The Pursuit of Dost Mohammed Khan: Political, Social and Cultural Intelligence during the British Occupation of Afghanistan, 1839-42[1]

Huw J. Davies
King's College, London

Intelligence and Empire
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In 1968, Malcolm Yapp, future distinguished historian of the Middle East and author of *Strategies of British India*, wrote a series of articles describing in detail the British occupation of Afghanistan between 1839 and 1842. These articles are probably the most authoritative histories of the series of disturbances and rebellions that brought instability to Afghanistan during the first British occupation. This is strange when one considers that the articles are based almost exclusively on one source. This is not a criticism; far from it. Known as the Enclosed Secret Letters, these documents comprise several thousand pieces of correspondence from British political officers stationed throughout Afghanistan. The usual health-warnings apply: there are forgeries and inaccuracies; they are all copies, hand-written in the political department at Calcutta, with all the attendant errors such a process causes. Treated carefully though, these documents provide the most complete record of British occupation forces in Afghanistan. The information in those letters also provides some of the most comprehensive analysis of the political, social and cultural characteristics of the various tribes of Afghanistan. Yapp argues that the disturbances and rebellions in Afghanistan during the British occupation were not connected conspiracies orchestrated first by Dost Mohammed Khan, the deposed ruler of Kabul, and then his son, Akhbar Khan. They were, in fact, 'quite separate, and there was no general conspiracy'. According to Yapp, that these disturbances and rebellions were unconnected was a reflection of the lack of coherent or organised resistance to British authority. In my view, the lack of coordinated resistances was no accident. British political officers, actively undermined the efforts of Dost Mohammed to coordinate resistance to British authority. They did this not through the indiscriminate use of violence, but the judicious use of political, social and cultural intelligence: knowledge we have access to in the correspondence in the Enclosed Secret Letters.

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[1] Work in Progress. Please do not cite.

This paper will argue that the use of political, social and cultural intelligence by British Political Officers during the occupation of Afghanistan was a reasonably effective means of identifying causes of discontent within and between Afghan tribal communities. With this knowledge, the Political Officers were able to occasionally prevent violence in the first place, or, more frequently, undermine the roots of a disturbance, restoring stability without much recourse to the use of redcoats. This didn't always work, obviously, and violence was frequently used, both judiciously and injudiciously. I cannot hope to cover the entire occupation, so I am focusing specifically on the period between the completion of the invasion and the Autumn of 1840, when the use of this intelligence, and the skills of the Political Officers prevented the deposed ruler, Dost Mohammed, from gaining any traction in his various attempts to usurp British authority and that of the puppet regime of Shah Shuja al-Mulk. The former was able to raise minor disturbances, but these never blossomed into full-scale rebellions, and, despite Dost Mohammed's best attempts, never gained a national character, remaining entirely regional. Dost Mohammed himself eventually surrendered to the British in the autumn of 1840, although his son remained at large. Despite the best of efforts of some Political Officers, the personal and professional failings of those in charge, Sir William Hay MacNagthen and Sir Alexander Burnes, ultimately alienated what support the British had in Afghanistan, and allowed Akhbar Khan to foster a major rebellion against the British in the autumn of 1841. That rebellion will not be covered, although the reasons for the British failure to respond effectively to it can be demonstrated. Some mention of precisely what I mean when I talk about political, social and cultural intelligence is needed, but first, a health-warning about the Political Officers themselves.

Political Officers were not heroes. In the months leading up to the initial invasion of Afghanistan, key personnel, such as Sir Alexander Burnes in Kabul, Claude Wade in Ludhiana and Sir John McNeill in Tehran were arbiters of information on the motivations and intents of the Afghans, the Sikhs and the Persians respectively. All had something to say about the Russians. It is worth briefly contextualising events in Central Asia in the 1830s. For reasons on brevity, the situations are sometimes simplified, but I am happy to answer questions on the period in general. Since the Napoleonic Wars, a growing wave of Russophobia was gripping Britain and her policy-makers. In its extreme form, this manifested itself as a completely false belief that Russia would be able to physically invade India. Various

military surveys were carried out, both officially and unofficially, to identify possible invasion routes. Schemes and strategies of defence were developed as a result.

In my opinion, the fear of physical invasion stemmed from 1798, when Richard Wellesley, then Governor-General of India used the spectre of possible French invasion (via Egypt), as an excuse for imperial expansion in Mysore and the Maratha Confederacy. Wellesley never believed such an invasion was actually possible, but needed a convenient excuse for war. Of course, much more likely was the possibility that Russia might send 'agents of discontent' to destabilise British authority in India. As a result, a dual fear was born. Worst-case scenario for British India was an internal rebellion swiftly followed by an external invasion. The tension of how to deal with the internal and external enemy was one that existed for British Indian policy-makers throughout the nineteenth century. The invasion of Afghanistan in 1839, was partly an attempt to create a buffer zone between British India's northern frontier and any threat Russia might pose in the future.

