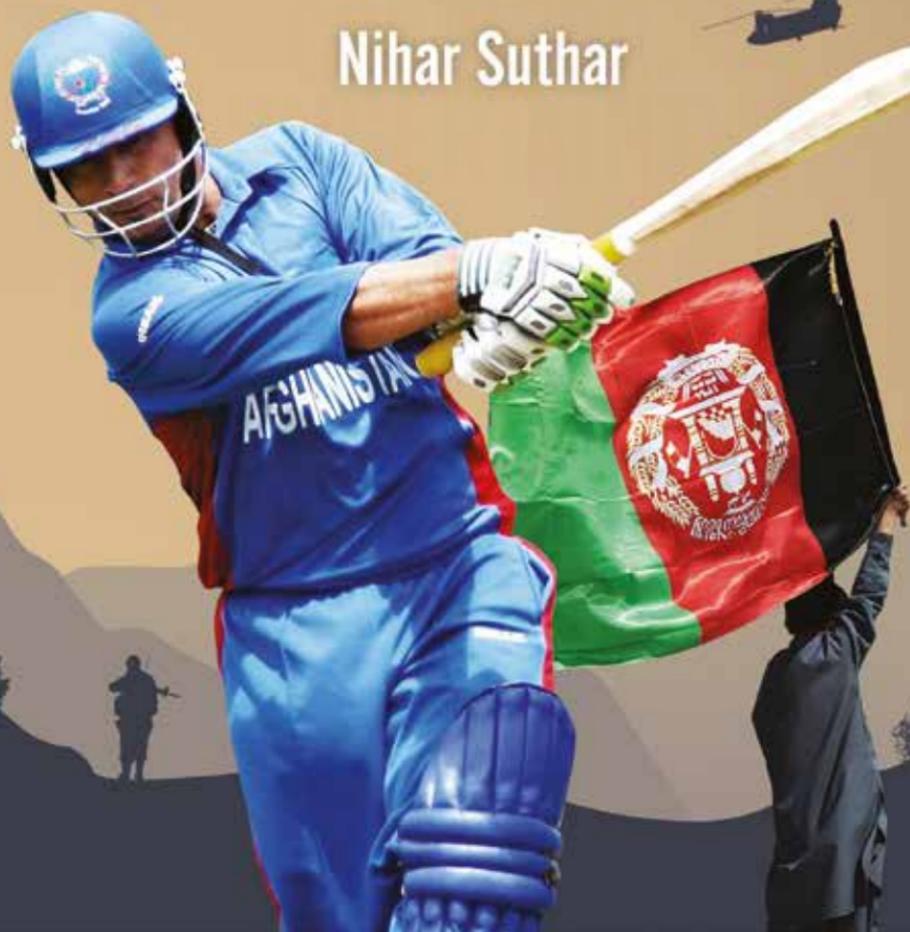


THE
CORRIDOR OF
UNCERTAINTY

How Cricket Mended
a Torn Nation

Nihar Suthar



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Destined for Violence

A DEAFENING gunshot echoed throughout the Tajbeg Palace. Afghan president Hafizullah Amin helplessly collapsed to the ground, gripping his chest. Sharp bursts of pain ran down his entire body. The realisation that he had been betrayed hit him like a freight train. He shuddered in disbelief. There was no use trying to call for help now. It was too late.

Three months earlier, in September of 1979, Amin had forced himself into presidential power. From the outside, he was a clean-groomed man, always sporting a sharp, black suit and a friendly look in his hazel eyes. On the inside, he was anything but clean. He led a fierce communist government, which rejected all forms of religion. Amin attempted to sweep away already existing Muslim traditions as well, by ordering the arrest of thousands of influential Islamic leaders.

His actions outraged almost every Afghan citizen. Islam is the official religion of Afghanistan. In an attempt to defend their faith, thousands of Afghans came together in a mission to overthrow Amin's government. They declared a jihad, or holy battle, on all supporters of Amin.

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The country soon after erupted into an intense civil war.

Afghanistan totally lost its identity among the warfare. To make matters even worse, in December of 1979, Russian troops arrived at the heart and capital city of Kabul. They offered 'friendship and protection' to Amin's regime from the numerous, rising jihadist rebels. Amin gratefully accepted Soviet Union assistance. He felt like he could trust the Russian soldiers. In reality, the troops were not even in Afghanistan to aid Amin. They secretly sensed an appealing opportunity for military takeover. The evil scheme was named Operation Storm-333.

