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Türkiye's Role in the Afghan State-building and Reformation Process in the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract

The period of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed significant reformation efforts in both Türkiye and Afghanistan initiated respectively by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Amanullah Khan. However, while Türkiye under the guidance of Atatürk made significant progress in the reformation and modernization process, the reforms launched by Amanullah Khan in Afghanistan failed despite the strong assistance the Afghan government received from Türkiye and other countries. This article seeks to explain the motivations of the two leaders as well as the discourse of their interaction with the goal of understanding the influence of the Turkish experience on the Afghan reform process. It could be argued in this regard that the origins of Turkish-Afghan relations lie in the shared interest of the two countries for reformation, while mutual sympathy and the needs of the Afghan people inspired the further pledges of the Turkish government to Afghanistan.

Keywords

Türkiye, Afghanistan, reformation, Atatürk, Amanullah Khan

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Introduction

Relations between the Turkish and Afghan people began even before the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. The Afghans' perception of Türkiye in those days was largely influenced by the psychological authority of the Ottoman Caliph. Nevertheless, the two nations re-interpreted each other's importance after the signature of the Turkish-Afghan Friendship Treaty of March 1921, which was one of the first bilateral treaties that recognized the Turkish government in the international arena, predating even the Moscow Treaty that was signed with the Bolshevik government in Russia the same month.¹

The formation and context of the Turkish-Afghan agreement in 1921 need to be further scrutinized in order to understand the motivations of the two countries. The purpose of the Turkish government—not the state since it was not established yet—can be classified under two headings. The first was its eagerness to find political support from the outer world for the War of Independence that was still going on in Anatolia. For instance, the Turkish delegation in Moscow which was there to hold talks with the Bolshevik government coincidentally met with the Afghan delegation in a hotel hall. The presence of the two delegations in Moscow at the same time reflected their common desire to find a counterbalance against Britain.

The second motivation of the Turkish government was the search for military equipment and economic incentives from Russia and the Eastern Muslims (a term coined for Indian Muslims and Afghans) to be used in the War of Independence. In this sense, an agreement with Afghanistan, which was the only independent state of the Islamic world at the time, would not only deliver a strong message to the world that the Turkish people were seeking to become a respected member of the international community, but also increase the pressure over Britain to withdraw from the Turkish territories, since acting otherwise could alienate and even provoke the Muslim nationalists in India.

The Afghans, on the other hand, had succeeded in winning their independence in the 1919 war against Britain, relying primarily on Russian political, economic and military support. Even though at the beginning, the Afghan perception of the Turkish Independence War had more to do with their respect for the Caliphate than the Ankara government's independence goal,² the presence of a common enemy (i.e. Britain), similar domestic concerns and the search for support in international engagements fostered a sense of solidarity between Turks and Afghans.³

A significant development in the establishment of the relations between the two countries was the Afghan government's request for military and professional support from the Ankara government. Afghanistan's desire to attract Turkish aid and support, even though the Turkish nationalists were fighting for their own sovereignty at the time indicates the positive image of the Turks in the Afghan mind. In addition, Afghanistan's lack of infrastructure and relative backwardness required significant foreign aid so that the country could facilitate domestic reforms. However, Afghans' bias against foreign assistance was strong, since imperial powers like Russia and Britain had engaged in harsh geopolitical competition with each other in the past to create a sphere of influence in Afghanistan. The Turks, who were similarly fighting against imperial powers, on the other hand, had the human resources the Afghans needed because the Ottoman Empire had been sending students and professionals to Europe for almost two centuries.

In short, the expectations and needs of Türkiye and Afghanistan were consistent, which was a major factor in their interest in developing their bilateral relationship. Even though the two peoples shared the same religion for many years, the geopolitical concerns and realist interests of their governments brought them closer after they became independent following WWI. To support this argument, this article seeks to examine the development of Turkish-Afghan relations in the 1920s and 1930s.

An Overview of Turkish-Afghan Relations in the 1920s

To understand the evolution of Turkish-Afghan relations, the developments of the 19th century should be taken into consideration. For instance, the Muslims in Afghanistan and India viewed the Turkish-Russian War of 1877-1878 and the Turkish-Greek War of 1897 as the attack of the Christian world on the Muslims. While the failure of the Ottoman army in these wars was resented by the Afghan people, Turkish victory against Greeks in Thessaly provided the spark for the Tirah uprising in India, where Afghans were heavily involved.⁴ It should also be noted that every development that took place in the Ottoman-Western engagement appeared on the agenda of the Eastern world after a delay due to the primitive communication technology of the time. Nevertheless, when the news of the Tripoli War in 1911 and the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 were received, many Eastern Muslims volunteered to join the Ottoman army.⁵

The interest of Eastern Muslims in the Ottoman affairs was closely related with the emergence of a pervasive and communal motivation propelled not by state actors but by social groups. The initial cause was the sense of a common enemy: Britain. Angered by the longstanding British occupation of their territories, Afghans and Indians desired to witness a Turkish victory against the British in Anatolia. Meanwhile, influential Muslim intellectual figures in India like Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Jauhar brothers and Abu Al Kalam Azad harshly criticized the Western assault on the Caliphate.⁶ Complicating the matters, the Ottoman Sultan who was also recognized as the Caliph of the Islamic world made a call to the Muslim masses around the world to support the Ottoman army in WWI, despite the British military's conscription of Indian Muslims against the Ottoman-German alliance.⁷

In contrast to the Indian Muslims, the call for *jihad* (holy war) diffused in the minds of Afghans more conspicuously. The British-Russian agreement to partition Iran and Afghanistan in 1907 was a clear warning to the Afghan people, which urged intellectuals like Mahmud Tarzi to promote nationalist and pro-Turkish ideas in Afghanistan.⁸ Tarzi particularly

played an important role in convincing Habibullah Khan, the father of Amanullah Khan, who ruled Afghanistan until 1919 to help the Turkish opinion-makers in Egypt to escape to Afghanistan with the goal utilizing the professional skills of these people for the Afghans' own modernization process.⁹

Mustafa Kemal's speech in the Erzurum Congress held in 1919 indicated the general Turkish perception toward Eastern Muslims as he made strong reference to the resistance movements in Egypt, India, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.¹⁰ He emphasized that Britain was the common enemy of all these peoples, while he presented the Turkish War of Independence as a struggle on behalf of the Eastern peoples who had suffered under colonial rule for centuries.¹¹ The timing of the speech was interesting as it coincided with the third Afghan-British war, which had brought full independence to the Afghan people. Yet, despite this victory, Afghanistan was still in ruins and suffering from poverty and unmet basic needs.

