

# Understanding the Pashtuns<sup>♦</sup>

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Afghanistan, and especially the Pashtuns,<sup>1</sup> have been in the news internationally, at least since December 1979, when the Soviets invaded the country. From then on, the region has seen incessant warfare and violence: the Soviet invasion led to

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1 There has been a fair amount of confusion about the terms Pashtun, Pakhtun, Pathan and Afghan. The ambiguity stems from the fact that the Pashtuns have been commonly referred to interchangeably with Afghan due to the Persian usage of Abagon, Afghan or Affaghanah for the Pashtuns. During the British rule, a distinction was sought to be made between Afghan and Pathan: the Afghans were considered under Persian influence being part of the Safvid Empire of Persia and spoke Darri while the Pashtuns or Pathans had greater interaction with India and spoke Pashto. Further, tribes in the north of the region use the term Pakhtun while the southern tribes use the term Pashtun. Similarly, Pakhto is used to describe the language in the north and Pashto in the south. In this article, Pashtun and Pashto have been used throughout.

the *mujahideen* resistance and a nine-year-long war that ended with the exit of the Soviets in February 1989; a devastating civil war between the *mujahideen* who could not unite to govern the country and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. While the Taliban did establish the ‘peace of the graveyard’, 9/11 was to change all that. It led to the US invasion in 2001, the ouster of the Taliban, and the Taliban’s resurgence and eventual return to power in August 2021.

Over four decades of war have seriously impacted all ethnic groups in Afghanistan, none more so than the Pashtuns. This prolonged war has caused one of the largest displacements of people in recent times, with the main victims being the Pashtuns, whether they were refugees who sought shelter in Pakistan and Iran, or the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Pakistan as a result of various army operations.<sup>2</sup> The Pashtuns have also suffered the most in the globalization of *jihad* because of the structural changes that Pashtun society underwent on both sides of the Durand Line. The traditional Pashtun leadership was brushed aside, at times violently, and replaced with Afghan and Pakistani radical Islamists. Worse, those being killed were Pashtuns and those who were killing were also Pashtuns. Most of the *mujahideen* were Pashtuns; the Taliban are Pashtuns; the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is Pashtun; those whom they have killed in Afghanistan and in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA, now part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province) are Pashtuns; even Pashtun children have not been spared.<sup>3</sup> And the story is not yet over. The killings, the war, go on.

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2 Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtuns: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*, Hurst and Co., London, 2014.

3 Aurangzaib Khan, “Manzoor Pashteen: Leading the Fringe to the Centre”, *Herald*, February 19, 2019, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398800>.

All this makes it imperative to study the Pashtuns in some detail. An understanding of the key trends amongst the Pashtuns and their history, especially of *Pashtunwali* – the way of the Pashtun; and of two important forces – Pashtun nationalism and Pashtun extremism – and their potential combination, are critical for peace and stability in the region. Superficial understanding and prescription have had, and could continue to have, devastating consequences for the region. Violence, insecurity and instability in this ‘crossroads’ has radiated, and would continue to radiate, violence and insecurity in the whole region, leading to a renewed surge of refugees, an increase in drug trafficking, and the creation of ungoverned spaces in which global terrorists incubate.<sup>4</sup>

The land of the Pashtuns – Pashtunistan – spanning an area of more than 100,000 square miles, historically stretched from the Indus to the Hindu Kush. It had a common government from 1747 up to 1834, when the Sikh empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh annexed the part of it lying between the Indus and the Khyber. This part was inherited by the British and passed on to Pakistan. Today, the Pashtuns are divided by the British era 2,640-kilometre-long Durand Line, into Afghanistan, a country that started taking shape in 1747, and Pakistan, a country created two centuries later, in 1947. As a result, the Pashtuns, perhaps despite being the largest Muslim tribal population in the world, are without a state of their own.

Though divided between two countries and having developed differently, the Pashtuns share a common ideology of descent, a common religion, common ethnic, cultural, linguistic and familial bonds, common historical memories

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4 Dr. Sima Samar in conversation with Sally Armstrong, ‘How to end the endless war in Afghanistan’, April 29, 2021, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/how-to-end-the-endless-war-in-afghanistan/>.

and a common code – *Pashtunwali* – the way of the Pashtun. These unifying bonds makes it possible to see them as a single entity, inhabiting a single piece of real estate, distinct from their neighbours. Moreover, the present division of the Pashtuns is just one of the several *avatars* that this land has been subjected to over the centuries. Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line being one nation is best expressed by the Pashto phrase: *Lar O Bar, Yaw Afghan*, i.e., the Afghans in the low (as in lowlands of Pakistan) and high (as in highlands of Afghanistan), are one. This is one of the key slogans of the Pashtun Tahaffuz (Defence) Movement.

There are about thirty-one million Pashtuns in Pakistan, making up about sixteen per cent of the population, the third-largest ethnic group after the Punjabis and Sindhis. There are another fifteen million in Afghanistan, where they are forty per cent of the population and the largest ethnic group, though not the majority. The city of Karachi is home to the largest Pashtun population in the world – superseding Pashtun cities such as Peshawar, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar.<sup>5</sup>

### WHO ARE THE PASHTUNS?

There is no unanimity amongst scholars about the origins of the Pashtuns or when they came to settle in Pashtunistan. The various hypotheses about their origins vary from Semitic origins – being one of the lost tribes of Israel – to an Indo-Aryan inception.<sup>6</sup>

While scholars continue to debate the issue of Pashtun origins, there have been many attempts to codify the Pashtun genealogies, the most famous being the *Makhzan-i-Afghani* (History of the Afghans) compiled in India by Ni'matullah

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5 Iftikhar H. Malik, *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics in Southwest Asia*, Anthem Press, London, 2016, p. 3.

6 Ibid, p. 25.

al-Harawi, after being commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Jehangir in 1613.<sup>7</sup>

According to the chronicles, the Pashtuns themselves claim descent from a common ancestor – Qays bin Rashid or Qays Abdul Rashid who went to Madina in 622 CE, met the Prophet and was converted to Islam by him. On his return to Ghor, Qays is supposed to have successfully propagated the new faith.<sup>8</sup>

Qays had four sons – three biological and one adopted – who are, today, accepted as the founders of the major tribes in the Pashtun lineage. From all these sons and grandsons of Qays Abdul Rashid sprang the hundreds of tribes, sub-tribes and local lineages of the Pashtuns.<sup>9</sup>

This narrative is an article of faith amongst the Pashtuns, who determine the start of their lineage with the conversion to Islam, ignoring their whole history before Qays. They believe in the purity of the descent of their religion, believing that they ‘have no infidel past, nor do they carry in their history the blemish of defeat and forcible conversion’ – almost like a ‘chosen people’.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Hindushahi kingdom of Kabul, the Buddhist Kingdom of Bamiyan and the Zorashtrian influence in Ghazni, are all buried and forgotten.

Despite this Pashtun belief, the reality is different. Historically, scholars agree that Islam initially came to Afghanistan through the conquests of Arab generals in the service of the Rashidun Caliphs (reigned 632–61 CE) and the

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7 Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: A History of Religious Mobilisation in the Pakhtun Tribal Areas, c. 1890–1950*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2011, p. 29.

8 Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans. 550 BC – AD 1957*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1958, p. 9.

