
REPORT FROM THE FIELD

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Pushtuns, Tribalism, Leadership, Islam and Taliban: A Short View

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Striking is easy, tolerating a blow is difficult.¹

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The Pushtuns are the most tribalised group of people in the world, which has a definite impact at times on their abilities to stay focused or united for issues larger than their respective tribes, sub-tribes and *khels* (clans). This tribalism, epitomised by the ‘code of the Pushtuns’ or *Pushtunwali/Puhktunwali*, can at times even trump the Muslim faith of the Pushtuns or the hard-won regional alliances agreed to. Therefore, it is important to examine, at least cursorily, the nature and structure of Pushtun tribal leadership. Before I do so, let me start with a perfect example of how adherence to the *Pushtunwali* and its emphatic tribalism can over take and nullify the efforts at unity attempted by non-Pushtuns (in this instance, Islamic radical fundamentalists, a.k.a. *Islamiyun*).

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In March 2007 fighting apparently erupted between two (possibly three) groups of expatriate Uzbeks and their local Pushtun tribal supporters. The location of the fighting is South Waziristan, the ‘heartland’ of the neo-Taliban (as differentiated from the ‘traditional’ Taliban headquartered in Quetta, normally either Durrani or Ghilzai; or the opportunistic Taliban ‘concessionary’ of Jalaluddin Haqqani in North Waziristan, himself a Zadrani Pushtun). The Uzbeks, having been living on the hospitality of the Ahmedzai Waziris (an example of *malmastia* and *nanawati*), but the expatriate groups are supported by different *khels* within the Ahmedzai. One group appears to be supported by the Darikhel (who are a *khel* of the Zalikhel) and the Tojikhel while the other group is supported by the Yargulkhel, itself the largest *khel* within the Zalikhel.

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(The following is complex but critical to understand in reference to the tribal environment in which Pushtuns live. As my example, I will use the Ahmedzai Wazirs of south Waziristan. The main sub-tribes of the Ahmadzai Wazir are the Zalikhel, the Tojikhel, the Khojalkhel, the Gangikhel, the Sarkikhel, the Mughalkhel, the Khoniakhel, the Shodyakai and the Sperkia, for a total of almost 200,000 Ahmedzai Wazirs. Most of the above sub-tribes are further subdivided; for instance, the Zalikhel itself consists of the Seikh Bazid, the Atmankhel and the Kakakhel. These are even further subdivided into clans, for instance, the Seikh Bazid consists of the Ashrafkhel, the Yargulkhel, the Darikhel, the Ghanikhel, and the Jaykhel. It looks confusing to a non-Pushtun but is something almost imbibed from birth by most Pushtuns, with greatest familiarity being those closest to the Pushtuns immediate own family.)

The fighting resulted from a resentment of the presence of at least some of the Uzbeks in south Waziristan but was ignited by the ambush and murder, by Uzbeks, of a Saudi, Sheik Asadullah in early March 2007 (Asadullah was the successor to Ahmed Saeed Abdur Rehman Khaddar al-Canadi, an Egyptian-born Canadian known as a conduit for finances to al-Qaeda affiliates; he was killed near Angor Adda in October 2004). Maulavi Nazir of the Darikhel, designated Taliban successor to Maulavi Omar (who was himself a Yargulkhel and successor to the killed Taliban commander Nek Mohammad), had remained aloof from the brewing troubles with the Uzbeks, but apparently decided the killing of the tribal belt ‘moneybags’ was a good opportunity to be rid of the ‘bad’ Uzbeks while simultaneously cementing his position as leader of the larger Ahmedzai Waziri Taliban. The latter reason is a continuation of an intra-tribal power move against the more powerful Yargulkhel, especially as Asadullah was personally linked to the Darikhel. In the following clash, the Yargulkhel and Uzbeks killed two brothers and the son of a respected Darikhel elder, Saidullah Khan. Since then, vengeance killing has followed vengeance killing, according to the dictates of the *Pushtunwali*. It has reached the point that interventions by Fazlur Rahman of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema e-Islam (JUI), Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah Akhund and Jalaluddin Haqqani’s son Sirajuddin, as well as local tribal leaders, have been attempted and failed. While the government of Pakistan is somewhat happy to watch the fractious Pushtuns display their violent tendencies of egalitarianism in this instance, the Taliban and al-Qaeda are trying to quell the violence and restore a semblance of Islamic and tribal unity. If history is any guide, they will not be very successful.

I wrote the above as way of an introduction because it seems to me that it is much easier to depict the ‘independence’ of the Pushtuns, situation be damned, rather than starting off stating that Pushtun

leadership is egalitarian and acephalous within a segmentary tribal structure. This article will span both Afghanistan and Pakistan, because that is where the Pushtuns live. West of the Durand Line, also known as the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, reside the tribal confederacies of the Durrani and the Ghilzai with some small slices of the Gurgusht and Karlanri. To the east lie the Karlanri, Ghoriah, Lodin, Khaki and the Gurgusht.

For the Pushtun and everyone else there, Afghanistan is a land of paradoxes. Called Afghanistan because it means land of the Pushtun, there are over 50 ethnic groups, often locked in conflict with one another. Ironically, each one of these groups appears to fully subscribe to their common Afghan heritage and none have ever sought secession as a path to power. As an example, in 1994 United Nations peace envoy Mohmand Mestiri received over 300 proposals from Afghans outlining methods and ways to settle the then ongoing post-Najibullah conflict(s). Not a single one of those proposals raised the question of partition. Secondly, while Kabul is the national capital (Kandahar has occasionally usurped that role but only briefly, while the old capital was Peshawar until the Sikhs took it in the 1840s, which still rankles with Pushtuns to this day), what happens in Kabul only matters in the provinces to the extent that it undermines (or does not) the foundations of local power. That local power is often tribal, especially in the Pushtun areas, or ethnically provincial, such as the Farsiwan of Herat, the Tadjiks or the Uzbeks. Custom also plays its part, limiting any centralising power. When the central power of Kabul attempts to impose its will over the provinces (the periphery), its strength either doesn't last long or is relatively weak and thus tolerable, or it causes conflict. The last time before the current Karzai/Coalition effort that the centre tried to impose its control was during the Soviet occupation. It can be seen what devastation ensued due to the resistance from the provinces/periphery.

Lastly, in the absence of centralised control, ethnic/tribal homogeneity or a unifying external threat (not a sure method to create unanimity amongst Afghans or Pushtuns) the only vehicle available for consensus is Islam. Therefore any successful or aspiring government must have the 'spiritual legitimacy' of being either Muslim or Islamic. This cannot be imposed from outside nor can it be 'owned' by any single ethnic group or tribe/tribal confederacy.

Since 1747 the Pushtuns have been the dominant force, for good or ill, in the region now spanned by Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even the Moghuls of India and the Safavids of Persia hired Durrani (then called Abdali) and Ghilzai mercenaries for work in their respective empires. The Uzbeks have been largely peripheral, being occupied more in central Asia and against the Persians, only really flowing into the region in the wake of Russian destruction of the Uzbek khanates of Central Asia in