How did the Political Officers feature in this complex strategic intercourse? Throughout the first forty years of the nineteenth century, three options for a strong buffer state, friendly to British interests, and to hostile to Russian, appeared to present themselves to the British in India. Since the 1800s, Britain had had an alliance with the ambitious and expansionist Sikh Maharajah, Ranjit Singh. As Ranjit Singh expanded his authority across the Punjab, a strong, and heavily armed buffer state appeared provide an answer to Britain's problems. This alliance did not come without baggage however. Ranjit Singh remained hostile to Dost Mohammed Khan of Kabul, after the latter deposed Shah Shuja, the former Saddozai ruler of Afghanistan. In 1833, under the pretence of supporting Shah Shuja in an attempt to retake Kabul, Ranjit Singh seized, and held Peshawar. This issue became a long-standing bone of contention between Dost Mohammed and Ranjot Singh, and Britain was forced into attempting to curtail Ranjit Singh's expansionist tendencies. In the midst of all this was Captain Claude Martine Wade, the Political Officer at Ludhiana. Convinced of the efficacy of the Sikh alliance, Wade constantly paraded information and intelligence suggesting that the Sikhs were to be trusted, whilst Dost Mohammed had plans to side with Russia and incite rebellion in India. For Wade, his position in Ludhiana made him one of the most important frontier Political Officers. His analysis of information coming to him from Afghanistan, Persia, as well as the Punjab, was therefore tainted with his careerist attitude. So long as Britain's buffer state was left in

the Punjab, Wade would continue to exert enormous influence over policy-making. If Afghanistan or Persia became the primary buffer state, the Punjab and Wade would quickly lose influence. Wade was not alone in suffering from careerism.

The second option available for a buffer state was Persia. The declining empire had its own set of strategic difficulties. The equally declining and volatile Ottoman empire lay to the West, Russia encroached from the north, and Britain controlled the Gulf in the South. Persia, then, was looking for a Great Power ally, and when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, Britain appeared to provide a solution. A provisional alliance was signed in 1801, followed by subsidiary and confirmation agreements in 1809 and 1814. The agreement promised Persia military support from Britain if she were attacked by a European power. Unfortunately, Britain failed to specify that the only European power she would go to war against was France. When Russia emerged as the biggest threat Persian sovereignty, British policy-makers realised their blunder. In 1826, Russia and Persia went to war, and Persia looked to Britain for support. Unsurprisingly, Britain was not forthcoming, and suggested that Persia had been the instigator of the war, thus annulling the defensive treaty. Understandably, the Shah of Persia was furious. The Russo-Persian war ended in 1828, the result being the waxing of Russian, and the waning of British, influence in Tehran. Into this almost comical mess was sent Sir John McNeill, as the British mission to Tehran. Faced with a deteriorating situation, McNeill recognised that his career hinged on the success or failure of his mission. In 1837, apparently under the influence of the Russian minister to Tehran, Count Simonich, the Shah invaded Afghanistan and laid siege to Herat. The reasons for the invasion are too complicated to describe here, but what is important is that the British, specifically McNeill, and Lord Auckland, the Governor-General of India from 1836.

McNeill viewed the solution to the Herat crisis as being the foundation stone for the re-emergence of British influence in Tehran. The crisis was bad enough, but in reality it posed no real threat to British India. But reality and perception are two very different things. Intelligence had been received from Kabul, that Russian agents had arrived to offer Dost Mohammed Russian support. With this news, the entire character of the Persian invasion appeared to change. Further to this, one of the Shah's ministers, Hajee Ibrahim Khan, had written to Dost Mohammed Khan apparently alluding to the true nature of Russian intentions. The evidence was like a badly made jigsaw, the pieces not quite fitting together properly. Considerable leaps of

imagination were needed to reach the conclusion that Russia had orchestrated an alliance between herself, Persia and Afghanistan, all aimed at the invasion of India, and usurpation of British authority there. McNeill took a mallet and hammered the pieces together, to suit his own ends rather than reality. He would get credit for solving an Afghan-Persian crisis, but if he resolved a crisis that appeared to threaten not only British India, but Britain's role in the world, then his diplomatic reputation would be sealed. He therefore drafted a dispatch to Auckland that overstated the nature of the crisis. It is worth quoting:

> In short, looking at the Russian and Persian Correspondence with Kandahar and Cabool, at the missions of Kumber Allee Khan & Omar Bej (alias Vitcovich and Bekovitch [two purportedly Russian agents sent to Kabul by the Tsar]) – at the general belief of all intelligent men in this and the surrounding countries … – and at the confidential communications which pass between the Russian Mission and the Shah's officers regarding the conduct of his present operations, I cannot doubt that a concert exists between the Persian & Russian Governments in regard to their proceedings in Afghanistan; and that the object of both is hostile to England would have appeared probable even if that probability had not been much strengthened by the information regarding the views of Russia which is contained in the letter of Hajee Ibrahim Khan [to Dost Mohammed Khan of Cabool.

In the meantime, the siege of Herat had not gone well. Well defended with the help of the Political Officer Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger, the northern Afghan city had held out for months. The Shah's commitment was wavering when the arrival of a Royal Navy squadron off the southern coast of Persia, as requested by McNeill, sealed the deal. The Shah withdrew, and with him the imminent, if illusory, threat of a tripartite alliance between Afghanistan, Russia and Persia. For Auckland, though, who appears to have at least partially lost his nerve in the Indian climate, the notion of an imminent threat to British security stuck.