The Afghan interest in the Turkish independence movement was also because the Afghans for their part had realized during their 1919 war against Britain that they were militarily weak against the British army as well as against the opposing tribes in the country, and experienced Turkish officers could provide military support to reform the Afghan army.

Amanullah Khan's commitment to maintain the independence of Afghanistan with an Islamic, liberal and nationalistic perspective urged him to establish dialogue with the Ankara government. Since he prioritized being recognized as a fully independent country by other states and eradicating the image of Afghanistan's dependence on Britain, he was eager to reach out to the Turks.¹² The Afghan interest in the Turkish independence movement was also because the Afghans for their part had realized during their 1919 war against Britain that they were militarily weak against the British army as well as against the opposing tribes in the country, and experienced Turkish officers could provide military support to reform the Afghan army.¹³ For this purpose, Amanullah Khan sent a letter to Mustafa Kemal via three Turkish officers released from the Russian prisoner-of-war camps who were heading to Türkiye by way of Afghanistan. He informed the Turkish leader of the services of these officers to the Afghan people and requested a Turkish military delegation to renovate the Afghan army.¹⁴ Even before the letter reached Mustafa Kemal, the delegations of the two countries in Moscow signed the Treaty of Friendship on March 1921, which paved the way for them to deepen diplomatic relations and cooperate more efficiently.

Mustafa Kemal's response to mobilize Turkish support to Afghanistan was immediate, even though his forces were still fighting the Allied Powers, mainly the Greek army in Anatolia. On May 19, 1921, the Ankara government decided to send an envoy accompanied by a military delegation to organize the Afghan army. Mustafa Kemal also expressed his gratitude to the appointment of an Afghan diplomatic delegation

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headed by Sultan Ahmed Han and appointed Abdurrahman Bey as the Turkish envoy in return.¹⁵ Abdurrahman Bey was a significant figure as he was an Afghan who participated in the Balkan Wars and WWI in the cadre of the Ottomans before joining the Turkish army of the Ankara government during the War for Independence. It should also be noted that these first contacts between Mustafa Kemal and Amanullah

Khan coincided with the Turkish army's defense maneuver in the Battle of Sakarya in 1921, which is also known as the "Officers' Battle" due to

the vast number of Turkish officers who lost their lives.¹⁶ It was remarkable in this regard that the Ankara government did not refrain from sending aid to the Afghans even though the Turks needed every single officer on the battlefield against the British-supported Greek army.

Mustafa Kemal's interest in Afghanistan was double-pronged. His first goal was to gain international recognition for his government, while the second was to benefit from the positive image of the Afghans in the eyes of the Turkish public. For instance, the Afghan Ambassador Sultan Ahmed Khan's arrival in Ankara took place right before the opening ceremony of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) and the ambassador presented his greetings to the Turkish people during this ceremony. Sultan Ahmed Khan's letter addressed to the TGNA was also warmly received by the members of the assembly.¹⁷ In the letter, the Afghan ambassador presented his salutes and support to Mustafa Kemal, while he praised the common Islamic bonds between the Turkish and Afghan people. After the letter was read before the TGNA, the members of the assembly acknowledged the two nations' close relations and praised the Afghans' support for the Turkish War of Independence.¹⁸

The clear commitment of the TGNA to develop Turkish-Afghan relations in the early 1920s convinced Mustafa Kemal to make critical changes in his Afghan policy. For instance, in order to continuously support the human resources needs of the Afghan people, he appointed Fahrettin Pasha as the ambassador of the Ankara government to Afghanistan in September 1921. Fahrettin Pasha was regarded as the hero of the Holy Madina campaign against the British army during WWI, and his appointment sent several messages to the world. First of all, appointing an ambassador as the highest representative of an independent state in another independent state strengthened the two countries' recognition of each other. Secondly, Fahrettin Pasha was famous for defending the holy Muslim lands as he refused to retreat, even though the Ottoman government in Istanbul ordered the army under his command to surrender. Thus, instating such a figure as Türkiye's ambassador sent a clear message to Britain as millions of Eastern Muslims were still living under British rule.¹⁹ In this sense, it could be argued that the Ankara government hoped to exert pressure over Britain to withdraw its aid from the Greek army fighting against the Turks in Anatolia.