Operation Storm-333 was set in motion on the morning of 27 December 1979 and would drastically change Afghanistan for years to come. Twenty-four Russian soldiers from the elite Alpha special forces group and 30 soldiers from the national KGB military group stealthily disguised themselves as local jihadist rebels. They wore chilling black masks. Their eyes burned through two narrow slits. The Alpha group was assigned to eliminate Amin, while the KGB group was tasked to collect any evidence proving that Amin was collaborating with the United States. Both groups were armed with state-of-the-art, automatic rifles.

Amin resided inside the Tajbeg Palace with his family. It was a massive stone building that sat on a hill, overlooking Kabul. The Alpha group and KGB group arrived in a battle convoy. As both groups were clamouring up the snowy hill to the palace, Amin's guards opened fire. Anybody who came close to the building was considered a serious threat. The Russian soldiers were equipped with advanced bulletproof vests. They stood in the middle of the gunfire and quickly took down the guards.

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Inside the palace, Amin became alarmed when he heard shooting. He was only half-dressed, as he shouted at his family to find a place to hide. He also barked to his private officer, 'Contact the Soviets! They will help us.'

'The Soviets are the ones who are attacking,' the officer grimly informed Amin.

Amin paced back and forth like a caged tiger, muttering, 'That has to be a lie.'

He picked up a phone from one of the dark, wooden desks and tried to contact the Russian chief of general staff. There was certainly some sort of misunderstanding. To Amin's horror, nobody answered. The line was dead. He threw the phone across the room, and sank to the ground in desperation.

'I guessed it. It's all true,' he cried. He buried his head in his hands and waited. The Russian soldiers by now had worked their way into the palace. They found Amin. He stood up to meet them.

A deafening gunshot echoed throughout the Tajbeg Palace. President Amin helplessly collapsed to the ground, gripping his chest. Sharp bursts of pain ran down his entire body. The realisation that he had been betrayed hit him like a freight train. He shuddered in disbelief. There was no use trying to call for help now. It was too late.

Amin, along with his family and 200 other personal guards, were killed that morning of 27 December. The 43-minute Tajbeg Palace raid sparked an extensive era of violence in Afghanistan. It also threw the country into a period of political instability. Power was abused. Wars would not stop.

The Soviet Union attempted to pin Amin's assassination on local jihad rebels. Unfortunately, efforts to

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conceal the truth were futile – everybody soon uncovered what had really happened. The Soviet Union further went on to appoint Babrak Karmal, a well-connected politician, as the new Afghan president. Karmal's puppet position depended completely on support from the Russian military.

Once Karmal was initiated into power, many Afghan national army soldiers left to join the jihadist rebel force. Most of them did not side with the strict communist government in the first place. They were enlisted in military service purely for pay-cheques, and the Soviet Union's deceitfulness had finally pushed them over the edge.

The jihad movement started spreading like a virus. Collectively, jihadist rebels became known as the mujahideen, or a guerrilla force on a holy mission. Karmal's government needed 85,000 Russian troops just to enforce laws and maintain power against the multiplying rebels.

In order to remain dominant over the mujahideen, Russian troops forced native Afghans to join their military. One such Afghan they attempted to pressure into service was Ajmal Khan. Khan was a peaceful nurse who worked at a local Kabul hospital. Like many other citizens, he opposed the communist government, and had no desire to fight with Russian soldiers. He refused to obey their commands. The troops threw Khan in jail for a night without any food or water, expecting him to change his mind about joining the next day. He did not waver. As punishment, the Russian fighters sentenced Khan's ailing father to six years in a low-grade prison. This was one of many drastic techniques the Soviet Union used to gain an advantage.

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Yet, the mujahideen managed to be a forbidding opponent. Members of the guerrilla force knew much more about Afghanistan's hilly terrain than the foreign Russian troops did. They hid far in the mountains, while the Russian soldiers cautiously stayed put in major cities. Heavy fighting took place in provinces close to the border with Pakistan. The mujahideen targeted government outposts and obvious Soviet Union bases there.

By 1982, the mujahideen shockingly took control of 75 per cent of the land from the second most powerful military in the world. The Soviet Union desperately needed to suppress the revolution. It employed three new strategies:

1. Intimidation – The Russian troops utilised air attacks and armoured ground attacks to annihilate villages, crops, and livestock. They did this in villages with known rebellion support, in hope of destroying resources and forcing rebels to flee the country. Innocent civilians almost always died in these attacks.
2. Subversion – The Russian troops sent spies to 'join' the mujahideen, and report back with any tactical plans they learned.
3. Limitation – The Russian troops cornered mujahideen groups into certain zones, hindering their abilities to fight back.

Russian fighters also employed KHAD – Khadamat-e Aetela'at-e Dawlati, or the Afghan Secret Police, to quietly gather intelligence, spread fake information, and cause fights amid local tribe militias. No one knows how successful KHAD actually was, but it did light up many

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internal arguments among mujahideen groups. This made some local militias ineffective, because they were quarrelling with each other rather than staying united together.