The third option for the strategic defence of India, and one that became gradually more pressing with the failure of the Persian alliance in 1828, was the creation of a buffer state in Afghanistan. Alexander Burnes had been sent to Kabul in the 1830s to identify possible commercial opportunities. Whilst there he set about

establishing a large, if sparsely populated, network of Political Officers. Personable and approachable, Burnes quickly struck up a friendship with Dost Mohammed Khan. The latter looked to Britain as a means of retrieving Peshawar from the Sikhs. Burnes's mission to Kabul had brought him into direct opposition to Wade. Faced with the unruly Sikhs though, Wade initially supported an alliance with Dost Mohammed in order to curb Sikh power. For Wade, this appeared the lesser of two evils, the other possibility being a full-blown war between the Sikhs and the Afghans in which Britain would inevitably become involved. The acting Governor-General in 1835, Charles Metcalfe, though, dismissed the suggestion of an alliance. Ignored by the British, Dost Mohammed turned to Russia for support, the result of which in 1837 was the arrival of Vitcovich and Bekovitch. The presence of Russian emissaries in Kabul should not have been calamitous, but to Auckland, this appeared to be confirmation that the Russians did indeed have designs on Afghanistan. Seeing an opportunity to undermine Brunes, Wade now trumpeted the benefits of the Sikh alliance.

Dost Mohammed, meanwhile, used the Russians as leverage, attempting to persuade the British to support him in his hopes of regaining Peshawar. Enter Sir William Hay MacNagthen, future envoy and minister to the court of Shah Shuja al-Mulk. Inevitably perhaps, MacNaghten, who was then Auckland's secretary, failed to recognise the game of brinkmanship that Dost Mohammed was playing and took any sign that the latter might consider abandoning Britain for Russia as a gross act of betrayal:

> If he should … seek to retain the [Russian] agent, and to enter into any description of political intercourse with him, you will give him distinctly to understand, that your mission will retire; that our good offices with the Sikhs will wholly cease, and that, indeed, the act will be considered a direct breach of friendship with the British Government. It has been before, at different times stated to you, that the continuance of our good offices must be entirely dependent on the relinquishment by the Ameer of alliances with any power to the westward.

To be fair on the Afghans, their position was not aided by Burnes, whose overeager approach to his new position, had given cause for considerable hope to

Dost Mohammed that the British would be instrumental in restoring Peshawar to Afghan control. Unfortunately, Burnes had somehow managed to convince Dost Mohammed to lay claim to the city himself, rather than insisting merely that it was returned to its original ruler, Sultan Mohammed. Such a position would never be acceptable to Ranjeet Singh, who might have considered returning Peshawar to Sultan Mohammed. Not that he was ever given the choice, of course. Wade ensured that any diplomatic overtures between the Afghans and the Sikhs never reached the Maharajah. That the Afghan stance was one of bluff is proven by the climb-down the Afghan court later made to the British. Seeing that no positive diplomacy was to be used by the British to persuade the Sikhs to give up Peshawar, and against the advice of most of his advisors, Dost Mohammed sought to maintain his position of friendship with the British merely by seeking their good offices in persuading Ranjeet Singh to relinquish Peshawar. However, having alienated the Governor-General by his previous attitude (largely sponsored by Burnes), even this modest request was ignored. Burnes's mission was therefore forced to retire.

In hindsight, despite his poor diplomatic judgement, Burnes's position was clearly the most plausible. Even before Burnes's mission to Kabul, Dost Mohammed had sought help from the Russians and the Persians. If the British wanted to prevent the extension of Russian influence to the India frontier, then they had to reach an accommodation with Kabul. True, this would have been much easier had Burnes not over-egged the pudding when he arrived in Kabul. He anticipated that Russia was interested in extending her influence into Central Asia, although he mis-appreciated the reasons for this interest. To Burnes, Russia independently sought influence in Afghanistan, despite the clear evidence that her involvement was as a result of specific requests for aid received from Kabul and Kandahar. Had he maintained Britain's position of 1836, and offered to continue to negotiate with the Sikhs on the Peshawar issue, then he might have maintained a status quo, but he increased the stakes with little reason to do so, and thus increased Dost Mohammed's perception of what he could expect. Burnes's failure was not one of strategic judgement, but of cultural judgement. As the man best informed of Afghan culture, he should have known better how to negotiate. Expectation management was what was required, but Burnes managed Dost Mohammed the wrong way, increasing rather than decreasing his expectations. In other respects, though, Burnes was also correct. He was the only Briton to question the value of the Sikh alliance. This alliance was at best temporary.

The elderly Maharajah could not be expected to last much longer (he died in 1839). No one in his immediate line of succession was friendly to Britain. Sikh aggression in Scinde had only been tolerated because it achieved wider British Indian strategic objectives. Much more aggression would inevitably result in conflict. In this event, British India's frontier buffer would be lost. Its pre-emptive replacement with a united Afghanistan was the only way to maintain the buffer policy.