Turkish interest in Afghanistan was also motivated by the deeply needed morale boost in the Turkish army and the justification of the War of Independence in the international sphere by attracting the support of the Muslim communities around the world. The early 1920s was a time

of tremendous psychological shock for the Turkish public and the political figures due to foreign troops' advances into Anatolia's heartland, while the Ottoman Sultan who was also the Caliph of the Islamic world adopted a negative attitude toward the Ankara government. Thus, the support of the Indian Muslims and the Afghans was important for the TGNA in terms of receiving approval from the Muslim world.²⁰ The War of Independence in this sense would be perceived as a war being waged to save the Caliphate and the Ottoman Sultan, since the conception of the Republic and the idea of a people-based government was not yet fully formed in the minds of the Turkish public. In this regard, the Afghan diplomatic presence in Ankara was actually the symbolic representation of loyalty to the Caliphate. This is also probably why the Turkish official gazette, *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, which had a limited printing and distribution capacity, continuously urged the Turkish public to praise the Afghan presence in Ankara and support the war.²¹

Türkiye's concern for recognition also continued after the Lausanne Treaty and the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Ankara, which was the new capital of Türkiye, was not popular among the European powers, and most of them did not even move their embassies to Ankara for years with the expectation that the Turkish government would eventually take a decision to move the capital back to Istanbul. While this issue continued until 1929, the USSR and Afghanistan were the two states that carried their embassies to Ankara to support the Turkish government. In addition, Afghanistan became the first government to congratulate Mustafa Kemal for the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, while Amanullah Khan's "Grand Tour" that included Ankara in 1928 could be regarded as an acknowledgement of Türkiye's sovereignty.²²

The Afghan government's positive perception about Türkiye even before the start of the Turkish War of Independence was guided by logical reasons. Because they recently became independent from British domination, the Afghans sought to be recognized by other states to strengthen their sovereignty. Besides, they required foreign aid to renovate their country and build an army. The Ottoman government would not be able to provide material support to the Afghans, however, educated Turkish soldiers could fill the human resources gap, which was the reason why Afghanistan hosted many Ottoman soldiers running away from the Allied powers during WWI. Amanullah Khan hoped to benefit from these soldiers in reforming the Afghan military system. Cemal Pasha, one of the "Three Pashas" who ruled the Ottoman Empire until 1918, for instance, became a prominent figure in the Afghan military

reformation process.²³ Amanullah Khan assigned Cemal Pasha specifically to build a presidential regiment. Despite problems like shortage of weapons and equipment as well as aging soldiers, Cemal Pasha regularly informed Mustafa Kemal of his progress in Afghanistan and requested more Turkish officers in Kabul.²⁴ He even consulted Germany to receive material assistance, but he was assassinated in Georgia before he could return to Kabul.²⁵

It should be noted, however, that Cemal Pasha's efforts to receive foreign aid were met with suspicion in certain circles in Afghanistan not only because he had fled from Anatolia after WWI, but also due to his role in the 1908 coup that overthrew Abdulhamid II, who was perceived as a respected Ottoman ruler in Kabul.²⁶ The fact that Cemal Pasha and his crew were under close scrutiny of the Afghan government at the time negatively influenced the success of Turkish contribution to the Afghan military reform process in the early 1920s.

Afghanistan's Quest for Economic and Political Assistance

The internal political and social environment in Türkiye and Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s may provide a better understanding of the course of Afghan-Turkish relations. The leaders of the two countries were similar in terms of their quest to start a reformation process after independence. However, while Türkiye achieved to launch a remarkable reformation process led by Atatürk, Amanullah Khan failed to do the same thing in Afghanistan due to a number of political and economic reasons.

Amanullah gained reputation inside Afghanistan as a respected ruler, since he was committed to achieving Afghan independence. He was a charismatic, liberal and reformist leader who was also a good follower of Islamic faith. He opposed radicalism, while he was also aware that his ruined country lacked infrastructure, and suffered

from problems like illiteracy, uneducated human resources and a dependent economy. At the same time, however, tribes which played an important role in the Afghan society challenged Amanullah's authority

Amanullah's reform process greatly benefited from the Turkish experience as many Turkish technicians, teachers, doctors and engineers were sent to Afghanistan, while Türkiye also provided military assistance which was warmly welcomed by the Afghan leadership.

and continued to promote radical ideas at the local level. The competing tribes particularly criticized Amanullah on the grounds that the agreement with Britain perpetuated the division of the Pashtun land. In addition, there was also considerable propaganda against his rule in the British outposts in India.²⁷

Meanwhile, conservative Afghan society disappointed by Amanullah's reform attempts and agitated by British propaganda reacted with dismay, probably due to the quick implementation of the reforms.²⁸ Funding of the reforms was another concern for Amanullah, as he had to apply to Russia and Britain for financial support, which inevitably meant greater foreign meddling in the Afghan internal affairs.²⁹ Hence, the multiethnic Afghan society which was unprepared for such a deep reformation process and reeling from the worsening financial situation made Amanullah's authority even more vulnerable to foreign incursion.

Amanullah's reform attempts encountered additional challenges as the abolition of the Caliphate with Türkiye's decision in 1924 weakened the unity between the Afghan and Indian Muslims. Amanullah could still rely on the idea of Muslim solidarity, but this would not be enough to achieve the groundbreaking reforms in the country as he was not politically powerful enough to convince the Afghan society. In contrast, the Turkish reform movement happened very quickly and Atatürk's charisma and strong leadership eased the Turkish transformation process. Afghanistan, on the other hand, lacked the social readiness, human resources and level of technology to replicate the same success.

Nevertheless, Amanullah's reform perception may be compared to Atatürk's course. Amanullah described himself as different from previous rulers: "I am a revolutionary King; I desire to make revolutions in every phase of life in Afghanistan."³⁰ The similarity of the two leaders in this regard was that they desired to transform the public to build modern states. The difference between them, however, was their *modus operandi*. Atatürk pursued his reform path by mapping the needs and customs of society while benefiting from his power of persuasion to reform their minds. Amanullah, on the other hand, did not have Atatürk's power of persuasion, and the Afghan community's socially heterogenic and geographically scattered structure hindered communication efforts.

Nonetheless, Amanullah's reform process greatly benefited from the Turkish experience as many Turkish technicians, teachers, doctors and engineers were sent to Afghanistan, while Türkiye also provided military

assistance which was warmly welcomed by the Afghan leadership. The personal letters exchanged between Amanullah and Atatürk demonstrate that reformation efforts brought the two governments closer to each other after 1923. However, especially following the uprising of a tribe in the Khost province in the 1923-1924 period, the Afghan reformation process lost momentum and Amanullah started to focus more on bolstering the unity of the country instead of introducing new reforms.

