

**Weapons of the not so Weak in Afghanistan: Pashtun Agrarian Structure and Tribal Organization for Times of War & Peace**

**Thomas J. Barfield**  
**Boston University**

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Afghanistan is a country with a reputation. It bested two short British attempts at occupation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one long Soviet attempt in the 20<sup>th</sup>. The international community wonders if it will go for three in a row to mark the 21<sup>st</sup>. While resistance to political domination is now attributed in some form to practically everyone, resistance in Afghanistan is still of the old fashioned type—they shoot at people. But scratch beneath the surface of this history and one finds that resistance of this type does not originate in the country’s urban centers or in its most productive agricultural areas, but that the margins where people still find open resistance a useful political option. One reason for this is that governing powers found it easier to pay such people off than to fight them continuously. Example: I saw a sign at the beginning of the Khyber Pass that declared it was “closed after sunset” (and another that prohibited taking pictures of tribal women). Given that the overloaded painted trucks that sped through the pass often drive without lights at night, this seemed a sensible safety regulation. But it was nothing of the sort. The British, like their Mughal predecessors, had had a problem with the tribes of the Khyber who supported themselves by raiding caravans. The Mughals paid them not to, and the British followed this tradition. But in the spirit of bargaining the tribes had insisted that the treaty only apply to daylight hours. The sign should have read, “Khyber Pass, no government after dark.” Pakistan, as the world is now learning, inherited and has continued this policy more quietly.

The people causing this trouble were the Pashtuns, now straddling the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, long experienced at holding their more sophisticated neighbors to ransom as Rudyard Kipling observed in an oft quoted line from “Arithmetic of the Frontier”:

A scrimmage in a Border station—  
A canter down a dark defile—  
Two thousand pounds of education  
Drops to a ten-rupee *jezail*.<sup>1</sup>

The Pashtuns (also called Pathans or Pakhtuns) are the largest tribally organized group in the world, numbering 20-24 million divided more or less equally between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan they constitute plurality but not a majority of the country’s population and have provided its national leaders for the past 250 years. In Afghanistan they are divided politically and linguistically into two large descent groups: the Durranis who inhabit the southwest in the regions bordering Baluchistan who have Kandahar as

their center, and the Ghilzais of eastern Afghanistan who border and often overlap Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). The Pashtuns in the NWFP are mostly comprised of a third large descent group, the Karlanri. While the Pashtuns in Pakistan constitute a relatively small percentage of the country's total population, they are the overwhelming majority in the NWFP. Here they are divided among the autonomous groups who live in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of the NWFP that border Afghanistan and those who inhabit the settled regions of the NWFP that are ruled by the Pakistani state from the provincial capital in Peshawar.

The Pashtuns have dominated national politics in Afghanistan since the foundation of the Afghan state by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747. But while other ethnic groups may view such Pashtun domination as monolithic, there has always been a rivalry between the more numerous Ghilzai Pashtuns in the east and the Durrani Pashtuns in the south. Indeed in the 1970s a Ghilzai Pashtun friend of mine in Afghanistan complained that it was the majority Ghilzais who won the country's wars but the minority Durrani who always seemed to end up ruling the country and excluding them from power. He noted that in the 1<sup>st</sup> Anglo-Afghan War it was the Ghilzai tribes that had taken on the British, most notably by destroying their retreating army in 1842. It was they who had who had forced the abdication of the Afghan Amir and started the 2<sup>nd</sup> Anglo Afghan war in 1878. It was their revolts in 1929 that had overthrown the reform minded King Amanullah. What they got in return each time was a restoration of Durrani Mohammadzai monarchy, followed by punitive military campaigns directed by the Kabul government to put them in their place. While my friend's relatives had held high positions in the police and military, they complained of a glass ceiling kept them well below the power and privilege held by the ruling Durrani Mohammadzais (*sardars*) under King Zahir Shah and later his cousin President Daud. These Persian speaking poseurs hardly deserved to be called Pashtuns, he claimed, and yet here they had ruled the country for more than 200 years.

I took these complaints to be a bit of sour grapes mixed with some tribal chauvinism since he had easily overlooked the contribution of the Tajik Kohistanis, the Sunni Persian speaking population north of Kabul, to Afghanistan's long history of resistance to foreign invasions and rebellion against its own rulers. They tended to as involved as the eastern Pashtuns in these matters but stood even lower on the political food chain than the Ghilzais. Yet when conflict broke out in Afghanistan in 1978 with the coup that toppled Daud and brought the Soviet backed Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power, I was struck by an undercurrent of revenge long in the making. The dominant *Khalq* (Masses) faction that came out of the military was not only mostly Pashtun, in contrast to the more Persian speaking *Parcham* (Banner) faction, it was Ghilzai Pashtun. So in the guise of communists, the Ghilzais had finally taken the top slots.

But unlike the old dynastic line, faction fighting among these Ghilzai communists was so intense that within a year they were murdering one another. This internal struggle so weakened the power of the PDPA government that the Soviets invaded the country in December 1979 hoping to stabilize the situation there. As war enveloped all of Afghanistan, another of my friend's observations seemed to be repeating itself. Most of the significant Pashtun military commanders, whether on the PDPA side or the mujahideen side were overwhelmingly Ghilzais. Where were the Durrani generals and why was the most severe fighting in eastern rather than southern Afghanistan? Following

the Russian withdrawal in 1989 and a subsequent unresolved civil war among ethnically based factions, the Taliban emerged on the national stage in 1975. Since they were based in Kandahar, the center of the Durrani Pashtuns, I thought that this would prove my biases wrong and that here was the Durrani reply to Ghilzai mismanagement. But no, although based in Qandahar, the Taliban's leader, Mulla Omar, was a Hotak Ghilzai and most of his ministers were also Hotaks. The Hotaks had been the princely lineage before the rise of the Durrani and were the closest Ghilzai group to Kandahar. In addition that movement gave precedence to clerics rather than tribal leaders so its organizational base was more religious than tribal. It also recruited foreign fighters more readily than Afghan ones.

