood feud with his neighbor. Every man’s hand is against the other, and all against the stranger,”³ he was reflecting his experience with the Malakand Field Force, an episode of British frontier war in the Pashtun tribal areas of Swat and Dir in 1897 under a particular situation in place and time.

The history of the people living in modern Afghanistan did not start with the colonial intervention in Afghanistan but dates back to centuries before, when they experienced different situations and various enemies and embraced diverse beliefs and developed changing perceptions.

In Afghanistan, like everywhere else, people have their distinctive assumptions, perceptions, and preferences that may underpin their way of war. But they transform over time and are subject to ideological, economic, political, and environmental changes. Although for the past thirteen centuries Islam has been an important ideological and cultural element in the Afghans’ approaches to warfare, its implementation has been strongly influenced by political and social conditions. The ghaza (fighting for the faith) forays of the Afghans and Turkic warriors in the Middle Ages to spread Islam in India were different from the ghaza-motivated battles of the Afghan ghazis against the British invasions in the nineteenth century. The popular uprising in Afghanistan against the Sawr Revolution, which brought the communists to power in 1978, and the nationwide resistance to the Soviet invasion that was launched in 1979 to bolster the faltering communist regime were initially comparable with that society’s historical models of collective behavior. The resistance was basically a spontaneous defensive action by social communities without any connection to national political organizations. It was aimed at protecting the community’s value system and traditional way of life, which were threatened by an alien ideology and an intolerable state control. But, as the war
expanded in space and time, the resistance transformed into a wider struggle involving the decentralized resistance forces, internal and exiled political elites, and international actors. Both the state and the resistance became part of an international conflict waged on the last battlefield of the Cold War. The opposing international actors, with diverging interests in the Afghan conflict, armed and financially supported the conflicting sides in the Afghan war. This made the war far different from what the Afghan society fought against the British invasions in the nineteenth century. Later, the very concept of *Jihad*, which underpinned the struggle of Afghan Muslims against the atheist forces that had occupied their land in the 1980s, proved different from the radical *Jihad* ideology that inspires the suicidal fighters of the Taliban two decades later in their war against the Afghan government and its NATO allies.

The nature of the military forces that emerged and operated on the Afghanistan political scene throughout history has been conditioned by the makeup of the state-society relationship and the dynamics of projecting power within a changing environment. Imperial and dynastic rulers often administered major urban areas and highways through direct control and maintained nominal sovereignty in marginal areas. These included hard-to-reach places and remote tribal societies where they left the local leaders in control. Society remained segmented and immobilized. The lack of integration made the communities, particularly in tribal areas, semi-independent, mostly relying on their own resources and their own traditional institutions. This included local military forces that were mobilized during intertribal conflicts or foreign threats. The tribal militias also could be mustered in support of or against the central government during domestic disturbances. This nation-in-arms status provided for the rise of local and tribal leaders and nonstate armed groups when the central government collapsed or the state army disintegrated in the face of foreign invasion or dynastic upheavals.

Thus, there were a variety of military institutions created and nurtured by dynasties, empires, tribes, and communities to achieve their distinctive goals and secure their particular interests. From very ancient times, state armies existed, as did public military forces, in areas not fully governed by the state. The state army was the instrument of dynastic power while the public military was part of political and social institutions of tribes and other communities that had to depend on their own resources for local security, which was rarely provided by the sovereign prince. The tribal levies and local militia were also essential for supporting local interests in a volatile and competing environment.

As a result of these patterns, few state armies in premodern Afghanistan have successfully monopolized the use of force. Generally, the state army was not the only military institution within a social system imbued with military
pluralism. The rulers usually relied on a smaller standing army of well-trained and loyal soldiers closely linked to them and larger contingents provided by satraps, local governors, and tribal leaders. These contingents gathered when needed to fight rival powers, conquer other lands, and crush domestic rebellions. Meanwhile, a cycle of constant rising and falling of ruling dynasties and the dominance of an unstable security environment reinforced a state of localism in political, social, and military life. While state armies focused on dynastic interests, nonstate local groups and factions with paramilitary capacity emerged to secure local interests and sometimes acted independently as sources of local resistance.