Amanullah's Reform Attempts

The Afghans had been struggling to survive between the spheres of influence of Russia and Britain for many decades. For these two imperial powers, the Afghan territories had no significance other than playing the role of a buffer zone in their ongoing "Great Game" with each other. Amanullah sought to change this role assigned to Afghanistan by the imperial powers after he became the ruler of Afghanistan, while he also tried to augment the integrity of Afghani multiethnic society. His reign coincided with the transformation process experienced in the Islamic communities in the early 1920s.³¹ His objectives were to build a nation-state and start social reforms to transform his ethnic/tribal-based, conservative society into a modern one.³²

The Afghan reforms can be categorized into three phases.³³ The first phase was the 1919–1923 period, in which state-building efforts were prioritized. The 1924 Khost uprising marks the end of this first phase, as it slowed down the reform movement until 1928. The *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) of 1928 was the final turning point in transforming the country through the consensus of Afghan opinion leaders, although Amanullah's reign came to an end right after this phase.

The planned reforms covered four sectors: social, political, religious and economical. The social reforms were mainly related to changing the traditional, educational and cultural practices. For instance, women's rights and dress codes were significant agenda items. In the educational sphere, Afghanistan sent thousands of students to France, Germany, Austria, India and Türkiye. While female students were only allowed to go to Türkiye due to religious concerns, male students were sent to the other countries to receive training. Political reforms included constitutional amendments, mainly for separating the country's executive, judiciary and legislative powers. Afghans did not look to any single state as a model to achieve these goals but instead considered many examples.

For instance, the administrative and military reforms were mainly excerpted from the Turkish experiences, while countries such as Russia, France and Italy also inspired Afghanistan's military reformation.

The nature of the Afghan society was the fundamental reason for the failure of the reformation attempts, mainly because the Afghan people largely interpreted the reforms through the lens of religion. The people's interest in continuing absolute Islamist practices in their social life made the reforms vulnerable to Mullah-designed propaganda.³⁴ Afghanistan was under the heavy influence of the clergy, and the male-dominant society gave greater credence to clerics than to progressive statements. Hence the reforms suffered from lack of justification, and Amanullah's efforts to persuade the community were inefficient. His coercive methods did not work much, since the army was not as strong as the militia controlled by the tribes.³⁵ Meanwhile, increasing the tax rates to finance the reforms was not tolerated by the predominantly rural population of Afghanistan who lacked communication and basic services. The leaders could not clearly explain why the reformation was a requirement for the future of the country.³⁶ In the absence of compelling explanations, coercion of the government to implement the reforms led to resistance rather than obedience.

It should also be noted that Amanullah had limited options to begin the reformation process. His initial preference for foreign aid was Russia, which withdrew from WWI right after the Bolshevik Revolution and later became the main source of technical and financial assistance for Amanullah's reforms. Interestingly enough, Amanullah also challenged the Bolsheviks' willingness to prevail over Central Asia by pursuing a dual policy—seeking Russian aid while supporting Central Asian resistance movements like the *Basmaci* movement. As argued earlier, the other option was to recruit the Ottoman officers in exile, who could provide significant momentum to the reformation of the Afghan military. Thus, Amanullah immediately provided safe haven to the Ottoman military officers with the expectation that they would share their professional experience and technical expertise with the Afghan government.

Amanullah also sent a delegation to Russia and some European countries in 1921. Under the leadership of Veli Khan, delegates had the authority to sign agreements with states that recognized Afghanistan.³⁷ As a result, the Afghan delegation signed various trade agreements in Russia, Germany, Italy and France, while they were met with a cold shoulder in Britain – indicating the tense relationship between London and the Afghan government at the time.³⁸

Amanullah also contacted Mustafa Kemal during this period even though the Ankara government was still unrecognized and the Turkish War of Independence was continuing in Anatolia. As stated earlier, his first two letters included a request for a Turkish military delegation to organize the Afghan army, since the Afghan army required restructuring to stand against external and internal threats. After receiving the request, Mustafa Kemal sent a letter to the Chief of General Staff that emphasized his positive attitude to the Afghan cause: “The army that would be built in Afghanistan would help keeping Britain away from Anatolia.”³⁹ Mustafa Kemal also believed that the sustainability of Amanullah’s authority in Afghanistan would be beneficial for Turkish long-term interests in this country.⁴⁰

In 1928, Amanullah Khan made a six-month trip to Egypt, Italy, Germany, Britain, Russia, Türkiye and Iran with the goal of finding foreign aid to modernize his country.

Meanwhile, Amanullah achieved obtaining the support of the Bolsheviks by the agreements signed in Moscow in February 1921 and in Kabul in September 1921. The Russian motivation was similar to that of the Turks: keeping Britain away from the regions of Bukhara and Khiva in Central Asia, which were not yet under Bolshevik control. Cooperation with Afghanistan was crucial to achieve this objective. The Russian-Afghan agreements also meant that Afghans recognized the Russian interests in Central Asia. On the other hand, Russia pledged to provide significant financial support to the Afghan government.⁴¹

The delegation of Veli Khan also visited the US in 1921. While the Afghans succeeded in persuading the US government to recognize their country, they failed to attract technical and financial support from the US.⁴² Afghanistan also developed a fruitful relationship with Germany, which accepted many Afghan workers after WWI. Afghanistan had accepted many German immigrants during the war, which inspired pro-Afghan sentiments in Germany. In pragmatic terms, the Afghans viewed Germany as a balance against Britain in their foreign relations.⁴³ However, the belief that Germans shared the same ancestral roots with the Afghans as both nations traced their ancestry to the Aryans also contributed to the friendly relations between Germany and Afghanistan.

