

The Pashtun Will Outlast All Empires, but Can They Hold Afghanistan's Center?

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'An empire within an empire,' the Pashtun are essential to understanding the complexities of Afghanistan as a nation-state today. What is the 'Pashtun universe,' and why will they always outlast those who try to govern them?

It was bound to happen: the remixed Saigon moment at Kabul airport and the stunning comeback of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, led by Pashtuns, has unleashed across the West a cheap Orientalization avalanche.

The whole of Afghanistan is now 'threatened' by the return of the 'barbarians.'

Once again, Afghan women 'need to be protected,' all Afghans 'need to be rescued,' 'terrorists will rebuild' and Afghanistan may even need to be re-invaded for the sake of 'civilization.' All because of those wild tribal Pashtun barbarians.

Imperialist pathologies never die. 'Barbarian' yields from the Greek original *barbaros* – as in someone who could not speak Greek, or spoke it incorrectly.

When faced with the sophisticated Persians, the concept of barbarian evolved. And then the Romans gave it its final contours, encompassing people who could not speak Greek or Latin, those who deployed military skills, were fierce or cruel to their enemies, or came from a non Graeco-Roman culture.

All this eventually coalesced into a toxic Western cultural construct deployed for centuries, the ultimate, pejorative denomination for a warrior-like Other: uncouth, uncivilized, rural, non-urban, prone to violence and cruelty, maybe not a total savage, but close.

As a contrast, Imperial China always referred to various Central Eurasian tribes and peoples as warring, civilized, urban, nomads, agrarian, but never as barbarians.

Pashtun Afghanistan is a much more sophisticated universe than the prevailing

reductionism that evokes rural subsistence economy, mud-brick architecture, caravans of nomads, burqas and bearded men in sandals brandishing Kalashnikovs.

So as a tribute to the late, great Norwegian social anthropologist [Fredrik Barth](#), let's subvert Orientalism by taking an – Orientalist! – magic carpet ride to the twists and turns of the Pashtun world.

It's all about Turko-Persia

Afghanistan may be approached as southern Central Asia, as western South Asia, or as eastern West Asia.

The fact remains that Afghanistan, historically, is a crucial node of Turko-Persia – as much in culture and language as in geography. Turko-Persia stretches east from Anatolia and the Zagros mountains, along the Iranian plateau, all the way to the Indian plains. This has been no less than the heartland of Persian empires.

Pashtuns have an immensely complex ethno-genesis. There are historians who identify Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan as far back as the Achaemenid empire in 500 BC.

Pashtuns may be descendants of the Hephtalites, which by the way are not the White Huns of Central Asia, as demonstrated by scholar Etienne de la Vaissiere. The Hephtalites defeated the Sassanid empire in the 5th century and occupied vast stretches of Bactria and Transoxiana.

But Pashtuns may also be descendants from the Sakas – nomadic Iranian peoples of the Eurasian steppe. And that, famously, would put them as descendants of the Sogdians and the Scythians.

Herodotus wrote that the Persians called the Scythians *Saka*, and later Oswald Szemerényi in his 1980 classic *Four Old Iranian Ethnic Names; Scythian-Skudra-Sogdian-Saka* showed that *Saka* was the Persian name for all Scythians. An earlier form, *Sakla*, suggests historically the conquest of the entire steppe by northern Iranians – literally Scythians.

What's certain is that Pashtuns have multiple origins; after all, they are a tribal confederation.

Pashtuns have a knack of linking multiple lineages (*zai*, in Pashto, as in 'son of') with tens of millions of people into a single genealogy, right to their – arguably mythic – common ancestor: Qais, a contemporary of Prophet Muhammad.

These lineages merge into larger clans (*khel*, in Pashto) and lead to tribal confederations, the most important of which are the Durrani, the Ghilzai and the Karlanri, which the British called Pathans. The Pathans are the indigenous inhabitants of the mountains that straddle what is now an artificial Afghanistan-Pakistan border; they only became Pashtuns much later, adopting their language and culture.

The 11th century capital of the Turkish Ghaznavids lay in what would later become territory held by the Ghilzai tribes. This intermingling is explainable because Afghanistan was always the eastern frontier of the Persian and then Turko-Mongol empires.