In the end, the fact that no accommodation was reached was entirely down to a failure of intelligence. Not of intelligence collection, though: open-source (that is to say not even secret) information was available, plain as day, on the various stances of the Sikhs and Afghans, not to mention the Russians. For one reason or another, the correct interpretation of this information would have jeopardised the positions of those providing it: in this instance, Claude Wade. Wade's failure to present accurate intelligence to Auckland and MacNaughten was designed to maintain the capacity of the Panjab as the key buffer frontier of British India. It was also designed to maintain Afghanistan as a divided power. According to Wade, Dost Mohammed was the aggressor in the Afghan-Sikh dispute, and had to be resisted. To give Peshawar up to the Afghans would effectively reward bellicosity, and send completely the wrong message to all of Britain's less friendly neighbours. An accurate picture would have presented Kabul under Dost Mohammed as the new focal point of power in Central Asia. What Auckland should have realised was that if Britain was not Dost Mohammed's key ally, then Russia would be. Auckland was kept almost completely in the dark as to the true situation.

Ironically for Wade, his machinations, designed to preserve the ascendancy of the Sikhs and keep Afghanistan divided, would ultimately lead to the failure of his plotting. The failure of his mission to Kabul mortified Burnes, and it appears he now reluctantly agreed with the prevailing view in Ludhiana, Bombay and Calcutta that Dost Mohammed should be considered an enemy. It is unclear what persuaded Burnes to abandon his support of Dost Mohammed. Perhaps it was the embarrassing failure Burnes had just sustained in Kabul. Perhaps it was the dawning realisation that continued support of Dost Mohammed in the face of a prevailing view which saw him as an enemy, would do his career no good. Perhaps it was the intelligence being received from Kabul that indicated Dost Mohammed was now in active negotiations with the Russians, and was becoming more and more hostile toward Britain. This

intelligence is itself highly dubious, and one must look again to cultural cognitive dissonance to explain it.

Upon Burnes's departure from Kabul, Claude Wade set about establishing a new source of intelligence in the Afghan capital. The new source, Gholan Khan, was an active ally and supporter of the deposed ruler Shah Shuja, who was now with Wade in Ludiana, negotiating with the British and the Sikhs about a new invasion of Afghanistan. Gholan Khan reported regularly to Wade his findings, which are highly questionable:

> Whatever measures you mean to take against Cabool, be quick, otherwise, if [Dost Mohammed's] agents return from Mahomed Shah [of Persia], who will promise him much, it will not be good, everything will be favourable to you if Shah Shuja's name is with you… To the [Count Simonich] the Amir wrote that he was very much flattered by the contents of the letters which Vitcovitch brought from the Emperor, and himself, and he had therefore dismissed Mr Burnes and hoped for the protection of Russia… He has likewise written to him to explain to the English [specifically McNeill] that the Afghans are now the friends of Russia, and the English should not cause any disturbance on his Eastern Frontiers, and that Peshawar must be restored to Cabool.

These demands did not match the intelligence later in the same letter, that Dost Mohammed feared an imminent invasion, after news that Ranjit Singh, Shah Shuja and the British were negotiating at Ludhiana. Dost Mohammed apparently immediately requested Russian protection. Taken at face value, this intelligence is an apparent startling justification of British suspicions of Afghanistan's nominal leader. A deeper analysis would identify Gholan Khan as highly unreliable, and possibly specifically chosen by Wade because he would supply intelligence that unquestionably supported a policy which Wade himself had staked his career formulating.

In any event, Burnes apparently now wholeheartedly supported the British policy of intervention in Afghanistan:

> It is clear that the British Govt cannot, with any credit or justice to itself permit the present state of things in Cabul to continue. The counteraction applied, however, must have extent beyond Dost Mohammed Khan, and to both

> Persia and Russia… If it is the object of govt to destroy the power of the present chief of Cabul, it may be affected by the agency … of Soojah ool Moolk, but to ensure complete success to the plan, the British Govt must appear directly in it, and not leave it to the Sikhs themselves.

Auckland, then, was presented with a fait acompli. Even if he had not been paranoid in the extreme about Russian intentions, the fact that three of his key Political Officers had reached the conclusion that Dost Mohammed was hostile to British interests, was tacitly, if not overtly supported by the Russians, and had incurred the support of the Persians, would have persuaded him to view Afghanistan with suspicion. Increasingly, the beleaguered Governor-General became convinced that military action alone could sole the problem of Afghanistan. This notion was only bolstered by two snippets of intelligence from India itself. First came news that a massive alliance of India's other neighbours against British interests was in the offing:

> Maharaja Ranjeet Singh observed in court … that it was reported by his newswriter at Delhi that the King of the Burmese had lately spent three lacks [one lack = 1000,000] of rupees in the purchase of arms for his troops. His highness added if the Emperor of China & the Raja of Nepal & the Burmese make a common cause with the Russians against the English it will cause a commotion on the earth as great as will happen at the day of resurrection "or the last day of judgement". All who were present attested to the truth of the observation.

Although there was trouble with China over Opium, the notion that China, Burma, Nepal and the Sikhs should ally with the Russians is patently absurd. There was no corroboration to the information, yet Auckland took it at face value. Much more accurate was the news that the inhabitants of Mysore and other dependencies were growing restless:

> The siege of Herat has much occupied the minds of the public of India and speculations upon the progress of the King of Iran have been life to the newswriter in every event, and our shrewdest and earnest observers: Skinner, Culbon and Sutherland in Hansi, Mysore and Swalior, have concurred in

> describing the fever of restlessness as beyond anything which for many years they had witnessed. From the military strength of the Persians there has been actually nothing to fear, but religion and circumstances and historical association and the character of ignition and magnificism which is attached to the Russian name have been at work on men's minds and it might be a fatal mistake if the Persians and Russians were allowed to plant their standard or fix their influence.