The structure of states, tribes, and social communities in Afghanistan, along with the scope of their controlled space, shaped their mode of fighting throughout history. The state armies, with wider space to maneuver and greater resources, usually fought in a conventional manner, seeking rapid and decisive results. The dynastic wars and foreign conquests were often fought by a combined force of regular and irregular contingents guided by the principles and methods of conventional warfare. The wars initiated by nonstate actors, including tribal and community militias, against foreign invasions or repressive governments were invariably fought by the tactics of irregular warfare. The most effective and sustainable method of irregular combat was an indigenous form of guerrilla war that in strategic terms was different from the one conceptualized by Mao Zedong. The latter form aims at seizing state power through organizing “liberated zones,” while the Afghan model is defensive in nature and tactical in scope. Due to its lack of structural cohesiveness, the irregular warfare model of nonstate Afghan actors had transient impact. Its tactical achievements could hardly develop into strategic and political gains. It was a lengthy war of “a thousand cuts” that could hurt the enemy but was often not capable of exploiting the gains to establish a new political system.

Khoshal Khan Khattak, the renowned seventeenth-century Pashtun national leader and thinker, detailed the guerrilla tactics of the Afghan highlanders:

The Qazaqi [guerrilla] method of warfare is more effective than a pitched battle. Qazaqi is enemy killer and protects small forces against a strong enemy. There are two prerequisites for this kind of warfare: good horses (mobility) and good archers (fire power). These two can help a small force defeat a large enemy. No heavy equipment should be carried in qazaqi war. When you fight a smaller enemy detachment you should decisively attack with surprise. But, if the enemy receives reinforcement [or] when you
encounter a stronger enemy force, avoid decisive engagement and swiftly withdraw only to hit back where the enemy is vulnerable.\(^5\)

It was in such a setting that the tribal warrior felt at home. It was quite a challenge to transform such a fighter into a soldier in a disciplined army ruled by professional ethos and regulated by conventional military norms. A British observer of the Afghan society, Howard Hensman, wrote in 1881:

The Afghan does not lack native courage, and in hill warfare he is unrivaled, so long as it takes the shape of guerrilla fighting. But once he is asked to sink his identity and to become merely a unit in a battalion, he loses all self-confidence and is apt to think more of getting away than of stubbornly holding his ground as he would have done with his own friends led by his own chief.\(^6\)

The two modes of warfare, regular and irregular, were often used in combination for better results. In the nineteenth century, the military actions of the state army were supported in certain cases by guerrilla-type attacks mounted by tribal fighters in Afghanistan. In 1919 the Afghan military strategy for war was to instigate tribal insurgency and support it by military operations of regular forces—a strategy Pakistan partly emulated in its operation Gibraltar in 1965 during its war with India. Over the centuries, the embracing of the two models of warfare by fighters in Afghanistan facilitated the cross-influence and integration of conventional and guerrilla tactics into a unique way of war. The innovative design transforming the light guns Zanbouraks (Zambouraks)\(^7\) into mobile camel-mounted artillery by the Afghans in Kandahar in the early eighteenth century was inspired by the irregular warfare traditions that emphasized the combination of archery/fire and mobility. The innovation played a key role in the victory of Shah Mahmud Hotak’s army over the superior Safavid forces in the fateful battle of Gulnabad in 1722.\(^8\)

Forty years later the combination of regular and irregular approaches to war helped the Afghan monarch Ahmad Shah Durrani to decisively defeat the Maratha army in Panipat (1761). A century later Joseph Ferrier dramatized this approach of combining the tactics of regular and irregular warfare by the Afghan fighters. He wrote: “Before they encounter their adversary . . . they endeavor to weaken him by ruining the country in his front, so that he cannot maintain himself; they burn the villages, expel the inhabitants, and destroy the aqueducts. . . . And after he [the enemy] is panting with thirst and exhausted by hunger, they pounce on their enemy like a tiger and make a horrible massacre.”\(^9\)

Meanwhile, the guerrilla fighters enhanced their effectiveness by integrat-
Introducing modern technology into their culture of warfare and soon became some of the best marksmen in the world. In modern times, the use of new and radical methods has revolutionized the irregular warfare as conducted by transnational insurgents. The war pursued by the Taliban fighters and their associates in Afghanistan in the early twenty-first century is very different from the hit-and-run tactics of the fighters led by Khushal Khan Khattak against the Mughal armies of India in the seventeenth century. It is even different from the guerrilla war waged by the Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. In the new irregular warfare, terrorism is a major instrument of insurgency and insurgency is a means of global terrorism.

In general, Afghanistan’s military history is mostly shaped by three unique features: a distinct geography unsuitable for large invading armies and difficult to sustain logistically; the decentralized sociopolitical order of self-relying local communities; and the multiplicity of military institutions within a social system imbued with military pluralism. Under such a sociopolitical setup, few state armies in the past successfully monopolized the use of force. The state military establishment was mainly involved in protecting the state while local community militias and the people at large defended their land and social values against foreign and internal incursions. This created a potential to wage thousands of wars in villages and towns when needed.