9 Frederik Barth, *Features of Person and Society in Swat: Collected Essays on Pathans*, Routledge & Kegan, London, 1981, p. 60.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Umayyad dynasty (reigned 661–750 CE), based in Damascus. While Balkh gradually became an important Islamic centre, the nature of Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain was such that it took another two to three centuries for Islam to spread to other regions. Buddhist rulers in Bamiyan and Hindu Shahi rulers in Kabul remained holdouts against Islam for many centuries.<sup>11</sup>

### TRIBAL CHARACTERISTICS

*The Pathans are rain-sown wheat—they all came up  
on the same day—they are all the same.*<sup>12</sup>

Two unique characteristics distinguish the Pashtuns. First, they are regarded as perhaps the most highly segmentary ethnic group in the world. Each of the approximately 350 tribes are composed of a large number of *khels* or clans who, in turn, are divided into extended family groups called *kahols*. These *kahols* are made up of a number of nuclear families, or *koranays*.<sup>13</sup> The names of Pashtun tribes end with suffixes that link the tribe to its progenitor, such as ‘*i*’ (of), ‘*zai*’ (sons of) and ‘*khel*’ (clan of).<sup>14</sup> A tribal unit is traditionally defined by territory and usually lives in an area named after the tribe itself.<sup>15</sup> According to Afghan scholar M. Jamil Hanifi:

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11 Nile Green, “Introduction, Afghanistan’s Islam: A History and Its Scholarship”, in Nile Green ed., *Afghanistan’s Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, University of California Press, California, 2017, p. 3.

12 Abdul Ghani Khan, *The Pathans*, University Book Agency, Peshawar, 1947, p. 57.

13 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier”, *International Security*, Volume 32, Number 4, Spring, 2008, The MIT Press, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30129791>, p. 51.

14 Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failure of Great Powers*, Public Affairs Books, New York, 2011.

15 Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle And The Drone, How America’s War On Terror Became A Global War On Tribal Islam*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2013, p. 20.

The Afghan individual is surrounded... by concentric rings consisting of family, extended family, clan, tribe, confederacy, and major cultural–linguistic group. The hierarchy of loyalties corresponds to these circles and becomes more intense as the circle gets smaller... seldom does an Afghan, regardless of cultural background, need the services and/or the facilities of the national government. Thus, in case of crisis, his recourse is to the kinship and, if necessary, the larger cultural group. National feelings and loyalties are altered through the successive layers.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, tribal allegiance exerts the greatest pull on the life of a Pashtun. According to Geoffry Moorhouse, “The bonding within the tribe is much stronger than any local western community has known for centuries, and there may never have been its equal in the West.” Equally, are the antipathies between one tribe and another, making the region a kind of permanent battleground not only because of regular invasions but also due to the tribes fighting each other.<sup>17</sup>

The second unique feature of the Pashtun tribes is that they are acephalous, i.e., without leaders, where each man guards his status and independence jealously. Every household head is thus a ‘petty chief’ and no collective tribal action is possible without his consent.<sup>18</sup> This is best represented by the common saying, ‘Every man is a *malik* [elder].’ The same sentiment was reflected when a Mehsud elder from the Abdur Rehman Khel tribe suggested to the then British administrator in Waziristan,

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16 Cited in Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier, pp. 51-52.

17 Geoffry Moorhouse, *To The Frontier*, Holt, Rinehart And Winston, New York, 1985.

18 Akbar Ahmed, *Social and Economic Change in The Tribal Areas, 1972-76*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1977.

Sir Evelyn Howell, in the early twentieth century, either “blow us all up with cannon, or make all eighteen thousand of us *nawabs* [chiefs].”<sup>19</sup> This was expressed by Ghani Khan, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s elder son, who declared that the Pashtun is a great democrat:

The Pathans are rain-sown wheat – they all came up on the same day – they are all the same. However dirty and coarse his hand, he will stretch it to a king for a handshake. However meager his meal, he will invite an emperor to share it. ‘Look at the warmth in my eyes,’ he tells his guest, ‘and not the hardness of the corn bread before you.’<sup>20</sup>

This Pashtun ideal of equality has been reinforced with the belief that all Pashtuns are born equal as children of a common ancestor. Thus, social and economic inequality that exists is not given by nature or birth, but is individually achieved. The tribal order, in fact, discourages social hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

The tribal system over the centuries has not been static but dynamic, subject to innovation and change in changing circumstances, like outward migration, development schemes and so on.<sup>22</sup> The poet Mohammad Iqbal called Afghan conservatism a “miracle”, for it was “adamantine, yet fully sensitive to and assimilative of new cultural forces; this was the secret of the eternal organic growth of the Afghan type.”<sup>23</sup>

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19 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 15.

20 Abdul Ghani Khan, op. cit., p. 57.

21 Bernt Glatzer, “Is Afghanistan On The Brink Of Ethnic And Tribal Disintegration?” in William Maley ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan And The Taliban*, New York University Press, New York, 1998, p. 173.

22 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit.

23 Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2013, p.32.



Many individuals, families and even subtribes settled in the plains, where the original tribal identity gradually became diluted. They became part of settled administrations and subjected to laws that were based on different systems than their own. Not surprisingly, while the Pashtuns in the settled districts retained their identity, language and culture, their tribal ties were weakened by a century of close contact with the laws and administration, first of the British and then of the people of Pakistan (and Afghanistan).<sup>24</sup> Those who continued to live in the hills and mountains clung to tribal identity and prided themselves on their independence. As a result, over a period of time, “despite having the same origins, the two developed distinct, and even antithetical, social and political ways of organizing their lives.”<sup>25</sup> The former, settled populations, do retain their identity as Pashtuns or their memory of tribal descent, but they do not live amongst fellow tribesmen or participate in tribal political institutions. Such Pashtuns are often referred to as detribalized.<sup>26</sup>

Akbar Ahmed, a noted scholar, described two kinds of tribes: *nang* and *qalang* Pashtuns. The *nang* (highland Pashtuns) primarily resided in the mountainous regions and lived by honour, while the *qalang* (lowland Pashtuns) lived in the fertile lowland areas and were subject to taxes. Thus, the main difference between the *qalang* and the *nang* tribes was whether they were taxed by the state or not. For the Pashtuns, taxation – even symbolic – meant submission to another authority and hence made them unfit to rule. Being

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24 James Spain, *The Way of the Pathans*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1972, p. 25.

25 Akbar Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

26 Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002, p. 29.

taxed was humiliating because they felt that they were capable of governing their own internal affairs. Thus, tribes submitting to the state's authority and paying taxes were called *qalang*, which is taxation in Pashto, while those who did not let the state tax them were called the *nang*, meaning honour in Pashto. As the Pashto proverb goes, "Honour [*nang*] ate up the mountains, taxes and rents [*qalang*] ate up the plains."

More closely adhering to the segmentary lineage structure, *nang* populations were small and dispersed, whereas the *qalang* societies were typically large, concentrated, and hierarchical.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the *nang* tribes were located in the tribal belt between today's Afghanistan and Pakistan, or earlier, British India. These tribes have had a reputation of resisting outside control, whether of the Mughals, the British, the Durrani or Pakistan.

Among the several characteristics of the Pashtuns, Louis Dupree's classic study, *Afghanistan* (1973), notes the 'insolence' of the Pashtuns. However, this was not the frustrated insolence of the urbanized, dehumanized man in Western society, but insolence without arrogance, the insolence of harsh freedoms set against a backdrop of rough mountains and deserts, the insolence of equality felt and practised (with an occasional touch of superiority), the insolence of bravery past and bravery anticipated.<sup>28</sup>

Mention needs to be made of a peculiarly Pashtun institution, the *hujra* – or the village club and guest house combined. No account of Pashtun life would be complete without a description of this institution. Every village has

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27 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 26.