But with the American invasion and the toppling of the Taliban in 2001, the words of my friend came back to me again. After twenty-five years of war it was a relatively low profile Durrani from the south—Hamid Karzai—who suddenly got the new top spot in the new government in the Bonn Accord and went on to be elected president. He was a member of the Popalzai clan, the direct descendants of Ahmad Shah Durrani who had founded the Durrani Empire in 1747. At the same time the most powerful Ghilzai commanders were coming to blows arguing over who would be governor of Jalalabad, the provincial center where the Ghilzais were the majority. The election of Karzai as president in 2004 appeared to put the Ghilzais back in their secondary position at the national level as not a single one of the most powerful ministries went to them.

So why was it that the Ghilzai seemed to thrive politically in time of war and anarchy and so often produced the major military figures who were self made men? Why did the Durrani end up winning the peace from a position of weakness and were able to restore leadership to families that had dominated Afghan politics for generations with leaders who lacked a strong military base? And what light does this throw on the renewed Taliban insurgency, one of the first in Afghan history to have its base in the Durrani south rather than the Ghilzai east?

It is these questions that I would like to address in this paper. I do not believe that the answer lies in ideology but in the dynamics of social organization that itself is rooted in the long term structure of their respective agrarian economies. The more the agrarian structure was subsistence based and patterns of land ownership fragmented, the less scope there was for the emergence of powerful hereditary leaders, let alone dynastic families. This can be seen today most graphically among the Karlanri in Federally Administered Tribal Areas of the NWFP in Pakistan where the land barely supports the population. The Ghilzai in Afghanistan have a more productive agriculture base than that, but it was a production system that provided little scope for class distinctions. They maintained an egalitarian political order that was as opposed to the power of its own leaders as it was to attempts by governments to centralize power in Kabul. Successful leaders in this system were aggressive risk takers whose positions were based on their personal achievements that were hard to institutionalize. By contrast the Durrani Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan had come into possession of large tracts of lightly taxed agricultural land during the founding of the Durrani Empire. These rich irrigated lands located around Kandahar and Peshawar supported a hierarchical political system that required large agricultural surpluses to sustain them. It supported an elite of landowners whose tribal followers had in many cases been reduced to their economic clients. In this

system, power was relatively easy to maintain and pass on to descendants who rarely faced the personal power struggles required of Ghilzai leaders. Perhaps more important they could count on the support of their home regions if they entered national government. Ghilzai leaders could not—if they left their territories to enter the national stage rivals at home resented their success and undermined them at every turn.

Such dynamics still have an impact on Afghan politics today. To understand them we should look first at the classic model of the interaction between a subsistence based agrarian (and pastoral) system and one based on irrigated agriculture and cities as propounded by the medieval Arab social theorist and historian, ibn Khaldun. Afghanistan fits his model well but as we will see needs some modification to explain the rise of the more hierarchical tribal organization that was characteristic of ruling dynasties there.

### **Ibn Khaldun: Models of Agrarian Economies and Social Organization**

Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunisia in 1332 and died in 1406 in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> In 1375 he took four years of sabbatical from his usual work as a court official to write a multi-volume history of the world in the quiet of a village on the edge of the desert. It was the “Introduction,” or *Muqaddimah*, to this work where ibn Khaldun laid out his model of history and society, a new “science of culture” (*ilm al-'umran*).<sup>3</sup> This introduction was designed to provide the background to his larger history of events, to explain his methodology, and lay out a number of models that explained a series of historical cycles that underlay the rise and fall of dynasties, and the relationship between “desert civilization” and “sedentary civilization”.

Desert civilizations were those human communities based on subsistence agriculture or pastoralism that organized themselves along kinship lines under conditions of low population density. They were located in geographically marginal areas that proved difficult for outsiders to dominate effectively or that did not repay the cost of doing so. The specific examples he cited included desert nomads (camel raising Bedouin), steppe nomads (Turks) and mountain villagers (Kurds and Berbers). Sedentary civilizations were those human communities based on surplus agricultural production that sustained dense populations and created complex economies. They were located in broad river valleys and irrigated plains that allowed for the emergence of nucleated villages and cities. Such communities were organized on the basis of residency but divided by class and occupational structures with considerable division of labor. They were centers of learning and high culture as well as markets for regional trade and international commerce. In filling a blank map, the communities at the margins overspread the greatest geographic space but the people concentrated in the limited areas of irrigated agriculture or in urban centers equaled or exceeded them in numbers. More significantly, the sedentary areas controlled the region’s productive capital and produced the bulk of its wealth.

The two systems were not sealed off from each other. On the contrary, they had intense interactions and close connections, particularly because of population movements. Ibn Khaldun contended that desert civilizations must have predated sedentary ones because they were less complex socially and simpler economically, a supposition confirmed by modern archeology. Once cities arose, however, there was a

constant population flow from the marginal subsistence areas in the mountains, deserts and steppes toward the cities and irrigated valleys. By contrast city residents showed no desire to take up the harder and more austere life of the desert nomad or mountain villager. The push factor in this equation was demographic: the healthier periphery produced more people than its limited subsistence base could support. The pull factor was cultural and economic: city life has always been more appealing than that found in mountain villages or nomad camps. Cities and productive agricultural lands provided opportunities to indulge in rare luxuries for the rich and powerful while the poor were attracted by the constant demand for new workers. In fact this population flow was essential to the survival of pre-modern cities because their death rates exceeded their birth rates. Urban centers could not maintain a stable population (let alone grow) without a constant influx of migrants. Over time this could lead to what amounted to a wholesale population replacement. The disappearance of the Sumerian as a living language in ancient Mesopotamia was a product of the constant influx of Akkadian speakers from the countryside whose language displaced it. But the reverse also was true because of the cultural power of city life was so strong. Immigrants drawn from many disparate groups of people adopted the lingua franca of the cities that they moved to and lost their own native tongues over the course of a few generations.