Amanullah's "Grand Tour" to Türkiye

In 1928, Amanullah Khan made a six-month trip to Egypt, Italy, Germany, Britain, Russia, Türkiye and Iran with the goal of finding foreign aid to modernize his country.⁴⁴ Amanullah was fluent in Turkish, which made him popular among the Turkish society. Besides, Atatürk and Amanullah had communicated with each other regularly for many years. Therefore, Amanullah's visit to Türkiye was erected upon a clear understanding of friendship and equality between the two countries. In addition, it was the first foreign state-to-state official visit for Türkiye.

Two issues are worth mentioning during Amanullah's visit. The first involves how the Turks prepared themselves to welcome the Afghan King. The first state-level visit from another state to the Turkish capital was organized perfectly so that the guest would be impressed by the achievements of the newly founded Republic. Hence a Turkish entourage greeted Amanullah in the Soviet port of Sevastopol by *Izmir* vessel, which was a massive burden for the Turkish budget at the time. All the details of the visit were planned, including hosts, servants and even fireworks. After the long train journey to Ankara, an enthusiastic crowd greeted Amanullah at the Ankara Terminal. The streets of Ankara were cleaned, and the construction of the Ankara Palace Hotel was swiftly finished. The citizens of Ankara gathered to see the Afghan King in front of the hotel and celebrated his presence in Türkiye, indicating the Turkish public's sympathy towards Amanullah.

Atatürk also took Amanullah to the TGNA so that he could witness the discussions taking place between the deputies on specific law proposals. The subject of the meeting attended by Amanullah was the change of Turkish numerals to internationally used ones.⁴⁵ A parade of the army followed the session of the TGNA – as if it were a message to Amanullah that reforms must be complemented by military power to suppress the radicals and display the army's effectiveness.

Another highlight of Amanullah's visit to Türkiye was the Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship signed between the two states, which was perceived by the Western newspapers as an alliance at the time.

Atatürk's personal notes about the visit are also significant to understand the importance of Afghanistan for Türkiye.⁴⁶ A booklet, which was prepared for the official dinner to honor the Afghan King and Queen, for example, made reference to the decreed law on the alphabet as well as the of-

ficial language of Türkiye.⁴⁷ The second section on how to build an army included remarks about Atatürk's design which was based on the formation of three corps-level units under the authority of a command group that would occupy the Chief of General Staff position. Another section described the military mobilization plans that could be prepared either by Afghans or Turks and also recommended specific roles for Turkish officers. The booklet also underlined the military doctrine to be drafted according to the Afghan needs and the formation of a capable air force that would require training in Türkiye.

In his personal reflections on the evening, Atatürk mentions that he briefed the King about the internal uprisings and how Türkiye addressed them. He also spoke with Amanullah regarding the Turkish personnel's involvement in Afghanistan's foreign and internal affairs, education, trade and agriculture. Atatürk also proposed drafting Afghani history to strengthen the unity of the society. In addition, he talked about the importance of building an Afghan National Assembly, which did not exist prior to 1928. These suggestions prove that Atatürk had already formulated a nation-building conception for Afghanistan in the 1920s.

Amanullah Khan's program in Türkiye should also be noted in order to understand his priorities.⁴⁸ His schedule in Ankara was very busy with political negotiations, official visits, sightseeing tours and even a music concert. Yet, Amanullah was mainly interested in learning the Turkish experience in rebuilding a war-torn country. For instance, he asked for and received the city plan of Ankara from the mayor, and very interestingly he declared Dar-ul Aman as the new capital city center as soon as he returned to Afghanistan. He also wanted to see the newly-built factories, state farms and vocational schools in Türkiye. In Istanbul, which was his second destination after Ankara, Amanullah visited the School of Arts, the War College and Istanbul University, as he intended to send young Afghan people who were attending primary and secondary school in Türkiye to Turkish universities.

Another highlight of Amanullah's visit to Türkiye was the Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship signed between the two states, which was perceived by the Western newspapers as an alliance at the time. The first article of the treaty emphasized the friendship between the two states built on peaceful relations. Other provisions confirmed the commitment of the two parties to support one another in the case of a war and maintenance of the Turkish assistance to Afghanistan, specifically in the fields of military expertise and education. It should also be noted

that Türkiye was the only country with which Amanullah signed an agreement during his Grand Tour. While his European tour mainly focused on searching for military and financial aid, the Turkish leg of the tour was designed to win and solidify political commitments and cooperation.

After completing his Grand Tour, Amanullah formulated a reform plan to transform the Afghan society and bravely started the reform process as soon as he arrived in Kabul. He gathered the *Loja Jirga*, the traditional Afghan consultative body of tribal and religious leaders and presented his reform program. The first phase of the program was started a few days later which indicated that Amanullah was impatient to implement the bold reforms.⁴⁹ For instance, he removed traditional titles and civilian ranks, changed the dress code, persuaded most delegates of *Loja Jirga* to wear suits during sessions and limited the number of medals for the military. He also exerted pressure on the *ulama* (Islamic clergy) by introducing an examination to test the proficiency of the religious scholars and also forbid *imams* from coming from abroad, mainly from India.

Reforms in civil and social life were also very significant. For example, he addressed corruption which was common in Afghanistan, and governmental clerks were now required to announce their properties, incomes and spending. While he also introduced new measures to fight problems like slavery and drudgery, which were widespread in the country, his achievements in the field of women's rights were limited. The Afghan male society showed strong resistance to the reforms in women's rights, since women's subjugated place in the male-dominant Afghan culture was considered as an area of private life.