28 Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978), p. xvii.

one or more *hujras*, the number varying according to the size of the village. It usually consists of a room or two, with an adjoining courtyard. A number of bedsteads or *charpoys* are found in each *hujra*. Here the villagers gather when the day's toil is over, to meet one another and discuss the topics of the day. Matters like the weather, the crops, the marketing of farm produce, the high-handedness – supposed or real – of the police or the magistracy, and party politics are discussed, punctuated by great puffs at the *chilam* or *huqqa* passed around the gathering.<sup>29</sup>

### JIRGA

The *jirga*, the assembly of adult male Pashtuns, is an indigenous institution to discuss, deliberate and mediate on specific questions and provide a mechanism for speedy conflict resolution in Pashtun society. Its decisions are based on a combination of *Sharia* and *Pashtunwali*.<sup>30</sup> Key features of the *jirga* include people sitting in a large circle in the open to avoid even symbolic hierarchy, and within which there was no place for the *mullah*; he sat on the side and prayed for the success of the *jirga*; the *mashars* or *spin giris* (white-bearded elders), because of their knowledge and experience, played an important role in the deliberations; the *jirga* ruled by consensus. Theoretically, a *jirga* could be convened at any level of tribal organization, from the smallest lineage to an entire confederation. However, *jirgas* were most commonly held at the lineage level, though there were larger tribal or even inter-tribal *jirgas* as well, at least amongst eastern Pashtuns.

Discussions at a *jirga* were frank and democratic, though the village chief, who normally held a quantity of land and

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29 Abdul Qaiyum, *Gold and Guns on the Pathan Frontier*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1945, p. 25.

30 See below.

was called a *Khan*, was likely to be more equal than the others. Only a senseless man defied his tribal *jirga*, in which case he was ostracized or fined, or had his property burnt. There was no life for the Pashtun clansman in the tribal areas outside the clan system. Personal safety as well as access to roads, water, oil, food and help were provided through the tribal system and found with difficulty outside it.<sup>31</sup>

The *jirga* was not so much a justice delivery system as a resolution mechanism, where disputes were debated until a negotiated settlement acceptable to the offender and the victim was arrived at.<sup>32</sup> Fairness and collective justice were the ultimate good, not punishment of the individual wrongdoer as in the Western sense, which, for the Pashtun, was essentially an alien concept.<sup>33</sup> Some of the punishments meted out to those responsible for crimes were extremely harsh: death by stoning, for instance, was carried out on those found guilty of ‘illicit relations’. In the 1980s, stoning was used as a punishment to counter the growing incidence of abductions.<sup>34</sup>

Mediation apart, the *jirga* held the authority to declare war or work out a peace agreement between the conflicting parties. In most cases, estimated to be ninety-five per cent, the *jirga* succeeded in resolving the issue. The remaining five per cent issues were settled by force. A Pashto proverb reflected the reality regarding the unresolved five per cent cases: “What is not decided in the *jirga* will be decided by bloodshed.”

A *jirga* could often sanction the formation of *lashkars* (tribal militia) for maintenance of law and order, and self-

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31 Sana Haroon, op. cit., p. 75.

32 Farhat Taj, *The Real Pashtun Question: How to Control Religious Extremism, Misogyny and Pedophilia?*, Kautilya Books, Delhi, 2017.

33 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 61.

34 Giandomenico Picco and Antonio Luigi Palmisano, eds., *Afghanistan: How Much of the Past in the New Future*, Institute of International Sociology, Gorizia, 2007, p. 106.

defence, along with the enforcement of the *jirga's* decisions. The *lashkar* was thus the military arm of the *jirga* for the formation of which tribesmen were called to fight and each family contributed manpower and weapons.<sup>35</sup> *Lashkar*, as used in the tribal sense, could be employed for a *jihad* or a holy war.<sup>36</sup> Thus, since the purpose was temporary – to implement a *jirga* decision against an individual or a tribe – once it was fulfilled, the *lashkar* instantly disbanded. The tribal *lashkars* have played a major role in countering militants in Pakistan's Pashtun tribal areas, along with defending their territories, since 2002.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of *jirga* has changed since the 1980s, when the emergence of the *mujahideen* created a new type of leadership in FATA, not based on lineage or official position. The officially sponsored *jirga* lost much of its credibility after becoming a tool in the hands of the political administration and became riddled with corruption. From being a tribal gathering to resolve issues, it has been converted into a state-manipulated gathering.<sup>38</sup>

During the anti-Soviet war, under the influence of the Arabs, a new institution came into use in Afghanistan: *shura*, an Arabic term referring to the first meetings of the Muslim *ummah* (community), when the *shura* sat to appoint the first *khalifa* (caliph) after the death of the Prophet in 632.

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35 Matt M. Matthews, "An Ever Present Danger: A Concise History of British Military Operations on the North-West Frontier" Occasional Paper 83, Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, Kansas, June 2010, pp. 8-9.

36 Ibid.

37 Farooq Yousaf, 'Pakistan's "Tribal" Pashtuns, Their "Violent" Representation, and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement', *SAGE Open*, Volume 9, Number 1, 2019.

38 Shuja Nawaz, "FATA—A Most Dangerous Place", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, January 2009, p. 26.

There are several differences between *jirga* and *shura*. The *shura* is more representative in character than the *jirga* since it is not confined to members of a tribe or sub-tribe; it has a relatively permanent membership, and meets more regularly. *Jirgas*, on the other hand, meet *ad hoc* when a problem arises.<sup>39</sup> The *shura*, unlike the *jirga*, is often open to those who have some kind of religious qualification, and is not solely confined to tribe or locality. While the main function of a *jirga* is as a dispute resolution mechanism, the *shura*, on the other hand, makes recommendations of a policy nature that are accepted by the *Amir*.

There are several examples of the functioning of *shuras* in Afghanistan. One such was the *shura* used by President Burhanuddin Rabbani to prolong his rule. He held a *shura* consisting of 1,335 hand-picked members, mostly from his own *Jami'at* and Masoud's *Shura- i-Nazir* and some smaller groups, reviving an archaic Arab gathering the *Shura-i-Hal wa'Qud*, (the 'council of those who can solve and make decisions'), never convened in Afghanistan before. It approved Rabbani to continue as President for a further two years.

Mullah Omar, was declared the *Amir-ul Momineen*, or Commander of the Faithful, in April 1996, by a *shura* of 1,000 *ulema* in Kandahar. The *shura* also declared *jihad* against Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in Kabul.

The Taliban in the 1990s ruled through two *shuras*, one in Kandahar headed by Mullah Omar and one in Kabul led by his number two, Mullah Muhammad Rabbani. The former consisted of Omar's core advisors, while the latter comprised of religious leaders, cabinet ministers and deputy ministers.

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39 Bernt Glatzer, 'The Pashtun Tribal System', 2002, p. 161-168.

One shura that became famous over the past twenty-odd years was the Quetta *Shura*, which functioned as the leadership council of the Taliban after they were ousted from Afghanistan by US-led forces in late 2001. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban *Amir*, led the Quetta *Shura* and began planning counter-strikes against the US forces. The Haqqani Network's North Waziristan leadership was usually called the Miram Shah *Shura*.