Once again, the freedom given to Residents to collect and interpret their intelligence means one must question the authenticity of these reports. Fighting for resources, these residents, who had posts in regions which were no longer the important frontiers of the British Empire, had to make an adequate case for the allocation of more materiel and men. Reports of uprisings were not uncommon. Generally they were contained to a few discontents. That there were uprisings in 1838 and 1839 is not uncommon. That they were used as evidence by Auckland to support his invasion of Afghanistan is uncommon. This can be compared with earlier correspondence, written after his arrival in India. Then Auckland considered the various disorders that broke out around the country to be '…not more than must be incidental to an empire so extensive and so governed as this'. Some commentators have been moved to suggest that the Indian climate has adverse effects on the minds of otherwise sensible men. Whatever the truth of this, something unbalanced Auckland. He now became convinced military action was necessary. Some demonstration that Britain was in control of the situation, and not materially threatened by imminent Russian invasion would be needed to re-establish the moral authority that controlled the indigenous population of India.

Clearly cognitive dissonance played an enormous role in leading British policy-makers in the wrong direction. Auckland is not blameless, but the majority of the blame must, in my opinion, rest with the Political Officers, whose innate careerism meant they skewed the information they had at their disposal. The reasons for what amounts to cultural cognitive dissonance link back to the entire British approach to intelligence in the nineteenth century. This rather lengthy introduction to the Political Officers, which has also served to contextualise the invasion of Afghanistan, has been necessary to highlight the true nature of the British Political Officer. Self-interested and self-absorbed, they were certainly no heroes, and acted with panache and

sophistication entirely for their own gain. But once the invasion was complete, and the decision was taken to remain in Afghanistan in support of Shah Shuja, success for the Political Officers became dependent on success in the occupation. The interests of these men, and the interests of the country they served were now aligned, and the men who had been deployed by Burnes in the 1830s now set about doing what they did best: intelligence collection.

The intelligence they collected was not called political, social or cultural intelligence. That is simply what we might refer to it as today. Indeed, it probably wasn't even called intelligence: the information contained in the Political Officer correspondence is pure knowledge about the Afghan people. From anecdotes about tribal customs and inclinations to detailed demographics, the information in those letters amounted to a very considerable understanding of Afghan culture and society. One would be forgiven for thinking that culture was the silver bullet in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The word is mentioned 92 times in the American Counterinsurgency manual, FM3-24, and whilst the word is mentioned only 48 times in the new British Stabilisation doctrine, there is an entire chapter designed to explain 'through a cultural lens' how to understand how the enemy thinks. But the use of culture, or more specifically, understanding the motivations and beliefs of an enemy which are the inherent in his cultural and social origins, is nothing new. It was not new in 2006, and it was not new in 1839. Political Officers used culture – in modern parlance, demographic mapping, human terrain analysis – as a reflex action. When there is no enemy army, but there is still fighting, it makes sense to find out all that can be found out about the local population. And that is what Political, Social and Cultural Intelligence was (and is) in the context of this paper. This information provided Political Officers with knowledge about the political inclinations of the local population, the societal functions that sometimes predetermined why and how they acted, and the cultural traditions which embodied what it meant to be a mmber of the Ghilzai tribe, or a Barrackzai, or a Durrani, or one of the many, almost innumerable, tribes which exist in Afghanistan. This information helped Political Officers identify the motivations for violent disturbances and allowed them to react with means other than violence.

The first disturbance of interest to us occurred on Afghanistan's northern frontier, between the city of Bamian and the river Oxus. Two particular tribes dominated the region: the Hazarras led by Mir Murad Beg at Qunduz, and the

Uzbeks led by Mir Mohammed Beg, known as Mir Wali at Khulm. Until 1838, Murad Beg exerted authority over the region, controlling customs duties and depriving Dost Mohammed of an important source of revenue. In the autumn of 1838, Dost Mohammed led an expedition to gain control of the region. Mir Wali assisted in this campaign, and as a reward gained virtual autonomy himself. Khulm became the regional centre of power between the Hindu Khush and the Oxus.

In the 1830s, Dr Percival Lord (1808-1840) accompanied Burnes's mission to Kabul as surgeon. Although young, Lord had acquired a reputation in the medical establishment that had penetrated as far as Qunduz. In November 1837, Murad Beg requested the attendance of Lord at his court, to treat his brother for blindness. Despite being unable to cure Murad Beg's brother, Lord nevertheless struck up a friendship with the Amir, and was consequently appointed Political Officer to Qunduz. Upon Dost Mohammed's campaign in the region, Lord took up residence in Bamian, but when Burnes withdrew, Lord was appointed by MacNaghten to oversee the arming of Shah Shuja's force in Peshawar. Upon completion of the invasion, Lord returned to Bamian.