## **Desert civilization**

### *Economic structure*

In a subsistence economy nearly everyone produces the same things, so there are no great differences in standards of living or much internal trade. In desert civilization, therefore, the chief might eat and drink more than an ordinary person, but he ate and drank the same things. Wealth is measured in terms of property (land and livestock particularly) rather than money. This was brought home to me in Afghanistan by a nomad trader who showed me the goods he had brought into the mountains to trade with Tajik villagers. I commented that it could not be much of a business because these villagers had no money. He rebuked me saying, “Just because people have no money does not mean they are poor. Here they have livestock.” He explained that villagers had goats with so little local value that they were eager to barter them for his imported goods. As an example, the trader showed me a box containing a half dozen unbreakable tea glasses he had purchased for 100 *afghanis* in a city bazaar that he would barter for a goat valued in the village at 500 *afghanis*. I apologized and told the trader that this was indeed a good return, but he only laughed and remarked that I had missed the real profit in his trade. When his own flocks returned to the lowlands, each Tajik goat would then be worth 1500 *afghanis* in the local bazaar, meaning that his initial 100 *afghani* investment would yield a 1400 *afghani* profit per animal.

In the absence of a money economy, people support themselves at a basic level. When surplus comes their way they invest in relationships. Hospitality, communal feasts, gift giving and other forms of redistribution raise the status of the givers, and it is this social esteem or fame that is more cherished than money. Indeed a leader gains and retains power through his ability to give to the group in some fashion. Bedouin poetry in particular praises the sheikh who is so lavish with his hospitality that he keeps nothing for himself. But such a subsistence economic base provides little basis for class

differentiation, economic specialization, or capital accumulation. If societies rooted in subsistence economies often seem timeless and unchanging, it is because their replication remains trapped within such narrow limits.

### *Social and Political Structure*

Desert civilizations had specific social attributes. The most important of these was their strong group solidarity based on kinship and descent. This generated *'asabiya*, or group feeling, which bound all members of a social group together when facing the outside world. In such a system the group interest trumps individual interest to such an extent that loyalty to the group supersedes everything else. Positive acts by any member of the group redounded to the group's benefit; any shame likewise tarnished the reputation of the group as a whole. More significantly attacks or slights against an individual were met with a collective response. Take crime as an example. One does not seek justice through government institutions (which often do not exist) but by mobilizing the kin group to seek retribution or compensation. If one man murders another, the murdered man's kin are collectively obligated to seek blood revenge. Similarly the murderer's kin are collectively responsible for his act (and may even be targets in revenge killings), although they had no direct role in it. If compensation is agreed upon to end the threat of revenge, the whole group is liable for its payment. Not only did overt acts such as assault, murder or theft demand a collective response, so did threats to a group's honor and reputation. In Afghanistan, it is the Pashtuns who are the best examples of this system through the *Pashtunwali*, a code of principles thoroughly rooted in the primacy of maintaining honor and reputation. The military advantage of this solidarity was particularly evident in times of conflict. When such groups entered into battle they were renowned as fierce fighters because individuals would rather die than shame themselves in front of their kin by running away. Life would not be worth living afterwards if they did. Of course, the group itself could decide to run away (and usually did) if the odds turned against them, but they retreated together. That was only good tactics and there was no honor to be lost in deciding to fight another day when victory was more certain.

This strong group solidarity was undermined by a number of structural political weaknesses, however. The first was that these descent or locality groups were necessarily of small size. Second, because such groups were relatively equal in numbers and had a strong cultural predisposition toward equality, it was difficult to for a leader to consolidate power. In such a system every man and every group could at least imagine the possibility of becoming dominant and resented being placed in a subordinate position. Anyone in a leadership position was therefore plagued by jealous rivals who would be happy to replace him or at least throw obstacles in his way if they could not. This pattern was so ubiquitous among close relatives in Afghanistan that it acquired a specific term in Pashto, *tarburwali* (the rivalry of cousins). Third, even if a man succeeded in surmounting this rivalry, the position of leader itself was structurally weak. It lacked the right of command and so depended on the ability to persuade others to follow. It was therefore tough being a chief of a people whom you had to cajole into action and where criticism by rivals was constant. For this reason, Ibn Khaldun noted, religious leaders were often more successful than tribal ones in uniting large groups. Coming from outside the system and calling on God's authority, they could better circumvent tribal rivalries.

## **Sedentary civilization**

### *Economy*

Sedentary civilization has luxury as its defining characteristic. This luxury is the product of a complex division of labor where money trumps kinship. In cities everything one needs or wants is obtained with money and so kinship ties atrophy. Five hundred years later and a half a world away from ibn Khaldun's medieval Islamic cities, Adam Smith made the same point more broadly noting,

that without the assistance and co-operation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated. Compared, indeed, with the more extravagant luxury of the great, his accommodation must no doubt appear extremely simple and easy; and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages.<sup>4</sup>

Cities also supported a wide range of locally produced and imported foods, as well as goods and services that ranged from the utilitarian to the extravagant. Many of these products were vital to the survival of even distant rural communities. Their need for goods they could not produce for themselves forced subsistence mountain villagers and nomads into dependency relations with urban markets.

While (the Bedouins) need the cities for their necessities of life, the urban population needs (the Bedouins) for conveniences and luxuries... They must be active on the behalf of their interests and obey them whenever (the cities) ask and demand obedience from them<sup>5</sup>

I experienced an example of this at first hand with the salt trade in the mountainous province of Badakhshan in the 1970s. Although I had thought the summer nomad encampments were self sufficient, in fact they continually sent donkey and horse caravans to the distant provincial capital of Faizabad to buy salt because it was a necessary dietary supplement for their grazing sheep. Since the local mountain villagers had cows and goats, they also made the same buying trip for salt as did the nomads but purchased cloth, metal tools, sugar and tea as well. Villagers were therefore keen to sell surplus wheat to the visiting nomads for the cash they would need for these purchases. It was clear that geographic isolation did not imply economic isolation.