### TRIBAL RIVALRY

One of the constants in Pashtun history is the abiding and intense rivalry between the Durrani and the Ghilzais. This division between these two confederacies has been at the root of centuries of conflict and intrigue among the Pashtuns. The Ghilzai Hotakis under Mirwais Ghilzai had liberated Kandahar from Safavid control in 1709, and even invaded Persia and destroyed the Persian Empire.<sup>40</sup> The Durrani wrested power from them and held it almost continuously for over two hundred and fifty years. The Durrani provided *all* of Afghanistan's kings, a fact not lost on the Ghilzais. Despite this, the Ghilzais never accepted that the Durrani were superior to them, as an Afghan saying goes: "He who would rule at Kabul must make peace with the Ghilzai and make it to a great extent on their terms."<sup>41</sup>

Only twice in Afghan history have the Ghilzais seized national power from the Durrani – in 1978 when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) staged a coup d'état against Mohammad Daoud, and again in 1996, when Mullah Omar came to power. Much of the original

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40 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 63.

41 Quoted in Z T Sungur, "Articulation of Tribalism into Modernity': The Case Of Pashtuns In Afghanistan", Thesis, The Graduate School Of Social Sciences Of Middle East Technical University, January 2013, p. 14.

Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar, came from the Ghilzai Hotaki tribe.

An interesting point has been made that the politics of the Afghan *jihad* was virtually a Ghilzai affair. Khalq's Ghilzai leaders, Hafizullah Amin and Muhammad Taraki, began the process with the 1978 coup. The Afghan military forces were dominated by Khalqi officers, many of whom were Ghilzai. Najibullah, one of the few Parchamis with Ghilzai roots, replaced Babrak Karmal (who had Durrani connections). Except for Babrak Karmal, the great Durrani Pashtun confederation had little representation on either side of the conflict. Khalqi members of PDPA were committed to break the established tradition of Durrani rule. Some spoke of the Marxist usurpation and the war as Ghilzai revenge against Durrani dominance. On the resistance side, nearly all of the key *mujahideen* parties were led by or had strong ties to the Ghilzais. Ethnic rivalry, perhaps, more than Islamic ideology, was even responsible for the refusal of the Peshawar parties to accept the exiled King Zahir Shah, a Durrani, into *mujahideen* politics.<sup>42</sup>

The Taliban movement was at some level also a recreation of the triumph of the Hotakis over the Durrani monarchs. Significantly, when the Taliban first became powerful, their instinct was not to march immediately on the capital Kabul, but to subdue, co-opt and subjugate the Durrani lands of Kandahar and Helmand Provinces. When the Taliban seized control of Kabul, exiled King Zahir Shah was not invited to return from Italy. According to Johnson and Mason, this dynamic is still at work today: the priority of the resurgent Taliban in 2006 was not driving northeast towards Kabul and bringing down the Karzai government, but rather focusing on first establishing political dominance over Durrani lands in Kandahar and

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42 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 64.



Helmand Provinces. Clearly, more was at work here than a simple, radical Islamist movement bent on seizing national power.<sup>43</sup>

Another rivalry exists between the Mehsuds and the Wazirs in Waziristan in the erstwhile FATA. The Mehsuds consider Wazirs slow-witted, mercantile and untrustworthy—‘If your right hand is a Wazir, cut it off,’ advises a Mehsud. Wazirs, for their part, consider Mehsuds vagabonds and cattle-rustlers, often quoting as evidence for this a prayer that Mehsud women are said to chant to their infants: ‘Be a thief and may God go with you!’ Mehsuds also quote this, to illustrate their people’s cunning and derring-do.<sup>44</sup>

Both the Mehsuds and the Wazirs have had their heroes. The Mehsud warrior mullahs included Mullah Powindah, who in 1894 led an attack on the British team demarcating the Durand Line. Taking the title Badshah-e-Taliban, King of the Taliban, he was a two-decade-long headache for the British, who decried him as an irredeemable fanatic, but were not above trying to buy him. Curzon wrote that Powindah was “a first-class scoundrel that we are taking under our wings”. A Wazir of North Waziristan, Mirza Ali Khan, known as the Faqir of Ipi, was a harder case. From 1936 to 1947, he led a freedom struggle that at one point sucked in 40,000 British Indian troops, and was quelled only by brutal aerial bombing. Khan was also backed by the other Pashtun tribes, and was allegedly in contact with Nazi Germany. But when he died, in 1960, the London *Times* mourned him as a ‘doughty and honourable opponent’.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Ibid, p. 78.

44 *The Economist*, “Waziristan: The Last Frontier”, December 30, 2009, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2009/12/30/the-last-frontier>.

45 Ibid.

## PASHTUNWALI

*May God keep you away from the venom of the cobra, the teeth of the tiger and the vengeance of the Afghans.*<sup>46</sup>

The Pashtuns have a unique and defining tribal code called *Pashtunwali* or the ‘way of the Pashtun’ that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups. It is an unwritten set of values, customs and cultural codes that governs routine life. *Pashtunwali*, in fact, is “the sum total of the tribes’ collective expectations of their members to conform to the norms and customs that ensure the group’s survival as a distinct sociocultural entity.”<sup>47</sup> “While for the most part it is the individual who acts on the code, the community at large judges with remarkable unanimity the righteousness of his action and supports it or opposes it.”<sup>48</sup> “The more one adheres to its maxims the more high esteem he enjoys in his brotherhood and community.” The code, compels Pashtuns “to defend their motherland, to grant asylum to fugitives irrespective of their creed or caste and to offer protection even to his deadly enemy and to wipe out insult with insult.”<sup>49</sup>

The various elements of *Pashtunwali* taken together represent the Pashtuns’ notion of a *gairatmand* Pashtun, i.e., an ideal Pashtun who embodies *pashto*, or is leading a completely honourable life. The key qualities of a *gairatmand* Pashtun are that he is *tuhrawala* (courageous), *hayadar* (respectable), *sateetob* (humane), *rahamdel* (merciful), *bahadar* (brave), *mahman-nawaz* (hospitable), *khandani* (a descendent from honourable ancestors), *deendar* (religious) and a defender of

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46 Ascribed to Alexander.

47 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 244.

48 James Spain, “The Way of the Pathans”, cited by Johnson and Mason, op. cit., p. 68.

49 Cited in Matt Matthews, op. cit., p. 8.

the faith.<sup>50</sup> To obtain the status of a *gairatmand* Pashtun, he has to live an ideal lifestyle as prescribed by *Pashtunwali*. A person who does not follow the tenets of *Pashtunwali* is chided as *bagarat* (a man without honour).<sup>51</sup>

At its core, *Pashtunwali* is about *nang* (honour) rooted in the triangle of *zan* (woman), *zar* (gold/wealth) and *zameen* (land). “I despise the man who does not guide his life by honour,” wrote Khushal Khan Khattak, the seventeenth-century Pashto poet, ‘The very word honour drives me mad.’<sup>52</sup> He wrote:

The very name Pashtun spells honour and glory  
Lacking that honour what is the Afghan story?

Since the responsibility of upholding individual and tribal honour rests with the males, most carry weapons, which have become a tangible expression of the code of honour. The obligatory weapon symbolizes a man’s status in society, signalling his role as protector of his community. ‘A man’s gun is his jewellery’ is a popular proverb amongst Pashtuns. The fate of an individual who is not able to uphold honour is possibly worse than death. He would be called *dauz*, or ‘person with no honour’, quite possibly the worst slur or insult one Pashtun can bestow on another. Such a Pashtun family, especially in the rural areas, becomes a pariah, unable to compete for advantageous marriages or economic opportunities, and shunned by the other families as a disgrace to the clan.<sup>53</sup>

This obligation to protect the honour of his person, his property and his women has at times led to a great deal of

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50 Khan Idris, *The Pakistan–Afghan Borderland: Pashtun Tribes Descending into Extremism: A Case Study of a Pashtun Tribe*, Tribal Analysis Publishing, Texas, 2013.