In addition to civil and social reforms, Amanullah initiated cultural reforms which included the establishment of theaters and cinemas in the country.⁵⁰ While the calendar was already changed in the early 1920s, the 1928 reforms furthered these undertakings by building the School of Arts and Libraries and encouraged private media. The education system was also restructured, and new teaching methods were introduced in the religious classes and schools. Interestingly, the French model was preferred because of Amanullah's father-in-law, Prime Minister Mahmud Tarzi, who admired the French education system. It should be noted, once again, however, that Amanullah sent female students to Türkiye for higher education, which was a courageous decision as the conservative Afghan society was not ready for such a reform. Although the members of the *Loya Jirga* were also involved in the decision to send

female students abroad, there was a reaction to Amanullah from the public when some of these students were spotted in Western attire.⁵¹

In the judicial sphere, reforming the procedures of trials and observing law-based punishment provided the basis for Amanullah's judicial reforms. However, because Afghanistan lacked a Law Faculty and a secular judicial institution at the beginning of the 1920s, Amanullah had to depend on the traditional system of *kadis* (judges) and *muftis* (legal experts) until a secular system could be established. In addition, the system of taxation was re-designed, even though this was the most widely opposed measure mainly because the financial resources of the tribes were curbed.

In military terms, Afghans relied heavily on Turkish officers and foreign equipment procurement. The Afghan Armed Forces sent soldiers mainly to Türkiye, but also to France, Russia and Germany, to educate their officers.⁵² Even though the Turkish officers were keen to build a new and efficient army in Afghanistan, the Afghan military leaders and decision-makers were divided between pro-Turkish and anti-Turkish camps. This was because the Turkish program was perceived negatively by the tribes and active soldiers as it was based on a policy to build a younger army including a salary cut to reduce the number of older soldiers. In practice, however, this policy fueled discontent among all soldiers – not only the older ones.

Even though the repercussions of the Afghan reform movement reached all parts of the country, it proved to be unsuccessful for a number of reasons. The most important factor was the polarization in the society with regard to the reforms. The government's efforts of persuasion were not sufficient and religious and ethnic prejudices that dominated the society could not be easily eliminated. Also, while the Afghan *Loya Jirga* provided an opportunity for political participation to the Afghan people, the emergence of strong interest groups in the assembly which resisted the reform process became a significant obstacle.

Turkish Support to the Afghan Reformation

Amanullah built the Ministry of Education in 1922 with the goal of reforming the education system. The need to counteract *irtica* (religious reactionism) and tribal loyalty were the main reasons to place education at the top of the new reform agenda of the country. For this purpose, Amanullah sought support from Türkiye. Professor Ethem

Apart from military training activities, the Afghan government sent civilian students to Türkiye for education in various fields of study.

Menemenciöđlu, a top diplomat at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was also a professor of international law in Ankara University's Faculty of Administrative Sciences was appointed to the Turkish Embassy in Kabul to provide consultancy to the Afghan Ministry of Education in reforming the Afghan education programs.⁵³ In addition, Emin Ali Cavlı, who was the second advisor to the Ministry of Education, was active in the designing of the education programs. He also researched the various aspects of the life of Central Asian Turkish communities in the Hindukush Mountains until he became paralyzed due to a severe illness and was sent back to Türkiye.⁵⁴ Professor Mehmet Ali Dađpınar, on the other hand, was sent to Kabul in October 1936 to work in the foundation of the Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences.⁵⁵

The Turkish instructors and mentors also played an important role in the inauguration of the Afghan War College in 1926.⁵⁶ In addition to military education, the Kabul Medical Faculty was continuously supported by Turkish medical doctors especially after 1937. Well-known doctors like Abdurrahman Derman, Saip Atademir and Şakir Tural were appointed to Afghanistan by governmental decrees.⁵⁷ In addition, a medical school was inaugurated in Afghanistan 1932 led by Turkish doctors.⁵⁸ Documents from the Turkish archives show that three doctors, were sent to Afghanistan by a governmental decree that year and managed to open a medical faculty.⁵⁹ One of them was even appointed as the private doctor of Amanullah Khan. As the number of Turkish officers in Afghanistan increased, a law amending their rights and duties was passed in the TGNA in 1932.⁶⁰ As of December 1937, there were 38 Turkish officers and doctors in Kabul, while this number rose to 107 when their families were included.⁶¹

As stated earlier, the Afghan government also sent many students – mainly military officers – to Türkiye. According to the official archive of the Turkish Presidency, the first group of 15 Afghan officers arrived in Türkiye in 1926.⁶² The Turkish Defense Ministry accepted 10 more officers who arrived in 1927, despite the limitations in the Turkish budget.⁶³ In 1929, on the other hand, five Afghan officers were financed by the Ministry of Defense.⁶⁴ Documents from the Turkish archives indicate that some of the Afghan officers sought asylum in Türkiye.⁶⁵ Some

of them even gained citizenship like Mehmet Asgar, who attended military training in Türkiye as a young officer and was later enfranchised to the Turkish army.⁶⁶

Apart from military training activities, the Afghan government sent civilian students to Türkiye for education in various fields of study. Most of these students started their education in Turkish schools from the early grades until they graduated from Turkish universities. The reason for offering a complete education package – i.e. from high school to university – was largely due to the lack of such education institutes in Afghanistan. Afghan students were mainly sent to the Faculties of Law, Medicine, Agriculture and Public Administration in various Turkish cities. Atatürk was personally interested in the financing and accommodation of Afghan students in Turkish schools.⁶⁷ It should also be noted that the selection of these students was a matter of great concern for the Turkish government. Since the Afghan society was based on a feudal structure prioritizing family and tribal ties, the Turkish authorities were very careful in taking the ethnic balance of Afghan society into consideration while managing this process in order not to alienate various groups in Afghanistan. For this reason, Turkish Ambassador Şevket Mahmut Esendal was specifically tasked with the selection of the Afghan students.⁶⁸

The judiciary was another sphere that included Turkish assistance. According to the official documents, the Turkish government appointed Mehmed Cevat Bey as the first legal consultant to Afghanistan in 1926, who was later replaced by Cevat Bey in 1930.⁶⁹ During the following decades, Türkiye continued to send high-level Turkish judges and legal consultants to help the Afghan government in reforming the judicial system.