The mujahideen still never faded away. Thousands of faithful volunteers joined the force each day to offset large numbers of deaths. Influential countries like the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China backed the jihad campaign as well. By 1985, mujahideen factions operated from 4,000 different posts around Afghanistan. They executed sabotage mission after sabotage mission. The most common missions that they carried out were damaging power lines, destroying radio stations, and blowing up government offices and air terminals. Mujahideen groups combined together shot a stunning 800 rockets per day by the Pakistan border, where government buildings were located. Between 1985 and 1987 alone, they attacked government targets more than 23,500 times.

The violence slowly, but steadily became even more chaotic. Russian fighter jet pilots bombed every area under mujahideen control, killing and wounding thousands of bystanders in the process. An old man, named Akhtir Mohammad, to this day has not forgotten the struggle.

He recalls, 'I picked up the pieces of some children myself so we could put them in the ground. There were many other bodies, but it was too dangerous to dig their graves with the bombs. They were just lying there.'

Members of the mujahideen gave weapons to children and enrolled them in the war as a last resort. The conflict dragged on, demolishing bridges, shutting down major roads, disrupting industrial production, and rendering

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police stations inactive. Underground assassinations of government officials became normal. Afghanistan badly required a positive change.

The lowest point of the war came one day when a power failure flung Kabul into eerie darkness. Rebels had blown up power lines and plants connecting to the city. Later, they also proceeded to shoot down a domestic Bakhtar Airlines flight as it was taking off. All 52 people on board were killed. The Soviet Union at last decided that the war had gone too far. There were no longer any humane boundaries.

Midway through 1987, the Soviet Union announced intentions to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan. The end of the war seemed in sight. Karmal's government, KHAD, and the Afghan army were furious though, because they would be left to fight on their own against the commanding mujahideen. Russian soldiers made preparations for their exit from Afghanistan by limiting offensive attacks. This was a way to create resounding peace.

The Russian military finally departed in 1989. Over a span of ten years, 30,000 Russian troops had died, 53,753 had been injured, and another 415,932 had fallen sick. On the Afghan side, somewhere between 850,000 and 1.5 million faultless citizens had been slaughtered. Irrigation systems and agricultural crops in Afghanistan were demolished due to years of bombings. Before the war, Afghanistan was already considered to be amid the poorest countries in the world. After the battling and destruction, Afghanistan fell down to 170th out of 174 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. The Human Development Index measures standards of living and educational progress. War-weary

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Afghans displayed short life expectancies, poor standards of living, and hardly any access to education.

Even with the Soviet Union gone, Afghanistan remained divided internally. The mujahideen was by no means willing to negotiate with Karmal's communist government. Local factions continued planning attacks on major towns and cities. Through the 1990s, an additional 400,000 Afghan citizens lost their lives. Frail president Karmal fought to simply stay in power without Russian military backing. In the end, his efforts were to no avail.

A strong-armed, extremist mujahideen division, known as the Taliban, eventually seized presidential authority. After close to 13 years of domestic fighting and being challenged by the Soviet Union, Afghanistan seemed at rest – but only temporarily. In the wake of the struggle, the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, gained total rule of the thrashed country. It went on to provide Osama bin Laden with a training base and support to launch worldwide terrorist operations.

Perhaps the most devastating part of the lengthy war – worse than the political instability, deaths, or even planted seeds of the Taliban network – was its dramatic impact on children and the younger generation. Over 3.3 million Afghan civilians, mostly families with young kids, fled to neighbouring Pakistan to escape the harsh fighting. The children grew up in refugee camps, faced with violence on a daily basis. They had to learn how to survive to the best of their ability. Captain Tarlan Eyvazov, a Russian soldier during the time of the struggle in Afghanistan, pointed out that regardless of where the children grew up, their futures were destined for combat. He boldly concluded, 'Children born in Afghanistan at the start of

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the war have been brought up in war conditions. This is their way of life.'

The rise of the youthful Taliban proved that captain Eyvazov was partially correct with his theory. There was not a scarier influence in all of Afghanistan. The Taliban developed into a brutal, ruthless group of leaders, known everywhere for either beating or executing men and women that did not follow strict interpretations of Islamic law. However, Eyvazov and the rest of the planet would soon find out that the newest generation of Afghans stood for something greater than their 'predestined' violence. At the desolate refugee camp of Kacha Garhi in Pakistan, displaced Afghan children were beginning to lay the foundations of a bright future for the uncertainty, complications, and danger their home country faced. This is precisely where the heart-warming story of the Afghanistan corridor of uncertainty begins.