The division of labor and surplus production also supported centers of learning and artistic production. While one might find Sufi mystics in remote regions, centers of Islamic teachings were always urban based. They were financed through government patronage but also by private donations of money, irrigated land and urban property to pious foundations, the revenue from which supported shrines, schools and members of the clergy that ran them. These institutions served as bastions of power for orthodox religious sects. Heterodox sects by contrast tended to thrive in the marginal areas beyond

the control of status quo institutions. It is no accident that the core Shia and Ismaili populations in Sunni dominated Afghanistan are found in its most remote mountain regions, or that older pagan groups survived here until a century ago. Indeed one scholar has suggested that this is a reoccurring pattern: whatever tradition the center holds as orthodox, the mountainous margins will set themselves off against it.<sup>6</sup>

### *Social and Political Structure*

Two defining social characteristics of sedentary civilization are identification by residence (not kinship) and hierarchical divisions based on class. It is a world of strangers who are economically dependent on one another in all aspects of daily life but have no reason to interact socially. People may boast of having a particularly prestigious bloodline, but such descent groups cannot survive intact in a world where the individual interests supersede group interests. More important, social rank had less to do with ancestors than control of wealth. Signs of class inequality are ever present in dress, food, and housing. Indeed in this setting we are no longer dealing with undifferentiated commonalities ranked on a scale of more versus less. Here we experience differences in kind that so large that no single generality can encompass them. We stop talking about food and explore the realm of cuisine in which members of different classes have different diets. Similarly social status can be distinguished immediately by dress, some types of which may be legally mandated or prohibited to make their distinctions binding. It is where women are much more commonly veiled and secluded than their sisters in the countryside because they do no work outside of the household.

The political strengths of sedentary civilization lay in its centralization, higher degree of wealth and larger size. Political leaders had “royal authority,” the ability to issue commands with the expectation that they would be obeyed. Unlike the desert chieftain, a ruler here was not a consensus builder or redistributor of wealth but an acquisitive autocrat. He secured his power by accumulating wealth for himself and the state on a grand scale through various forms of taxation, control of trade or markets, and large scale ownership of productive land. Such wealth was necessary because it undergirded centralized authority. It paid for a government bureaucracy composed of appointed subordinates who carried out the ruler’s commands with a police force behind them. Punishment awaited those who refused to pay taxes or who had the temerity to ignore a decree. Perhaps most importantly the revenue paid for an army that protected the state from invasion from without and against rebellion from within. Such military forces in the medieval Islamic world consisted of paid mercenaries or slave soldiers. While Ibn Khaldun takes this as a given, it is a significant departure from Western history. Although mercenary forces were never absent, the ancient Greek *polis* (city state), Alexander the Great, or the Roman Republic and early Empire all recruited soldiers from their own people and often made military service an obligation of citizenship (or a way to obtain it). Even in feudal Europe, the nobility justified its dominance of society based on their obligation to provide military service as mounted knights and were expected to fight in battle themselves. In the Islamic world such mass participation in warfare was characteristic only of desert civilization. Warfare by states was in the hands of military professionals who were the often unruly but paid servants of the state, not the ordinary inhabitants of any class.

This very complexity, hierarchy and wealth created political weaknesses as well as strengths. Urban and peasant populations were not as tough as the people from the margins, physically or mentally. A structure of centralized political authority where officials could easily abuse their authority and accumulate personal wealth tended to spawn corruption. This weakened the state by siphoning off its revenue and alienating the population. But perhaps most significantly these populations were uninvolved with government. As its passive inhabitants it mattered little to them who the ruler was, hence concepts of patriotism, citizenship, or indeed any a sense of political obligation to the state was almost entirely absent. This often proved a fatal weakness because the wealth of cities served as magnets for attacks by poor but militarily powerful desert civilization peoples, particularly the camel riding Bedouin and the horse riding Turkish nomads. Ibn Khaldun noted that most of the ruling dynasties in the medieval Islamic world had their origins within such groups who formerly lived at the margins of powerful regional states and empires. Taking advantage of periodic military weakness and economic decline within sedentary states, they made themselves masters of societies far more complex than those in which they were born. In the process peoples from the margins regularly established themselves as ruling elites in regions in which they conquered and then settled.

The division of marginal areas in Afghanistan into mountain, steppe and desert zones creates a pattern very similar to that seen in North Africa or the Arab Near East but the order of their importance is very different. In this region it was the Turko-Mongolian horse riding nomads from the north who played the dominating political role historically, one they did not lose until the rise of the Pashtuns in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Mountain peoples also played a larger role than elsewhere in the Islamic world. These include the Aimaqs in the Paropamisus, the Hazaras in the center of the Hindu Kush, the Tajiks in the northeastern mountains, the Pashtun in the mountainous regions straddling the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the small but culturally distinctive linguistic groups in Nuristan and the Pamirs. By contrast desert nomads play an insignificant significant role and, unlike Arabia, nomads do not form exclusive tribal or ethnic groups. In particular the Pashtun nomads in the south and east share common descent groups with other Pashtuns who are sedentary, as do the much smaller number of Baluch in the deserts further south.

Even now at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ibn Khaldun's model can be applied directly and very fruitfully to Afghanistan. Although not untouched by the economic and social changes that have fundamentally transformed or even eliminated "desert civilization" communities in other parts of the Near East, North Africa or Central Asia, Afghanistan remains a place that ibn Khaldun would easily recognize. Its rural economy remains largely subsistence based and its road and communication infrastructure only minimally developed. Once leaving the few main highways, particularly in mountainous areas, you quickly encounter a world in which people move only on horseback, on foot, or by riding donkeys. They measure travel time in days, not hours. Wherever your destination, they will cheerfully tell you that the place is "*dur nist*" (not far) so as not to disappoint you even though it will still take all day or more to get there. These are people whose goal in agriculture is to feed themselves and their families, not to produce crops for the market. Although hospitable, they draw the boundaries of community tightly and distrust strangers. Differences in wealth, rank, and status are minimal when compared to

those on the plains on in the cities. Most importantly these communities are still beyond the direct control of a weak Afghan central government in Kabul. What power that state had gained in the century prior to the communist coup of 1978 was then lost in the quarter century of war that followed it.