It should be noted that Türkiye's capacity to assist the Afghan government was limited in some areas. For instance, when Afghanistan requested Ankara to send a mining engineer in 1935, the Turkish authorities could not be of any help as Türkiye did not have anyone working in this field.⁷⁰ Eventually, Afghans had to turn to the US which sent engineers to search for oil, and Germany which sent experts in the field of copper and coal mining. This meant that especially in exploring Afghanistan's mining wealth, other countries rather than Türkiye played a greater role. A report from the Turkish Embassy in 1932 drew attention to the increasing number of foreign technicians in Afghanistan and underlined the competition between Germany and Türkiye in a number of technical assistance activities.⁷¹

Conclusion

Conditions in the 1920s urged the Afghan government to seek foreign aid from all available sources. The Afghan delegation's trips to other countries in 1921 and Amanullah Khan's Grand Tour in 1928 can be interpreted as the Afghans' desire to gain recognition and support from the international community. Even though it was not yet an independent state in the 1920–21 period, Türkiye emerged as a viable option in the eyes of the Afghan elite due to their favorable view about the Ottoman Empire which was also the seat of the Caliphate. However, it should be noted that the Afghans' positive sentiments towards the Turks was not only due to common religious bonds, but also because they perceived the Turks as an important factor in terms of finding a balance against Britain in their foreign affairs in the post-independence period. Similarly, for the Ankara government, stronger relations with Afghanistan were useful in delivering a strong message of Muslim solidarity to Britain, while also contributing to Türkiye's recognition in the international field. In other words, the mutual sympathy between Türkiye and Afghanistan was complemented by the two countries' pragmatic geopolitical interests.

When establishing the Republic of Türkiye, Atatürk was determined to undertake reforms to create a modern state and a contemporary society through persuasive policies augmented by his leadership. For its part, Afghanistan attempted to start a similar reformation process while benefitting from Türkiye's experience. In this sense, Türkiye was committed to assisting the Afghan reformation process without being reciprocated. However, Amanullah Khan's reformation efforts failed due to a number of factors including social resistance to the reforms. The failure of the reform process made Afghanistan vulnerable to further foreign incursions and internal turmoil in the ensuing decades.

Endnotes

- 1 For Sarihan, the mood of the National Assembly must be mentioned while voting on the Moscow agreement with the Afghan delegation. All of the members voted in favor of the agreement. Enthusiasm prevailed in the Assembly, since an independent, Muslim state had recognized the Ankara Government, and that recognition could expand to the other nations. The Turkish media was excited when announcing the agreement and the Assembly's acceptance. See: Zeki Sarihan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afğan İlişkileri*, İstanbul: Kaynak, 2002, pp. 121–123.
- 2 Ibid, 125.
- 3 Amanullah Khan declared his acceptance of the Agreement before thousands of Afghans in the Abdgâh Mosque. He was keen to have his people hear this statement to underline Afghan Independence due to his policy against Great Britain. Ibid.
- 4 Anuradha Sareen, *India and Afghanistan: British Imperialism vs Afghan Nationalism, 1907–1921*, Delhi: Seema, p. 81.
- 5 Bilal N. Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk*, Ankara: TTK, 1992, p. 375.
- 6 Nile Green, *Global Islam: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 44.
- 7 The Caliphate's Jihad declaration had motivated many Eastern Muslims to join the Ottoman Army. Three soldiers from Afghanistan are registered as martyrs in the archives of the Ministry of Defense. The full list of Afghan soldiers can be extracted by checking the personal files of these soldiers.
- 8 See Omer Tarzi, *Two Kings and a Leader: Mahmud Tarzi*, Cosmo Publishing, 2021.
- 9 Bilal N. Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, Ankara: TTK, 2019, p. 19
- 10 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk (Cilt III)*, İstanbul: MEB, 1969, p. 1257.
- 11 Sebahattin Selek, *Anadolu İhtilali*, İstanbul: Kastaş, 2020, p. 553.
- 12 Mehmet Köçer, *Emanullah Dönemi Afghanistan*, İstanbul: Manas, 2009, p. 89.
- 13 Esedullah Oğuz, *Afghanistan*, İstanbul: Cep, 2009, p. 50.
- 14 The copy of this letter can be found in Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, p. 70.
- 15 Turkish Embassy to Kabul, no date.
- 16 Ministry of Culture and Tourism, no date.
- 17 Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, pp. 85–88
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Sarihan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afğan İlişkileri*, p. 213.
- 20 Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, p. 35
- 21 İsmail Akbaş, "Afgan Kralı Emanullah Han'ın Türkiye Gezisi," *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 7, No. 16 (2008), pp. 311–333.
- 22 Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, p. 124. Amanullah called his visits to Egypt, Italy, Germany, Russia and Türkiye the 'Grand Tour' of 1928. The objective was very concise. He was in search of aid and recognition. See Oğuz, *Afghanistan*, p. 55.
- 23 Şimşir argues that Cemal Pasha had sent letters to Atatürk asking Ankara to provide assistance to the Afghan army. He requested his former crew to build a Presidential Protection Regiment in Kabul, although Atatürk did not provide adequate support to him. Cemal Pasha is said to have wanted to be Ankara's Ambassador to Kabul, but Atatürk appointed Fahrettin Pasha. Cemal Pasha regularly informed Atatürk about his activities. He was unable to conclude his goal in Afghanistan, namely to organize the Afghans to threaten the British Army in India and encourage Indian Muslims to fight for independence. Unfortunately, he was assassinated in Tbilisi by an Armenian in 1921. Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afghanistan*, pp. 44–54.
- 24 Sarihan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afğan İlişkileri*, pp. 67–82