Following the fall of Kabul, Dost Mohammed fled north with his family, stopping at Khulm, before moving on to Bokhara. He left his family in Khulm. As Political Officer in Bamian, Lord was tasked with capturing Dost Mohammed and his family, and duly began negotiations with Murad Beg at Qunduz, whilst at the same time posturing with the intent to create the impression of imminent military annexation. It is fairly clear the MacNaghten intended ultimately to annex the region, as even after Mir Wali surrendered Dost Mohammed's family, the British continued military preparations. Then, in early August 1840, a delegation sent to Kabul by Mir Wali concluded an agreement with the British which guaranteed the independence of Khulm in return for the stationing of a small garrison of Afghan troops there. Almost without pausing for breath, and probably without knowing the finer details of the agreement, if not of its existence, Mir Wali seemingly allied himself with Dost Mohammed and two launched an attack against the British advanced outpost at Bajgah. Forced to retreat, the British, reinforced from Kabul, were nevertheless able to defeat the slowly advancing rebel force on 17 September outside Bamian.

To MacNagthen, Mir Wali's attack looked like the roots of a religious conspiracy against British authority, inspired by Dost Mohammed and funded by Mir Wali. Indeed, various claims seem to suggest Mir Wali had declared a jihad in an

effort to unite the Uzbeks against Shah Shuja and the British. Yapp dismisses this argument. The advance was slow and seemed badly planned, hardly what one might expect from a jihad, whilst the defeat of Mir Wali's and Dost Mohammed's forces so quickly also reflects a certain lack of commitment, which is not indicative of a coordinated jihad. Nevertheless, such an overt defiance of Britain's military supremacy could only be met with a severe retribution, or so MacNaghten would have liked. Instead, Lord reached an agreement with Mir Wali in which the latter agreed to support Shah Shuja in return for virtual independence. Mir Wali and Murad Beg had previously fought over the control of two vallies, Kamard and Saighan, which enabled the collection of duties and taxes. Mir Wali was granted control of Kamard, and, if he behaved responsibly, he would also regain control of Saighan. Mir Wali became an avowed supporter of Shah Shuja, and the British received no further trouble from him for the remainder of his occupation.

Why did Lord treat Mir Wali so generously? In my view, the reasons stem from Lord's understanding of Mir Wali's reasons for joining Dost Mohammed's campaign, combined with knowledge of what the local population preferred. Mir Wali was essentially disaffected by the British at Bamian: not because of their presence there, but because they had opened negotiations with Morad Beg, and also appeared to give undue levels of respect towards two minor chieftains, Mir Baba Beg and Mir Sufi Beg. Combined with this, the military posturing which MacNaghten and Lord instigated required some sort of response. Hardly surprising then that Mir Wali began assembling a force which was designed merely as a raiding party, as a counterpoint to British aggression. Then Dost Mohammed arrived. Mir Wali remained obliged to Dost Mohammed for his condescension in 1838, when Mir Wali replaced Morad Beg as the leading Amir in the region. Dost Mohammed promised Mir Wali a political role in Kabul, and the ascension of the Uzbek cause in Afghan politics. Essentially Dost Mohammed coincidentally offered everything that the British were threatening to remove.

The attack in August came before Mir Wali learned of the success of the negotiations in Kabul, and in any event had reason to doubt the seriousness of the British offer. The success of the attack on Bajgah appeared to demonstrate British military inferiority, and further promises from Dost Mohammed persuaded Mir Wali to continue the attack. Advancing slowly to stir up the local population, Mir Wali was nevertheless doubtful of success, and had already begun communicating with Lord.

On 10 August, Lord had written to MacNaghten outlining the agreement that was to become reality six weeks later. It appears Mir Wali continued in the attack as a means of remaining on the fence. He had not declared for one side or the other, and was merely seeing which way the wind was blowing. Lord recognised this, and following Dost Mohammed's defeat on 17 September, Mir Wali agreed to meet personally with Lord to negotiate a settlement.

Lord recognised that Mir Wali's motivations were neither religious nor out of loyalty to Dost Mohammed, but arose out of basic political disenfranchisement. This probably would not have mattered as much if Lord was not aware also that the majority of the population supported Mir Wali, and disaffection had been growing against the restoration of Murad Beg's authority following the initial British invasion. Indeed, as early as the end of August 1839, a full year before the rising in and around Khulm, Lord was writing to MacNaghten that the local population was growing increasingly discontented at the brutal rule of Murad Beg. Indeed, there had been a series of raids on Murad's supplies, which had caused severe retributions to be exacted on the populace. Lord realised that by siding with Murad Beg against Mir Wali he would be going against overwhelming popular support for the latter. He therefore made a judgement, based on information brought to him, not of military plans, but of the political, social and cultural inclinations of the population in the region. It was an act that was mirrored elsewhere in Afghanistan in the months that followed.

In Kandahar, for example, using political and cultural intelligence, the Political Officer in charge, Robert Leech (d. 1845), identified the cause of discontent in a Ghilzai rebellion. In this instance, Leech realised that the deposition of a Ghilzai chief, Gul Mohammed, and his replacement by a Saddozai was probably unacceptable to the population at large. Gul Mohammed fled across the border into what is now the North West Frontier Provinces and began plotting his return. Combined with discontent at perceived injustice in the collection of taxes, Gul Mohammed was able to stir a rebellion in and around Kandahar. Leech recognised the reason for discontent, but unable to resolve the issue politically owing to the refusal of Shah Shuja to countenance Ghilzai authority near Kandahar, there was no option but to send in the redcoats. The military successfully put down the rebellion, but not without permanently alienating the population. Leech himself, who complained bitterly to MacNaghten, was blamed for the failure and removed from the

post, being replaced by Sir Henry Rawlinson. Political, social and cultural intelligence had provided the solution, but the non-violent solution was politically unacceptable.