Ibn Khaldun would also be familiar the cultural tensions in Afghanistan between the people of the plains and cities and those who inhabited the country's mountains, deserts and steppes. To city people those in the hinterlands are more barbarian than civilized. Who (except perhaps an anthropologist like myself) would live with such people voluntarily? As a foreigner, I was often more comfortable dealing with nomads and villagers than some of my urban Afghan acquaintances. I at least respected their culture, which most city people (particularly educated ones) either held in contempt or feared. Of course people in the hinterland viewed city dwellers as weak willed and corrupt. And people in the countryside had little good to say of the political elites in the capital, regardless of their ethnic origin. Yet one of the most interesting things about this divide, unlike so many others in Afghanistan, was that it that it could be crossed by individuals. People migrating to the cities who may have been steeped in rural values found them impossible to maintain in an urban setting. (Or perhaps it would be safer to say that their children did.) This tension was particularly marked under Taliban rule. On first sight, the harsh restrictions the Taliban imposed on daily life in Kabul (no music, no games or kite flying, required beards and prayers) appears rooted solely in their severe vision of Islam. But beneath the surface lay an older and deeper conflict that ibn Khaldun would have well understood. The Taliban's hatred of the residents of Kabul, and the Kabul people's contempt and fear of the Taliban, had less to do with Islam than it did with the longstanding clash of values between luxury loving urbanites and puritanical rural villagers who had come to wield power over them. But, as ibn Khaldun also observed, if these mountain puritans were closer to being good in a moral sense than were city people, it was only because their rural life offered far fewer opportunities for corruption. And having power and wealth in an urban setting could always be counted upon to change that equation over time.

With this larger context in mind, let us now leave ibn Khaldun's model and return directly to the Pashtuns.

## **The Pashtuns**

### Who is a Pashtun?

The three ideal criteria for Pashtun identity are Pashtun descent, speaking Pashto, and conducting life in accord with Pashtun cultural code of values.

Descent play a key role because it gives rise to the Pashtun model of tribal organization based on nested sets of egalitarian clans and lineages defined by patrilineal genealogies stemming from a common ancestor. In the absence of government institutions such descent groups act to organize economic production, preserve internal political order, and defend the group against outsiders. The relationship between each of these lineages, and even extended families, rests on segmentary opposition, that is, lineages are supported by, or opposed to, one another based on their degrees of

relatedness and the problem confronting them. This ideal, though often honored in the breach, gives rise to the ethnographic cliché often cited by anthropologists and tribesmen alike: “Me against my brothers; my brothers and me against our cousins; my brothers, cousins, and me against the world.” The tribe marks the outer limits of both ordinary ethnic identification and political leadership.

In addition to descent, Pashtun identity has strong cultural boundaries, the first being command of the Pashto language. (This can be a bone of contention in Afghanistan where Pashtun elites such as the Mohammadzai royal lineage became Persian speakers over time.) But Pashtuns also insist that being a “real Pashtun” demands that one not just speak Pashto, but “do Pashto,” that is follow the precepts of the *Pashtunwali*. This is a code of conduct that stresses personal autonomy and equality of political rights in a world of equals. Thus it is more than a system of customary laws, it is a way of life that stresses honor above all else, including the acquisition of money or property. It is a code that is practically impossible to fulfill in a class-structured society or in areas where governments prohibit such institutions as blood feuds and demand tax payments.

It is therefore the people who inhabit the most marginal lands that are poor and beyond government control who see themselves as the only true Pashtuns. These include the Ghilzai border regions of eastern Afghanistan and the Karlanri FATA regions of the NWFP because only they can maintain the strict standards of autonomy demanded by the *Pashtunwali*. In richer rural areas, such as the irrigated plains around Peshawar or Kandahar where governments have been long established, this is less possible. Here there are two patterns: 1) relatively poor egalitarian lineage groups are no match for the power of states authorities and 2) local lineages that are dominated by hereditary landlords who have reduced their fellow tribesmen to the status of clients. In the first case it is not possible for the community to meet the standards of autonomy required by the *Pashtunwali*, while in the second is the landowning elite that overtly displays these values because only they have enough political autonomy to meet its standards of behavior and enough resources to meet demands of required hospitality. In Swat, Pakistan, for example, Pashtun landlords created political factions composed of clients in order to compete with other powerful landlords, but it was clear that the khans were politically and economically superior to these clients.<sup>7</sup> Pashtuns, even wealthy ones, who moved to large cities were even farther removed from the values of the *Pashtunwali* because there they were enmeshed in state systems of government that restricted autonomy and cash economies that valued money more than honor. The higher Pashtun elites rose in stratified urban societies, the weaker their ties with the rural hinterland became.

These distinctions were formally recognized by the British *raj* when it divided the NWFP into two zones: the FATA (which was not under direct state rule and had almost complete internal autonomy) and the more prosperous settled zones and cities (which were ruled by colonial administrators directly and subject to all state laws and regulations). Pakistan inherited and has maintained this same system since its independence. Afghanistan never formally recognized politically autonomous tribal zones, but did grant many distinct privileges in regards to taxation and conscription to the tribes that straddled the Durand Line. The Afghan Ministry of Tribal Affairs also provided subsidies to the tribes in this region and dealt with their problems outside of the

usual government administration.

### Political Leadership as a product of Pashtun tribal dynamics

#### *Egalitarian Pashtun tribes*

The Pashtun ethos among the Ghilzai and the FATA is rabidly egalitarian. Each individual is in theory no better by birth than any other. Leaders in such egalitarian tribal organizations gain their positions by displaying special skills in mediating problems within the tribe or successfully organizing raids and wars against its enemies. It is an achieved status not automatically inherited by a man's sons, for there are always potential agnatic rivals (particularly patrilineal cousins, *tarbur*) ready to seize any opportunity to replace an incumbent or his heir if the opportunity presents itself. For this reason leadership rarely remained for long in a single lineage. Indeed as ibn Khaldun was first to point out, such leaders lacked "royal authority", the ability to command. Such a role had little inherent power and without the ability to command it was hamstrung by time consuming consensus building to carry out any major action.