51 Ibid.

52 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 53.

53 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 59.

tension between Pashtuns and states attempting to establish their own rule of law. This is because, as Johnson and Mason note,

...for the Pashtun, the very concept of justice is wrapped up in the maintenance of his honour and his independence from external authority. Breaking the laws of the state to take action to preserve honour would seem perfectly acceptable to a Pashtun. In fact, his honour would demand it.<sup>54</sup>

An extreme example of this involved a woman, the most sensitive subject where a man's honour is concerned. It tells of a man who gave shelter to a couple escaping from a tribal feud and asked his oldest son to take care of them. Before long, the son developed a relationship with the man's wife. The man complained to the host, who responded by arranging a feast. At the end of it, the host asked everyone to say a prayer, then pulled out his revolver and shot six bullets into his son. After the forty days of Islamic mourning, the host called on the man to shoot his wife with the same revolver and uphold his honour. Upon her death, the host adopted the man as his own son and arranged a marriage between him and his dead son's wife.<sup>55</sup>

A core tenet of Pashtunwali is *melmastia* (hospitality) that pertains to the welcoming and protection of guests. As Elphinstone noted: "One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Afghauns is their hospitality. The practice of this virtue is so much a national point of honour, that their reproach to an inhospitable man is that he has no *Pooshtoonwullee*."<sup>56</sup>

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54 Ibid, p. 62.

55 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 53.

56 Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul , and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India: Comprising A View of the Afghaun Nation and A History of the Dooraunee Monarchy*, R. Bentley, London, 1842, p. 295.

Interestingly, while hospitality to strangers is offered free, without expecting any reciprocity, hospitality to one's kinsmen or tribesmen puts the recipient under reciprocal obligation, accompanied by the "fear that he will not be in the position to return it adequately when the occasion demands."<sup>57</sup>

All Pashtuns, rich and poor alike, pride themselves on their readiness to feed and care for their guests. Hospitality increases the power and prestige of a Pashtun amongst the tribesmen. The further a Pashtun spreads his *dastarkhan* (table cloth), the more respected he is. A common saying is 'There is no Khan without a *dastarkhan*.' For the Khan in particular, feeding many guests is one of the primary ways to convert wealth into power and respect.

*Badraga*, escort or safe passage through one's tribal land, is another aspect of Pashtun hospitality. Anyone in fear of being robbed or shot may ask his host for *badraga* and the host is then under obligation to freely escort the man out of his territory. Should anyone accost the guest, they will face not only the wrath of the escorted person but that of his host as well, a price few would want to pay.<sup>58</sup>

The concept of hospitality, according to Akbar Ahmed, is held in such high esteem that it even trumps tribal requirements for revenge, as seen in the chivalrous offering of food and provisions even to enemies.<sup>59</sup>

The obligation to take revenge, or *badal*, is another critical part of Pashtunwali, which, according to some, helps regulate behaviour in the absence of a legal system like police and courts of law. However, even when a modern court system is available,

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57 Nabi Misdaq, *Afghanistan: Political Frailty and External Interference*, Routledge, London, 2006.

58 Ibid.

59 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 23.

the need to take revenge persists.<sup>60</sup> As a young Churchill put it: no injury was to be forgotten and no debt left unpaid.<sup>61</sup> Every Pashtun knows that transgressions against another's honour will lead to revenge against the transgressor and it is in his interest not to provoke *badal*. As a Pashtun proverb states: 'He is not a Pushtoon who does not give a blow in return for a pinch.'<sup>62</sup> When serious crimes occur—such as murder, theft or rape—revenge is taken to correct the wrong and restore honour and face. Such acts often precipitate a cycle of revenge and counter-revenge between families and clans, which can last for generations. Time is irrelevant in the Pashtun culture for taking revenge. A tribesman and his relations may take years before they attack their enemy or before they avenge the killing of a family member. There is a saying amongst the Pashtuns: 'The Pashtun who took revenge after a hundred years said, "I took it quickly."<sup>63</sup> This also underlines the persistent fear that would hang over the head of the wrongdoer and his family.<sup>64</sup> Even a jihad does not stop *badal* but, at times, *melmastia* or hospitality clashes with *badal*. In such cases, even if the person seeking hospitality is a bitter enemy, he cannot be refused shelter and hospitality.<sup>65</sup>

The most important issue involving tribal honour concerns women—their behaviour and transgressions against them. This is so because it directly relates to the honour of men in the family and clan. Violation of their honour is perceived as one of the greatest threats to a tribe's honour and thus provokes

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60 Ibid, p. 25.

61 Rajmohan Gandhi, op. cit.

62 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 53.

63 Ibid, p. 25; Idris, op. cit.

64 Nabi Misdaq, op. cit.

65 Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap—The Defeat of a Superpower*, USA: Casemate, Philadelphia, 2001, p. 33.

the most intense blood feuds.<sup>66</sup> Cases concerning honour of women are called *tor* (black). In most cases, they can only be converted to *spin* (white) by death.<sup>67</sup>

Ghaffar Khan's eldest son, the poet and artist Ghani Khan, described the working of *badal*:

[If dishonoured, the Pathan] must shoot, there is no alternative. If he does not, his brothers will look down upon him, his father will sneer at him, his sister will avoid his eyes, his wife will be insolent and his friends will cut him off... One day he goes out and never comes back. He has laughed his way into a bullet that was fired by another of his own blood and race. His wife inherits from him a moment of joy, two sons and a lifetime of sorrow. She hangs up his rifle and sitar for his sons. She learns to hide her tears when she hears a love song in the evening. She worships her elder son because he looks like his father, and the younger one because he smiles like him. When she sits by the fire in the evening and looks at the eyes of her children and then at the empty space beside them, she thinks of him who is not there.<sup>68</sup>

Ghaffar Khan was one who knew the flaw of *badal* and tried to overcome it – unsuccessfully.<sup>69</sup> His non-violent movement did not succeed in many respects partly because the state (first the British and later Pakistan) harshly restricted the movement and partly because the Pashtun values, such as revenge, are too firmly rooted in the culture to be eliminated without committed state backing.<sup>70</sup>

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66 Akbar Ahmed, p. 25.

67 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., 1977.

68 Khan Abdul Ghani Khan, op. cit., p. 8.

69 Rajmohan Gandhi, op. cit.

70 Farhat Taj, op. cit.

While *badal* generally signifies violence such as revenge killings, it also means ‘exchange’ and includes marriages, in which two men marry each other’s sisters.<sup>71</sup> The Pashtun culture is designed not so much as to punish an aggressor as to address the grievances of the victims in order to prevent further conflict. The emphasis on revenge, to an extent, gets mitigated through mediation between rival parties to settle matters peacefully through blood compensation, arranged marriages between rivals, and so on.<sup>72</sup>

Like *melmastia*, *nanawatai* (offering shelter and protection) is another fundamental element of *pashtunwali*. This requires an individual to safeguard those who seek refuge, even at the cost of his own life. For example, a tribesman fleeing from one set of enemies, who is forced to seek refuge from a third party who is also an enemy, can be sure to receive it despite the enmity. The person from whom refuge is sought would refuse to surrender the enemy now under his protection, even if it means having to fight the enemies of his sworn enemy. A man will not be considered *gairatmand* if he refuses to give refuge to those who (to use the Pashtun phrase) ‘seize his skirt’ (*laman niwul*).<sup>73</sup>

When one party in a feud wants to sue for peace, a delegation of women carrying Korans and accompanied by a *mullah* are sent to the compound of their enemy. By putting themselves in harm’s way in order to secure a truce, the action of the women signals the readiness of their male kinsmen to negotiate with their enemies. When this is done, all fighting is supposed to stop and those who refuse to do so are seen as

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71 David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1996, p. 64.