- 25 Baskın Oran (ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919–2006*, Salt Lake City: U of Utah Press, 2010, pp. 120–121.
- 26 Sarıhan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afgan İlişkileri*, pp. 67–82
- 27 Köçer, *Emanullah Dönemi Afganistan*, pp. 129–131.
- 28 Vartan Gregoryan, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Modernization, 1880–1930*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969, p. 477.
- 29 Mary E. Townsend & Cyrus H. Peake, *European Colonial Expansion Since 1871*, New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1941, p. 370.
- 30 Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, p. 137.
- 31 Köçer, *Emanullah Dönemi Afganistan*, p. 129.
- 32 M. Nazif Shahrani, "Review: King Aman-Allah of Afghanistan's Failed Nation-Building Project and its Aftermath," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2005), pp. 661–75.
- 33 Mehmet Saray, *Afganistan ve Türkler*, Ankara: TTK, 2022, pp. 147–149.
- 34 Andrew Chua, "The Promise and Failure of King Amanullah's Modernisation Program in Afghanistan," *ANU Undergraduate Research Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 38 (2014), p. 44.
- 35 Esedullah Oğuz, *Hedef Ülke Afganistan*, İstanbul: Doğan, 2002, p. 62.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 The Afghan and Turkish strategies differ in terms of recognition at any cost. Atatürk sent a delegation to Europe during the Independence War, too. The head of the delegation, led by the Foreign Minister of the Ankara government, had to resign since he had signed agreements with Western states. The reason was that Atatürk was more oriented to having the foreign Powers withdraw from invaded lands and being treated as an equal actor. He opposed any trade or economic concessions that resembled capitulations. The Turks were more experienced than the Afghans in dealing with Western powers.
- 38 Sarıhan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afgan İlişkileri*, pp. 35–39
- 39 *Atatürk'ün Milli Dış Politikası*, Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1992.
- 40 Sarıhan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afgan İlişkileri*, pp. 125.
- 41 Ralph H. Magnus & Eden Naby, *Afghanistan, Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1998, p. 41.
- 42 Ludwig W. Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century: Relation with the USSR, Germany and Britain*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974, p. 61.
- 43 N. D. Ahmad, *The Survival of Afghanistan 1747–1979: A Diplomatic History*, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1990, p. 177
- 44 Gregoryan, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 500.
- 45 Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afganistan*, pp. 151–200
- 46 *Atatürk'ün Not Defterleri XI*, Ankara: Genelkurmay Başkanlığı, 2004, pp. 79–136.
- 47 Şimşir compiles and presents every detail of Amanullah's program. Turkish National Library has the Booklet of the Official Visit that was printed to honor Amanullah. Ibid.
- 48 Akbaş, "Afgan Kralı Emanullah Han'ın Türkiye Gezisi," pp. 311–333.
- 49 Köçer, *Emanullah Dönemi Afganistan*, pp. 135–138.
- 50 Ibid, p. 145.
- 51 Some sources claim that it was the UK's agents who called tribe leaders to a diner and showed them these girls to provoke discontent. There is no proven documentation of the incident.
- 52 Sarıhan, *Kurtuluş Savaşımızda Türk-Afgan İlişkileri*, p. 135.
- 53 Ibid, p. 370.
- 54 Ibid, p. 369.
- 55 Aysultan Hayri, *Afganistan'da Türkçe Eğitimin Tarihi*, unpublished MA thesis, Ankara: Gazi University, 2007, pp. 35–170.

- 56 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 10.03.1926, F.K.30.18.1.1, Y.N.18.20.16.
- 57 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 20.02.1937, F.K.30.18.1.2, Y.N.72.14.9; Date: 06.04.1937, F.K.30.18.1.2, Y.N.73.27.11; Date: 18.05.1937, F.K.30.18.1.2, Y.N.75.41.3.
- 58 Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afganistan*, p. 328
- 59 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 11.05.1927, F.K.30.18.1.1, Y.N.24.27.17.
- 60 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 05.06.1932, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.20.119.18.
- 61 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 29.12.1937, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.258.733.26.
- 62 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 25.08.1926, F.K.30.11.1.0, Y.N.26.29.15.
- 63 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 08.09.1926, F.K.30.18.1.1, Y.N.20.57.16; Date: 05.08.1927, F.K.30.11.1.0, Y.N.33.18.15.
- 64 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 12.09.1929, F.K.30.18.1.2, Y.N.5.44.2; Date: 17.07.1929, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.257.731.10.
- 65 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 19.09.1929, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.55.364.2.
- 66 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 13.12.1936, F.K.30.11.1.0, Y.N.109.43.11.
- 67 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 05.11.1935, F.K.30.18.12, Y.N.59.83.8; Date: 05.11.1935, F.K.30.18.1.2, Y.N.59.83.9.
- 68 Saray, *Afganistan ve Türkler*, p. 210.
- 69 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 16.12.1926, F.K.30.11.1.0, Y.N.29.43.6.
- 70 Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 08.08.1936, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.212.444.2; Date: 29.12.1937, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.258.733.26.
- 71 France: six teachers; Italy: three in the War College and one in the Trade Ministry; Japan: one in the War College; India: four doctors and one teacher; Egypt: one teacher; Switzerland: one nurse (male); Iran: one doctor; Türkiye: one officer, four doctors, one midwife. Archives of the Turkish Presidency, Date: 21.02.1932, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.258.7333.2; Date: 21.02.1932, F.K.30.10.0.0, Y.N.258.7333.2.