The necessity to prove leadership by building a social consensus is seen most clearly in the Pashtun *jirga* (an assembly called to settle disputes or approve plans for collective action) in which effective leaders must build a consensus in support of their decisions. In settling a blood feud, for example, the community lacks the authority either to impose a punishment on the murderers or to force the murder victim's kin to accept blood money. Instead mediators must convince the aggrieved parties to accept a settlement even though this may take an extended period of time. If they are successful, such mediators gain prestige and more followers. This dynamic also crops up when Pashtun leaders have to deal with states. Pashtun khans or maliks may appear to be leaders of their tribes but their ability to negotiate is limited by the knowledge they can impose nothing on their followers. As Akbar Ahmed noted, "The prejudice against ranks and titles and the hierarchy they imply is strong in tribal society and is summed up by the choice the Mahsud *mahshar* [headman] speaking on behalf of the clan elders, gave the British, 'Blow us all up with cannons or make all eighteen thousand of us Nawabs.'"<sup>8</sup>

The tendency toward political fragmentation among the Ghilzais had been noticed by the first British envoy to the Kingdom of Kabul, Mountstuart Elphinstone in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Comparing them to the ruling Durranis he wrote,

The internal government of the Ghiljies is entirely different from that of the Doraunees. The chiefs of the former have now lost all the authority which they possessed under their own royal government. There is reason to doubt whether that authority ever was so extensive, as that introduced among the Doraunees on the Persian model. It is more probable that the power of even the King of the Ghiljies, was small in his own country, and that the tumultuary consent of the people to support his measures abroad, was dictated more by a sense of the interest and glory of the tribe than by any deference to the King's commands. Some appearances however warrant a supposition that his power was sufficient to check murders and other great disorders. Whatever the power of the King may have had formerly, it is now at an end, and that the aristocracy has fallen with it; and although it has left sentiments of respect in the minds of the people, yet that respect is so entirely unmixed with fear, that it has no effect

whatever in controlling their actions. No Khaun of a tribe, or Mullik of a village, ever interferes as a magistrate to settle a dispute, or at least a serious one; they keep their own families and immediate dependants in order, but leave the rest of the people to accommodate their differences as they can. This may be presumed not to have always been the case, because it has not generally produced the compulsory trial by a Jeerga, (or assembly of elders) which subsists among the Berdouranee [i.e. the Karlanri], so long habituated to strife; neither has it exasperated the tempers, nor embittered the enmities of the Ghiljies, as it has with the people just mentioned.<sup>9</sup>

The maintenance and persistence of this egalitarian ethos over time has a strong ecological base. The FATA area of the NWFP and the neighboring Ghilzai areas of eastern Afghanistan are resource poor and marginal to urban centers. Arable land is scarce and not very productive in any event. Resources such as timber or pasture are under community, not private, ownership. The economy is subsistence based. In such an environment those who rise to political prominence find it hard to secure their positions over time. What surplus wealth they have is consumed by obligations of hospitality and other expressions of generosity that maintain their political support. Seeking outside revenue is therefore a strong priority for leaders who have so little at home, but this is a two edged sword. Subsidies from governments or political movements to resident leaders build their followings but can provoke jealousy, generosity's evil twin.<sup>10</sup> Leaders in eastern Afghanistan or FATA are thus never able to soar far enough above their rivals to permanently subordinate them. And public acceptance of such permanent subordination would violate the basic principle of political autonomy that undergirds the Pashtunwali.

#### *Hierarchical Pashtun tribes*

The Pashtuns (and the Bedouin Arabs) are classic examples of egalitarian segmentary tribes. But not all tribes based on descent follow this pattern nor have such egalitarian ideologies. Invading Turco-Mongolian tribes from Central Asia whose dynasties dominated Iran and Turkey for almost a thousand years, for example, were explicitly hierarchical. This difference was reflected in both their social structure and political organization. Kinship terms made distinctions between elder and younger brothers, junior and senior generations, and noble and common clans. These created a structure of nested descent groups, similar to those of the Pashtuns, but where clans and lineages were ranked hierarchically along genealogical lines. Only the leaders of noble clans had the ability to compete for high political office and the cultural tradition among the Central Asian tribes of drawing leadership from a single ruling lineage was strong and produced dynasties of unparalleled duration. The direct descendants of the Mongolian Xiongnu leader, Modun (who founded his empire in 200 BC) ruled over the Mongolian steppe for six hundred years in greater and lesser capacities, as did the direct descendants of Chinggis Khan for seven hundred years. The unbroken Ottoman sultans ruled in Turkey for more than six hundred years. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in north India who was buried in Kabul, was a product of such a tradition.<sup>11</sup>

The tribal leaders in such hierarchical systems have true royal authority: they command followers who recognize their subordinate status. The hierarchical ideology of such social structures made the cultural acceptance of status differences more natural, for

no honor was lost in assuming a junior role in a larger group nor did vesting leadership in a ruling clan or paying tribute to it create discontent. The most notable example of this structure in the Afghan-Pakistan border region is the Baluch who have permanent khans from long lived dynasties to whom taxes and political fealty are obligatory. Such is the ideological divide between the two systems that Fredrik Barth found that Pashto speakers who accepted the political protection of Baluch khans were no longer considered as Pashtuns.<sup>12</sup> Because they had publicly surrendered their autonomy they had become, in the eyes of their neighbors, “Pashto speaking Baluch.”

If the Pashtuns have refused to accept the cultural legitimacy of a hierarchy, they have been forced to adapt to its consequences. The majority of the Pashtuns in the NWFP do not live in the autonomous tribal regions but in the state administered regions where they are subject to the laws of Pakistan. In contrast to the border regions, these are lands that are more highly productive agriculturally, depend on irrigated agriculture, have strong market economies and support the major urban center of Peshawar. Indeed the densely populated Peshawar Valley and surrounding areas have been under direct state rule since pre-Islamic times. Before Pakistan became a state the region was directly administered by the British, by the Sikhs, by the Afghan amirs and by the Mughals before them. Similarly in southern Afghanistan the rich irrigated land in Kandahar and Helmand has produced a more complex economy than in eastern Afghanistan and the emergence of powerful local lineages that have been able to secure their power by dominating the agricultural economy. Before the rise of the Afghan state Kandahar was a bone of contention between the Safavid Empire in Iran and the Mughal Empire in India and came under the rule of both at various periods of time.