72 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 24-25.

73 David B. Edwards, op. cit., p. 68.



violating *nanawatai*.<sup>74</sup> *Nanawatai* has also been described as “supplication by the defeated, invariably with the Koran in his hands, and in extreme indignity... the vanquished submitting to the victors with grass in their mouths and the exclamation ‘I am your ox.’ The victor, in his turn, is obliged to be magnanimous when faced with such humility.”<sup>75</sup>

A recent example of this was Mullah Omar refusing to hand over Osama bin Laden, who was his guest, to the Americans or even to fellow Muslims, the Saudis and Pakistanis.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, Mullah Omar prioritized *Pashtunwali* over *Sharia* in defending his decision when the *ulema* argued that under Islamic principles bin Laden should be handed over for trial.<sup>77</sup>

Another element in *Pashtunwali* is cousin rivalry or *tarburwali*. The agnatic rivalry between cousins is best expressed in the Pashtun saying ‘God knows that the uncle is an infidel.’ Agnatic rivalry engenders long-standing feuds and vendettas that often end in the destruction of entire families.<sup>78</sup> This denotes that first cousins fight each other, then they join in fighting the distant relatives of the other family and then they join to fight that of the other clan, and so on. Such rivalries have been a factor for not only causing internal division but also inviting external manipulation.<sup>79</sup> For example, the Persians were able to exploit the rivalry between the Durranis and the Ghilzais and so control Kandahar in the eighteenth century.

Analysts believe that these interlocking elements of *Pashtunwali* have enabled the Pashtuns to defeat efforts to

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74 Ibid.

75 Geoffrey Moorhouse, *To the Frontier*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1985.

76 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 22.

77 Ibid, p. 22.

78 Ibid, p. 20.

79 Ibid.

subject them to centralized rule of law. Despite this, as Johnson and Mason note, western policymakers have continued to downplay the importance of these basic cultural values in their efforts to shape strategies for the Pashtun areas. On the other hand, the Taliban and al Qaeda have used these values for recruitment, shelter and social mobilization.<sup>80</sup>

The problem with *Pashtunwali* for the West is, as Charles Allen writes, “an uncompromising social code so profoundly at odds with Western mores that its application constantly brings one up with a jolt.”<sup>81</sup> Talking about the Pashtun code of honour, Churchill noted that it was so strange and inconsistent as to be incomprehensible to a logical mind.

I have been told that if a white man could grasp it fully, and were to understand their mental impulses— if he knew, when it was their honour to stand by him, and when it was their honour to betray him; when they were bound to protect and when to kill him – he might, by judging his times and opportunities, pass safely from one end of the mountains to the other.<sup>82</sup>

## ISLAM AND PASHTUNWALI

There is a special relationship between the Pashtuns and Islam. For most Pashtuns, there is no difference between *Pashtunwali* and Islam on the grounds that, for a man to be a Pashtun, he must also be a Muslim. Thus, Pashtuns see Pashtunwali as entirely in sync with their Islamic identity. As mentioned in the section on Pashtun origins, the link to

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80 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 64.

81 Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, Little, Brown, imprint of Time Warner Book Group, London, 2006, p. 29-30.

82 Winston Churchill, *The Story of The Malakand Field Force: An Episode Of Frontier War*, Longman, Green And Co, London, 1898), p. 27.

the Prophet is through their common ancestor Qays. This, according to Akbar Ahmed, in effect sanctified *Pashtunwali*. It meant that almost every local custom had some religious cover, however tenuous. This close relationship has been reinforced with the symbols and practice of Islam being visible and respected in society. For example, there is an almost absolute observance of fasting during the month of *Ramzan*; most males, especially the elders, make it a point to say prayers regularly in the village mosque; great pride is taken in the title conferred after the pilgrimage to Mecca: *hajji* for men or *hajjan* for women.<sup>83</sup>

However, in reality, “the coexistence of Pashtunwali with Sharia was achieved only through the arbitration by *mullahs* and other *ulema*, whose community stature allowed them to bridge the chasm between the two sets of laws.”<sup>84</sup> When custom did not quite square with Islamic law, tribesmen may shrug it off, citing their relationship to the Prophet: ‘We are the most loyal of God’s believers. How can God be angry with us for a minor trespass?’

There are several friction points between the two aspects of Pashtun identity – Islam and *Pashtunwali*, and elements of *Pashtunwali* conflict with Islam. Some examples are : Tribal customs like the father of the bride demanding payment from the groom; a woman suspected of sexual indiscretion being put to death; a family’s women being excluded from inheritance, especially of land; bloody rivalry between male cousins lasting for years; interest being charged on loans; and *Pashtunwali* being glorified over all other forms of identity, including Islam itself.<sup>85</sup>

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83 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit. p. 54.

84 Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, HarperCollins Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 77-78.

85 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 54.

Such friction points are best exemplified by the Pashtun saying, 'Pashtuns accept half of the Koran,' reflecting the age-old struggle for influence between *Khan* and *mullah*, or the mosque and the *hujra* (the tribal chief's guesthouse). According to Peter Tomsen, one Pashtun told him that an Afghan Mujahedeen who was willing to become a martyr in the name of Islam would, at the same time, "not accept Islam when asked to give a share of his land to his daughter."<sup>86</sup>

Other examples include: *Pashtunwali* demands *badal* for a wrong in order to regain honour. This has led to a cycle of revenge that can ruin families involved in an active feud. In contrast, Islam stresses forgiveness that prevents the cycle of killing. For the Pashtun restoration of honour, and in order to not give the impression of being weak, redress is preferable when it is in accordance with *Pashtunwali* rather than Islam. Asking for justice under Islamic injunctions would indicate a man's weakness and thus leave him wide open to further encroachments by his rivals.<sup>87</sup> Then again, *Pashtunwali* relies upon hereditary leadership, while Islam facilitates achieved leadership, which appeals to the young, educated tribesmen whose leadership is blocked in traditional Pashtun society. Under *Pashtunwali*, the age of a person defines influence and power, but in Islam, age does not play an important role in leadership: piety and religious education and practices are the source of a leadership position.<sup>88</sup> *Pashtunwali* lionizes personal, family and tribal achievement, generating jealousy amongst close relatives, especially in the male cousins from the paternal side of the family. In contrast, Islam demonizes personal, family and tribal pride, lauding an achievement as God-given, not individual. This minimizes jealousy and competition

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86 Peter Tomsen, op. cit.