After his abortive attempt to raise a rebellion against British rule based in the north of the country, Dost Mohammed was forced to seek support from the chiefs of the Kohistan, a mountainous region north of Kabul. The former ruler and the chiefs of the Kohistan were unnatural allies: Dost Mohammed had himself executed many of the chiefs when he was in power, and the latter had enthusiastically supported Shah Shuja. But once again, the oppressive Shuja regime was alienating the populace in the Kohistan. Old taxes were enforced whilst new ones were created. An attempt to arrest the chiefs in Kabul failed, sparking a rebellion which saw the roads to and from Kabul plundered and cut off, whilst a correspondence began between the chiefs and Dost Mohammed. In response, MacNaghten sent a strong force under the command of 'Fighting Bob' Sale, accompanied by Sir Alexander Burnes, to quell the disturbances and restore tranquillity. The events of the next few months are worth noting because they represent the failure of Burnes to bring a peaceful resolution to the crisis despite the ample provision of information indicating how to do so. The failure represents the beginning of the wider British failure to understand the importance of political, social and cultural intelligence in the occupation of Afghanistan, and also represents a wider failure of intelligence analysis among the political hierarchy in Afghanistan.

Immediately following his arrival in Charikar, the capital of the Kohistan, negotiations were opened with the chiefs. Burnes believed that the chiefs were merely playing for time, and suggested Sale attack the fort of one of the believed ringleaders. In contrast, Mohan Lal, Burnes's native agent-secretary, later reported that one of Shah Shuja's representatives, who had accompanied Sale and Burnes, had had some success in identifying the concerns and grievances of the Kohistan chiefs and had managed to persuade two of them to rejoin Shah Shuja. In his final dispatch on the campaign, Burnes attributed the submission of the two chiefs to his campaign of violence. 'On the 4th of October', Burnes wrote, 'the force moved across the plain on which stand the ruins of the ancient city of Begram and took up a commanding position in the centre of the valley. The effect of this movement was in the highest degree satisfactory as it brought about the submission of the three principal chiefs of Lesser Kohistan'. In reality, the main motivation was neither religion nor loyalty to Dost Mohammed, which even the briefest of historical investigations would have revealed to be patently absurd, but rather political and economic disenfranchisement.

These chiefs did not commit to Shah Shuja out of fear, but because their relatively limited demands had been met. Burnes was either unaware of, or chose to ignore, this information, and continued with a series of sieges which alienated the chiefs and culminated in the Battle of Parwan Darra on 2 November 1840.

The battle successfully dispersed the combined forces of the Kohistan chiefs and of Dost Mohammed. A few days later Dost Mohammed surrendered to the Burnes. Yapp contends that the deposed ruler had decided to surrender even before the battle of Parwan Darra. The evidence certainly suggests this is the case, whilst the fact also seems to prove that the alliance between the Kohistan chiefs and Dost Mohammed, which the British feared so much, was never a realistic prospect. It is difficult to judge precisely what Burnes knew, as his post-battle despatch is an extremely well scripted piece of prose. In any event, his perspective was skewed by the information MacNaghten provided him with before he left Kabul, details of which I will explore in a few moments.

In the long-term of course, the off-colour treatment of the Kohistan tribes played badly for the British. This, like Kandahar, was another example of immediate victory, but long-term alienation. The relief and euphoria of finally capturing Dost Mohammed clouded any rational judgement. The British, though, had lost some useful Political Officers. Percival Lord was killed at Parwan Darra, as was Edward Connelly, brother of Arthur. With the removal of Leech, the scope for accurate interpretation of political, social and cultural intelligence was receding. It is difficult to account for Burnes's behaviour. Probably the individual with the most understanding of Afghan culture in the British occupation force, the reasons for his ignorance of the easily resolvable grievances of the Kohistan population are inexplicable. Perhaps he was intoxicated by his own success. Certainly his behaviour later in 1841, which probably resulted in his lynching in Kabul on the night of 2 November 1841, seems to indicate that he was so convinced of his own abilities that he refused to countenance the opinions of others, or the notion that his solution might not be the best one available.

News that Dost Mohammed had been captured was greeted with relief in Kabul. William MacNaghten in particular was euphoric. Not only had the deposed ruler been captured, but a major conspiracy against British authority, involving the Uzbeks, the Hazarras, the Ghilzai's, the Barrackzai's and the Kohistan chiefs, had been unearthed and halted, all with relative ease. Surprising as this may sound,

MacNaghten truly believed he had foiled a major revolt. This, I argue, is the ultimate root of the British failure in the first occupation of Afghanistan. MacNaghten combined the very worst elements of the Political Officers (ambition, self-interest, arrogance and intolerance), with the very worst elements of the administrators Britain sent to govern India (ignorance, stupidity, stubbornness, and an immoveable belief in his own abilities). Unlike Burnes, he had not experience in Afghanistan until his arrival in 1839, but he nevertheless brought with him a plethora of opinions, beliefs and notions about how the country should and would be run. Opinion that differed to his own was often ignored, whilst serial offenders in this regard were likely removed from their posts. It was in this mind, then, that the stubborn belief that a major conspiracy against British interests was borne.