In terms of styles of leadership Pashtuns from the irrigated plains rely more on wealth and inherited political authority to maintain their positions. The Durrani clans of southern Afghanistan, for example, more often consist of a landlord and his clients, all Pashtuns but now no longer equals. Such leaders faced only limited internal lineage challengers to their rule and focused more on competition with similar leaders from other such clans who competed for resources in the same region. In Kandahar the historic and continuing rivalry among the major Durrani clans is centuries old. The Popalzai, Karzai’s clan, provided the Sadozai lineage of Afghan amirs who ruled from the founding of the Afghan state in 1747 until 1818. Their rivals, the Barakzais, produced the Mohammadzai royal lineage that ruled Afghanistan from 1826 to 1978. Locally these clans faced two other rivals: the Alikozai and the Achakzai who have been powerful regional elites in southern Afghanistan for the same period.

There is a similar dichotomy in Pakistan’s NWFP as well. When Akbar Ahmad compared Tribal Area Mohmands with Settled Area Mohmands, he found that the latter were so encapsulated by the state that they had little effective leadership and were well on their way to becoming a subjected peasant class.<sup>13</sup> In Swat Barth observed the historical development of powerful landowning khans who dominated their clients.<sup>14</sup> Swat was therefore more structurally similar to Kandahar in political organization: the egalitarian ethos of the FATA tribes was missing but the landowning khans provided the backbone of resistance to state penetration. The price for FATA’s autonomy has been lack of economic development, education and services.

The leaders of southern Durrani groups have great time depth when compared to the

Ghilzais and more wealth at their disposal because they own so much land. They have also played an important political role in representing the region's interests in dealings with the central government. As a result they have been generally more educated and sophisticated than their rural Ghilzai counterparts and more comfortable in national politics. However, if they have more security of command and property, they are also more subject to more coercion. The river valleys and flat surrounding deserts are much more vulnerable to military attack than are isolated mountain villages. Landed estates are subject to confiscation and the irrigation network itself is exquisitely vulnerable to disruption. The once densely populated region of Seistan of western Afghanistan became a depopulated desert when its irrigation system failed (historians still debate whether the cause was geological or disruption by war).

### **Implications for leadership war and peace**

These differences may explain the first question introduced at the beginning of this paper. The Ghilzais do best in times of anarchy because their poor subsistence based regions cope better with economic or political disruption and are harder to coerce because of their isolation. The high level of competition and relative ease of entry into the political sphere means that ambitious and talented men have had a better chance to rise in times of war and political anarchy when military leadership is most highly valued and poor social or economic background is not a barrier. In terms of filling military commands, Ghilzais were more prone to enter the army or interior police in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because the Durrani already commanded the more prestigious positions. During the Soviet occupation, personal charisma and ability accelerated their advancement in both the PDPA and the *mujahideen*. By contrast the Durrani leaders were disadvantaged by the outbreak of war. Their regions were more vulnerable to retaliation, their populations more concentrated, and the topography less favorable to guerilla war than eastern Afghanistan. The power of Durrani leaders had also always been more political than military. In the communist ranks the Durrani were more often to be found with the urbanized Tajiks who formed the *Parcham* faction than allied with their more rural co-ethnics in the military ranks of the *Khalq* faction. The Durrani elite that opposed the PDPA used its established wealth and connections to seek asylum in Europe or North America. Their Ghilzai counterparts sought refuge in Pakistan from where they could still engage in resistance against the regime if they chose.

In time of peace, or at least emerging stability, the situation was reversed. Here the defects that hindered them were either irrelevant or positive advantages. The Durrani had a long established elite that could negotiate for them. Their leaders were able to make deals that would be accepted by their followers, while Ghilzai leaders could never be sure their followers would back them. Their Durrani elite by its very nature had higher levels of education and sophistication than their Ghilzai counterparts. This gave them an advantage in the world of diplomacy where dealing with non-Afghans was key to success. Indeed the bulk of the cabinet officials in the new government were educated Afghans who had been in exile in western countries, a fact that riled the existing *mujahideen* commanders who saw them as carpetbaggers. Still, money talks: the Durrani were past masters of winning subsidies from world powers, while the Ghilzai *mujahideen*

leadership had dealt only with Pakistan.\* In a continuing civil war conflict situation, Karzai would have never emerged at the top. But in a contest where dealing with the outside world took precedence he had signal advantage over Ghilzai rivals. The latter were not secure enough in their own regions to make a play for national power. Karzai was because the Durrani elite stood to back him regionally as a way back to national prominence for the Pashtuns as a whole and the Kandaharis in particular. In this political ecology, assets in time of war became liabilities in times of peace.

### **Some thought on the resurgent Taliban and their war of religion**

The current revival of the Taliban represents an usual situation in Afghan history. Resistance against Kabul or foreign occupation has usually had its epicenter in eastern Afghanistan (Ghilzai country) and Kohistan (plains north of Kabul including the Panjshir valley). Throughout Afghan history Kandahar and the south has either come to an accommodation with the powers that be or been a secondary area of resistance. The Afghans expelled the British from Kabul in both Anglo-Afghan Wars, but the British never lost control of Kandahar.