87 Nabi Misdaq, op. cit., p. 276.

88 Khan Idris, op. cit.

amongst the tribesmen. *Pashtunwali* glorifies personal and tribal identity that creates feuds and fragmentation within society while Islam highlights a common Islamic identity that facilitates more harmony, unity and a shared identity that crosses traditional tribal barriers. *Pashtunwali* turns a blind eye to some un-Islamic practices such as music, dance, smoking and the use of hashish and opium, while the Islam-based Tablighi Jamaat movement prohibits these practices and views them as un-Islamic.<sup>89</sup>

Another issue where Islam and the *Pashtunwali* are in conflict is related to women. In *Pashtunwali*, a woman whose husband dies may be remarried to the man's brother or another close relative. This is considered justified by the practice of the groom paying bride price to the bride's family, giving the husband's family right of possession of the woman her entire life. But in Islam, a woman cannot be remarried without her consent and her husband's family has no right of possession over her.<sup>90</sup>

*Pashtunwali* also keeps the priests outside the tribal system, either below it, or above it. Thus, *Sayyeds* and *pirs* are above the system, while the village *mullah* is below it, since he does not have much learning. At times, *mullahs* attend the *jirga* as counsellors but are not permitted to intervene too much. The *pir*, on the other hand, is a spiritual master of a Sufi order, whose tomb becomes a place of pilgrimage or *ziarat*. *Pirs* are believed to have *barakat* or a form of holy blessing, along with *Sayyeds*, who are believed to be the descendants of the Prophet. *Sayyeds* are also kept outside the tribal system even when they are of Pashtun origin. 'Even if his mother tongue is Pashto, he will not be thought of as a Pashtun: his *qawm* is *Sayyad*, that is to say, "Arab".' The external position given to

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89 Ibid.

90 Nabi Misdaq, op. cit.

the men of religion makes them natural mediators in factional rivalries amongst tribal groups.

According to Khan Idris, in some places, Islam has now superseded *Pashtunwali* when it comes to the Pashtun way of life, or to the decision-making process amongst Pashtuns. He notes that *Pashtunwali* does not provide answers to some of the complex questions raised by modernization, something that Islam appears to do. Moreover, the traditional Pashtun tribal leadership structure has changed due to modern education, rural-urban migration, trading, an influx of money and remittances from the Middle East, proliferation of media outlets, mobility of the people and growth of transportation. The penetration of modern institutions, such as the administrative structure, the police force, the court system and the system of governance, has also ensured that modern law and justice take precedence over customary law or *Pashtunwali*.<sup>91</sup>

## RELIGION

*Who could be a better Muslim than us?*<sup>92</sup>

Islam has been, perhaps, one of the most critical cultural, social and political forces in Afghan history. “From their conversation,” wrote Elphinstone of the Afghans in 1842, “one would think the whole people, from the King to the lowest peasant, was always occupied in holy reflections; scarce a sentence is uttered without some allusion to the Deity, and the slightest occurrence produces a pious ejaculation.”<sup>93</sup> In the 1970s, Michael Barry, a scholar, still found much the same situation: “Every gesture of life was dictated by ritual and impregnated with the sacred.”<sup>94</sup>

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91 Khan Idris, op. cit.

92 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 28.

93 Mountstuart Elphinstone, op. cit., p. 211.

94 Cited in Barnett Rubin, op. cit., p. 38.

For the Pashtun, his tribal identity and his Islamic identity are two sides of the same coin. Claims that the Prophet had converted their ancestors has engendered the belief that they are the 'purest' of Muslims. 'Who could be a better Muslim than us?' or 'We were converted to Islam by the Prophet himself,' they say with pride. They believe that on judgment day, 'the Prophet will vouch for them and overlook their shortcomings as they will receive the infinite blessings of the greatest of God's messengers.' These links to the Prophet provide 'a kind of cover for impurity' for groups 'largely ignorant of orthodox Islamic theology and practices.'<sup>95</sup>

While the overwhelming majority of Pashtuns are Deobandi Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, some tribes such as the Turi in the Kurram Valley of Pakistan, some amongst the neighbouring Bangash and Orakzai tribes, and small communities in Afghanistan, are Twelver Shi'a. The Deobandi sect has generally had an anti-Shia stance. Despite this, historically, relations amongst Pashtun Deobandis and Shias were cordial, though there were isolated cases of sectarian violence that were easily controlled by the British and subsequently by Pakistan. However, the advent of Gen. Zia ul Haq in 1977 changed the situation due to his policy of 'Sunnifying' Pakistan. This led to the rise of sectarian violence against Shias. These tendencies have been amplified greatly due to the anti-Shia aspects of the Taliban ideology.<sup>96</sup> The Sufi orders, too, have large followings amongst the Pashtuns, especially the Naqshbandi-Mujadiddi order.

Despite the perceived direct link to the Prophet, the Pashtuns followed tribal Islam, where *Sharia* was interspersed with tribal custom. The religiously conservative society was tolerant of other religions and sects. It has been pointed out,

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95 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 28.

96 Farhat Taj, op. cit.

Traditional Islam meant low government interference in defining what was Islamic and the prevalence of Sufi practices and popular Islam – a folksy Islam that blended pre-Islamic rituals and a reverence for saints and shrines not explicitly identified with the teachings of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, tribal Islam was quite different from the legalistic view of the *ulema* that, in turn, was different from the various schools of Islamists and their interpretation of Islam.<sup>98</sup> Many religious leaders would view some of the Islamic practices followed by the Pashtun tribesmen as un-Islamic or perhaps only borderline Islamic. Despite this, the Pashtuns continued to practise those rituals.<sup>99</sup>

Though most Pashtuns are Deobandis, they have been influenced by Sufi practices that supplemented Pashtun culture and involved participation in *Urs* (celebration of birthdays of Sufi saints), wearing *ta'wiz* (charms) and belief in the healing powers of holy men. According to the former Afghan Taliban ambassador to Islamabad, Abdul Salam Zaeef, his father, a village *mullah*, wrote *ta'wiz* for the ill and 'demonically possessed' people. He held that there were times when faith worked where medicines did not.<sup>100</sup> The tribesmen have faith that their saint, often a Sufi, whether alive or dead, would intercede with God on their behalf.<sup>101</sup> According to anthropologist Louis Dupree:

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97 Husain Haqqani, "Afghanistan's Islamist Groups", *Hudson Institute*, May 23, 2007, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9772-afghanistan-s-islamist-groups>.

98 Nabi Misdaq, op. cit.

99 Khan Idris, op. cit.

100 Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 5.

101 Akbar Ahmed, op. cit., p. 29.



The Islam practiced in Afghan villages, nomad camps, and most urban areas would be almost unrecognizable to a sophisticated Muslim scholar. Aside from faith in Allah and in Mohammad as the messenger of Allah, most beliefs relate to localized, pre-Muslim customs.<sup>102</sup>

According to him, almost any stone thrown in Afghanistan would hit the *ziarat* (shrine) of a *pir*, *khwajah* or other name-saint. Pilgrims flocked to *ziarats* to ask for the intercession of a particular saint with Allah for specific favours. In Afghanistan, for example, a saint's tomb near Jalalabad specialized in curing insanity; another near Charikar was believed to cure mad-dog bites; and in the Valley of Paiminar, just north of Kabul, were forty-odd shrines, all dedicated to fertility. Women desiring children visited Paiminar to buy *ta'wiz* (amulets) from the *ziarat* caretakers, each guaranteeing a son or daughter, as the case may be. At one tomb, women actually fondled the bones of shaheed (Muslim martyrs, particularly those killed in warfare against non-Muslims) and ate a pinch of earth, probably reflecting a very ancient belief in impregnation from mother earth.<sup>103</sup>

For the Taliban, since they were swayed by the Wahhabi ideology, such practices were heretical 'innovations' in Islam.

As a result, while still believing in Allah and His messenger Muhammad, different groups of Pashtuns have been Hanafi Muslims, Sufis, Roshanis, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Salafist Wahhabis, often following different schools of thought within the same tribes.

Traditionally in Pashtun areas, tribal *mullahs* or clerics did not have a lot of political authority. The mosque was not used

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102 Louis Dupree, op. cit., p. 104.