First among MacNaghten's erroneous assumptions was the belief that the various rebellions described in this paper had a religious character. The concept of a jihad seemingly frightened MacNaghten senseless, and in his belief the only way of dealing with a jihad was rapid and violent retribution, presumably to deter the population from supporting the rebellion. Oddly enough, the only rebellion where Jihad was even mentioned was the Uzbek disturbance, and that is the one with the most satisfactory outcome. Yet MacNaghten was quick to label the Ghilzai rebellion in Kandahar, and the violence in the Kohistan as jihads. In his mind they were part of the same conspiracy. In the case of the Uzbek rebellion and the Kohistan disturbances, there was evidence to suggest Dost Mohammed's involvement, but this was coincidental. It is possible that without the judicious intervention of Lord in the former, and the violent destruction of Dost Mohammed's forces in the latter, then a general conspiracy might have coalesced around the deposed ruler. But Lord prevented Dost Mohammed from gaining any support in Khulm, and Burnes saw to it that any support was destroyed in the Kohistan. Undoubtedly the former solution – political rather than military – had a longer-lasting effect, but the truth of the matter cannot be denied: there was no jihad, there was not conspiracy, and the success which the British achieved in 1840 was much more limited that MacNaghten chose to believe.

It is my belief that MacNaghten manifested the same cognitive dissonance that had drawn Britain into the conflict in the first place. He relied on poor intelligence that supported his views, and ignored the advice of others more experienced than he in Afghan affairs, simply because it did not support his preconceived ideas. An

example of the poor nature of the intelligence MacNaghten relied upon can be seen in the evidence he uses to send Burnes and Sale to the Kohistan. On 22 August 1840, MacNaghten wrote to the Governor-General outlining an 'intelligence operation' he had been engaged in recently. An intercepted letter received on the 15th, had alluded to an illicit correspondence between some Kohistan chiefs and Dost Mohammed Khan. In order to prove the authenticity of the letter, and to prove beyond doubt the guilt of those implicated in it's contents, MacNaghten had drafted a fake letter from Dost Mohammed to one of the chiefs. On the 21st, MacNaghten received a reply from the said chief, one Agha Hussein. Displaying an acute ignorance of Afghan culture, and at the same time of the principles of accurate intelligence collection, MacNaghten jumped to the conclusion that this indicated a general conspiracy. 'We are surrounded by spies' he wrote frantically, whilst also pointing out that Agha Hussein had implicated several other chiefs, as well as 'persons of influence in the city'. No more was evidence was needed. It is possible to speculate that MacNaghten used this evidence in justification to Burnes before sending him on the mission to the Kohistan.

Burnes was furious. In a lengthy dispatch, some 60 pages in length, he outlined the reasons he believed the British were suffering in Afghanistan. And those reasons all started with MacNaghten. His primary solution was a massive expansion of the Political Officer network. Only by increasing the numbers of individuals with the experience and intelligence to integrate with the local population could threats like the one MacNaghten said he had exposed be identified sooner in the future. Burnes was not the only one. Lord, Leech and later on Rawlinson all came to the same conclusion, although Lord and Leech thought an expansion of the number of Political Officers would serve to increase understanding and knowledge of the population and what it wanted. MacNaghten categorically refused. More Political Officers would, he said, create the impression amongst the general population that Britain was occupying Afghanistan rather than supporting Shah Shuja. This conclusion is obviously contradictory. Quite what impression he thought was created by columns of redcoats massacring villages is unknown.

In the event, the capacity of the Political Officers was drawn down. Lord was never replaced, for example. Rawlinson proved excellent in Kandahar, but was the exception rather than the rule. Intelligence gathering of all descriptions remained comparatively poor after Dost Mohammed's capture. Limited indications of Akhbar Khans conspiracy were unearthed, and in any event MacNaghten was not worried.

He remained convinced that Dost Mohammed had been at the centre of a widespread religiously-motivated conspiracy. That conspiracy had been unearthed by none other than himself, and had been subdued with relative ease. If that was all the threat a jihad posed, then he had no real concern about subduing another one. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, and the rather detailed information gathered by the Political Officers in Afghanistan, we know that Dost Mohammed tried and failed to organise a large-scale rebellion against British authority and against Shah Shuja. He failed because the Political Officers were able in some cases to identify the causes of discontent and resolve them. The implication is that the traditional perspective that Britain became embroiled in a war she could not win is not necessarily correct. The Afghan population was not inherently supportive of Dost Mohammed, and just as inherently opposed to Shah Shuja. Apparently what mattered more was political and economic enfranchisement. In her violent actions, Britain alienated the population, and it was not the invasion itself but subsequent behaviour which alienated he population and created the conditions necessary for a major and coordinated rebellion against British interests. For this, MacNaghten must take the blame, but it is also possible to argue that he was the product of a system that rewarded reckless ambition, and ignored less prestigious victories, like the one Lord achieved. MacNaghten was not the only member of the British establishment to suffer from cognitive dissonance. Despite his indifference to a major conspiracy, he did not want to hang around to be present when another one happened. He was eventually appointed Governor of Bombay, a post that he was sadly unable to take because of his untimely death at the hands of Akhbar Khan in a very real revolt against British authority in November 1841.