The Taliban were organized as a religious movement, but their followers and leaders are predominantly Pashtun. By 1999 they controlled all of Afghanistan except the Tajik northeast until they were expelled from Afghanistan by the American invasion of 2001. While their emergence was a surprise, their movement's dynamic followed a well worn path. Scholars have long noted that religious leaders could transcend tribal boundaries and unite people in the name of religion who would not otherwise cooperate. Commenting on the structurally similar Bedouin tribes, ibn Khaldun argued that religion was uniquely suited to bringing rival tribes together because,

The Bedouins are the least willing of nations to subordinate themselves to each other, as they are rude, proud, ambitious and eager to be leaders. Their individual aspirations rarely coincide. But when there is religion (among them) through prophethood or sainthood, then they have some restraining influence on themselves. The qualities of haughtiness and jealousy leave them. It is, then easy for them to subordinate themselves and unite (as a social organization).<sup>15</sup>

The Taliban used the failures of the *mujahideen* warlords during the Afghan civil war to attract a wide following in the south. Eliminating robber bands around Kandahar beginning in 1994, they went on to incorporate an increasing number of Pashtun groups, mostly by convincing them to join the movement. An advantage of a religious movement for rival Pashtun leaders was that there was no honor or prestige lost in subordinating oneself to the will of God or God's agents. The movement also served to give the Pashtuns the dominant role they expected to play in Afghan politics without having to cede any ground to specific rival clans. The Taliban expansion into Pashtun areas was largely peaceful, with tribal leaders and local *mujahideen* commanders defecting to their cause in return for retaining their local power under a Taliban administration. When they moved out of Pashtun regions they relied more on force and came to depend on outside support from Pakistan and international *jihadi* groups like al Qaeda. Their restoration of

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\* As one of Kipling's famous poems, "Ballad of the King's Mercy" went, "Abdur Rahman the Durani Chief, of him is the story told, He has opened his mouth to the North and the South, they have stuffed his mouth with gold."

order was welcome but their severe religious policies and their inability to provide any governmental services alienated them from the population. The tribal Pashtun elite in the south refused to ally themselves with the Taliban when the Americans moved on Kandahar and Mullah Omar decamped to Pakistan by motorcycle.

After four years of quiet in the south the Taliban made a concerted effort this past year to show they are still a powerful military force. While this proved that they remained players in Afghan politics that need to be reckoned with, the more likely reason for initiating large scale conflict was that the Taliban (and their Pakistani backers) saw the changeover to NATO troops in the south as a sign of weakness they could and should exploit. Certainly the types of attacks they made, the size of the groups involved, and the numbers of casualties they took were significantly larger than in the past. It was also apparent that the trouble they caused remained confined to the Pakistan border region. The Taliban and its leaders have always represented an alternative to the traditional Durrani tribal leadership structure and a threat to it. As the *jihadi* factions in the NWFP have done, they would like to use their access to vast sums of outside money, arms and their fervent Islamic ideology to displace much of the established tribal leadership.

But in southern Afghanistan this is less easy to do, in part because their tribal opponents now also have access to outside funds and can depend on a powerful international military force to take on the Taliban. Thus while the Taliban was able to replace the traditional tribal structure in the late 1990s, weakened as it was by the period of civil war anarchy, in the present context they may find it more difficult. Durrani leaders have a much greater capacity to cut deals with the Kabul government and mobilize larger numbers of people than do the eastern Ghilzais if they decide that this is in their interest. Having lost out once to Mullah Omar and company, they are not likely to accommodate the Taliban again if they think they can be defeated. As a Ghilzai he is at a disadvantage centering his resistance in Durrani tribal territory, although by stressing its religious basis this conflict is muted. Areas under current Taliban domination have come into existence where the absence of significant Kabul government or international forces to oppose them has given them an almost free ride. And it has been the failure of the Kabul government to provide economic benefits and security that have made the Taliban look like an attractive alternative again, not sympathy for their ideology.

But perhaps a greater problem is that the south has never served a good center for rebellions of any type because it provides a relatively poor base for an insurgency and its population has historically been inclined to sit on the fence rather than take the lead. Its leadership has always seen politics rather than military prowess as the best long term strategy. In geographical terms it offers little to sustain an insurgency. The terrain is flat with little ground cover and population concentrated in villages dependent on irrigated agriculture. Despite Pakistani President Musharraf's recent comments that the Taliban is a danger because it has solid Afghan roots, in fact its ideology is more Pakistani than Afghan. Its leadership bases itself in Pakistan and could not wage an insurgency without with the recruits, bases, and safe refuge it find there. The Taliban succeeded in the past in an environment of anarchy; to the degree that anarchy returns so do the Taliban.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> A *jezail* was a locally produced Afghan musket. Kipling, Rudyard. *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*. Roslyn, NY: Black Readers Service, n.d.
- <sup>2</sup> For a biography, see Muhsin Madhi, *Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history: a study in the philosophic foundation of the science of culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- <sup>3</sup> For a full translation see Franz Rosenthal, Ibn Khaldun: *The Muqaddimah* (3 vol.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958. Translations cited here are from the one volume abridged 1967 edition.
- <sup>4</sup> [B.I, Ch.1, Of the Division of Labor](#) in paragraph I.1.11 Wealth of Nations 1776
- <sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldun, (1967) *The Muqaddimah*. (trans. Frans Rosenthal). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 122.
- <sup>6</sup> Canfield, Robert, *Faction and Conversion in a Plural Society*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973.
- <sup>7</sup> Barth, Fredrik, *Political leadership among the Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone, 1959.
- <sup>8</sup> Ahmed, Akbar, *Pukhtun Economy and Society*. London: Kegan Paul, 1980:141-2
- <sup>9</sup> Elphinstone, Monsturat, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. Delhi: Manoharlal, 1998 [1815], p 439-440.
- <sup>10</sup> Lindholm, Charles (1980). *Generosity and Jealousy*. New York: Columbia University Press
- <sup>11</sup> Barfield, Thomas, "Tribe and state relations: The Inner Asian perspective." In *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, edited by Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 153-185.e
- <sup>12</sup> Barth, Fredrik. (Ed.). (1969). "Pathan identity and its maintenance." In *Ethnic groups and boundaries*. Boston: Little Brown, pp. 119-34.
- <sup>13</sup> Akbar Ahmad op cit
- <sup>14</sup> Barth op cit
- <sup>15</sup> Ibn Khaldun op cit pp 121-122)