103 Ibid, p. 105.

for tribal political activity and the *mullah* was subordinated to the tribal elders, who had the monopoly on political activity conducted in the *hujra*, which acted as a counterweight to the mosque. If a tribal area was threatened by outside invasion, *mullahs* might be called on to rally the tribesmen and lead a *jihad* in response. But for the most part, the *mullahs* were impoverished and illiterate, and they depended on the *maliks* to provide them with both income and security (for example, by protecting their mosques from raiders). The *mullahs* did not have an independent political voice.<sup>104</sup> Their traditional role was to act as a buffer between tribes and subtribes and as intermediaries when tribes clashed amongst themselves. Their everyday role was rather humdrum and only concerned with rites of passage (birth, circumcision, marriage and death ceremonies). They did not feature in tribal genealogy. Their role in tribal society is perhaps best depicted in this classic story, although apocryphal, about the *mullah* who went into Afridi Tirah and berated the tribes for not having a single shrine or holy tomb. The Afridi answer was to kill the *mullah* and set up his shrine as the first religious one in the area.<sup>105</sup>

Though Islam is at the core of the ordinary Pashtun's life, their practice of it has undergone major transformations. Prior to the Soviet invasion, the Pashtuns were tolerant of other religions and sects. This was evidenced by the significant number of Sikhs and Hindus who lived amongst the Pashtuns till the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent. The Pashtun Khudai Khidmatgars had joined the All India Congress, a secular nationalist party in India, and opposed the creation of Pakistan. However, the Soviet-era *jihad* (1979–89) and the civil war that followed (1992–96) severely damaged such open-mindedness.

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104 Shuja Nawaz, *op. cit.*

105 Akbar Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

Over the past three decades, Salafi influence has been growing at the expense of traditional religious orders, with support and funding from outside.<sup>106</sup>

Due to the Soviet invasion in 1979, there was huge influx of money from Saudi Arabia and the United States; eventually USD 6 to 8 billion was distributed to the clerics waging *jihād*. For the first time in history, the *mullahs* were not dependent on the maliks for their survival.<sup>107</sup> These new opportunities enabled the *mullah* to expand his traditional role and to move from the mosque to the *hujra*. According to Shuja Nawaz,

Mullahs now participate in the new *jirga* as Members of Parliament, and guarantees that were given by the tribe are now given by the *mullahs*. *Jirgas*, which were traditionally held in the open, have been held inside *madrassas* and addressed by *mullahs*. In the traditional system, *mullahs* could not sustain a network of political patronage, as they lacked financial means. But now they have access to money and have created a space for themselves in the society.<sup>108</sup>

The *mullahs'* power climaxed under Taliban control of Afghanistan in the 1990s and thereafter. They totally sidelined the Sufi *pirs* and the tribal leaders. Between 2007 and 2010, for example, the Salafists either killed or expelled the *pirs* and the traditional Pashtun leaders in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and the Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, fuelling an insurgency against Islamabad. This disrupted the delicate relationship between the *pirs*, the *mullahs* and the tribal leaders along the Pakistan–Afghanistan borderland. Khan Idris argues that “as

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106 Abubakar Siddique, op. cit., p. 29.

107 Shuja Nawaz, op. cit.

108 Ibid.

long as this disequilibrium exists in Pashtun society, there will be instability and violence.”<sup>109</sup>

### SALAFI INFLUENCE

A significant development in the past few decades is that the Pashtuns along the border separating Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially in the former FATA, have begun to shift their religious orientation from the more tolerant Hanafi Sufi beliefs to the more restricted and militant Salafi (‘following the forefathers’) interpretation of Islam that is more commonly practised in the Middle East.

This trend of the Pashtun tribes on the borderland moving towards Salafism began in the 1980s with the impact of the Soviet *jihād*, when a large number of Arab fighters came to the area and Wahabi *madrassas* were opened. It was reinforced in the 1990s due to the inroads that the Tablighi Jamaat has made in the area. The Tablighi Jamaat is one of the proselytizing Salafist organizations in the region while the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Taliban and al-Qaeda support the ideology.<sup>110</sup> Apart from FATA, the Salafi ideology is also making inroads into the settled areas of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

The older Sufi Islam was accommodative, even to the extent that the *pirs* would ignore some of the popular tribal practices that were clearly un-Islamic in the eyes of the more rigid purists. In contrast, the new Salafists do not tolerate any popular tribal practices, which are deemed un-Islamic. This has caused resentment amongst Pashtuns and, in some places, led to violence and intolerance.<sup>111</sup>

The transformation from Sufism to Salafism deeply impacted the local Pashtun tribes. Over the medium and long

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109 Khan Idris, op. cit.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

term, this will have consequences for the tribes, for the stability and security of the Pashtun-inhabited areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan, for regional stability, and terrorism. According to Idris,

...the changed internal dynamics to a large extent explain why some Pashtuns participate in terrorist activities and why some Pashtuns harbour non-Pashtun religious extremists. This would also help understand why some tribes gravitate towards extremism while others do not.

The Salafist ideology has been responsible for the Pashtun Salafists inviting and hosting al-Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups that have endangered the security and stability of the region. From their secure bases, al-Qaeda and others have planned and implemented terrorist operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other parts of the world.

The change to a more restrictive Salafism, seemingly at least for the long term, if not permanently, will alter and weaken the traditional Pashtun tribal structure that has been a major source of stability and peace in the area. It will undermine the role of the tribal leaders, leading to potential chaos and disorder. For example, the family structure of the Pashtuns is being impacted since, while the older generation tends to follow the Sufi traditions, the younger members are more receptive to the changes.<sup>112</sup>

A moot point is whether the growth of Salafism can be rolled back? Perhaps not. It has established deep roots within the tribal structure and local tribesmen have been empowered into becoming leaders who are thus able to rally support from substantial parts of the tribe. Traditional tribal elders will therefore, have a hard time trying to reclaim their original

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112 Khan Idris, op. cit.

position from the new leaders since it would be very difficult now, to drive a wedge between the local tribesmen and the Salafists leaders. Additionally, the Taliban, both Afghan and Pakistan, have developed deep social and religious contacts in Pakistani society due to the large infrastructure of Salafi madrassas in Pakistan. The Taliban of both varieties use these madrassas and the mosques associated with them as recruiting and indoctrination places and for fund-raising, thereby institutionalizing their position.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, while the Pashtun tribal structures of Pakistan and Afghanistan have been wounded, such an ancient culture cannot be eradicated in a few decades. However badly the building blocks of that culture are damaged, there remains a foundation on which Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other interested parties can begin to restore traditional Pashtun power structures and mores.<sup>114</sup>

The one way this can be done is by the restoration of the traditional balance in society by empowering the tribal elders again. The 'collective control' of the tribal elders and maliks 'is the only stabilizing force the region has ever known'.<sup>115</sup> Undoubtedly, the restoration of the Pashtun tribal structures will be a time-consuming and painstaking process. A prerequisite for this would be the commitment of governments on both sides of the Durand Line to demonstrate political will, provide reliable security and develop the requisite cultural understanding to underwrite such a task.<sup>116</sup> With the Taliban in power in Kabul, the Salafists having made deep inroads into society and successive governments in Pakistan seeking 'strategic depth', this would indeed be a challenging task.

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113 Ibid.

114 Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason, p. 77.

115 Ibid, p. 73.

116 Thomas H. Johnson and Chris Mason, op. cit., p. 67.



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