The large nomad tribal confederations emerged only in the early 13th century, in oases in

the southwest Afghan desert, or congregating peasants in the eastern mountains. It's an array of heterogeneous groups interlinked by a code and value system establishing their social relations: the Pashtunwali.

Pashtunwali rules

Pashtunwali has integrated quite a few elements of Muslim morals, but it's in contradiction with sharia law in many aspects. French scholar X. de Planhol succinctly described it as "a set of rules that model the customs (*adat*), character (*khoui*) in relation to social exigence (*raouadj*), and thus define ethnic identity (*khouyouna*)." Pashtunwali regulates individual honor and also regulates a set of sanctions, with death prominently featured.

In the Pashtun world, everything must be decided by a *jirga* (assembly). They happen at every level – home, village, clan, tribe, whenever necessary. The number of participants varies from a dozen to thousands. I've been to a few. It's a fascinating exercise in direct democracy.

There's no 'conductor.' Results don't come by vote, but by a consensus that must naturally evolve once there's no opposition to a decision. Elders are way more influential than youngsters. This is how the Taliban decided their new caretaker government.

As much as the Pashtun code is one of the most meticulous on the planet, Islam has brought to the fore quite a few moral issues, sometimes in contradiction with Pashtunwali. To add to the complexity, there are juridical norms imposed by a hereditary nobility, coming from the Turko-Mongols.

Starting in the 11th century, Afghanistan received an influx of Turk nomads, preceding the 13th century Mongol conquests. At the time, virtually all of Bactria was Turkicized – except for the Pashtuns.

Balkh, the legendary capital of Bactria, which stunned Arab invaders described as Mother of Cities, the richest satrapy of the Persian empire, was the dominant city in the Afghan northern plains for millennia, located north of the Hindu Kush. Those waves of Turkish-speaking nomads were over-spilling from Turkestan, which included the khanates of Bukhara and Samarkand: they merged with the local Persian population, and Dari – which is Farsi (Persian) with a different accent – remained the predominant language.

Peshawar was a completely different story. Historically, Peshawar was closely connected to Kabul because it was its winter capital for centuries (Kabul was an Hindu kingdom well into the 11th century). Afghans lost Peshawar when it fell to the Sikhs in 1834; later it became part of the Raj when the Sikhs were defeated.

Peshawar is the Pashtun Mecca. Pashtun tribes living in the mountain valleys above Peshawar have never in history answered to any government. For them, there's no border or ID papers: only their rifles.

A key Pashtun characteristic is that they have been living essentially at the margin of great empires. They evolved based on their own norms and had the freedom to build their own system of reference. And that explains why they are so independent.

Pashtuns identify two types of land: *Yaghestan* (the land of rebels) and *Hokumat* (the land of

government). There may be serious internal social differentiations, but the whole Pashtun social body comes together when it's a matter of facing external conditions. That explains the fierce fighting spirit against any foreign invader, be it British, Soviet or American.

So we're talking about extraordinary social cohesion – with a coordinated reaction towards external events. No wonder Pashtuns believe the political structures they develop are superior. History has shown that once neighboring imperial structures started to weaken, Pashtuns ended up forging 'their' state.

And don't forget the Turko-Mongols

Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, Afghanistan was squeezed between three empires: the Uzbeks of lower Central Asia, the Mughals in India, and the Iranian Safavids. The Mughals and the Safavids were fighting for Herat and Kandahar. Pashtuns privileged the Safavids, even though they were Shia. Afghan territory, a natural extension of Iranian mountains and plateaus, facilitated Safavid influence.

This went on until in the early 18th century when Afghan tribes rebelled against declining Safavid power. An independent political entity around the Durrani tribe emerged in 1747, and Ahmad Shah was crowned King of the Afghans in Kandahar, via a *loya jirga* (grand assembly).

This first Afghan state south of the Hindu Kush was quite homogeneous. The structure was basically Turko-Persian, in fact Turko-Mongolian, much more than based in Pashtun tribal tradition.

Since the late 10th century, every major empire from the borders of northern India to trans-Oxiana, Iran and Anatolia was founded by Turks or Mongols. Some would last centuries – like the Ottoman Turks. Afghanistan was in fact ruled by Turko-Mongols for no less than 750 years, until the Pashtuns formed a state in the mid-18th century.

Yet an Afghan state was definitively established only after the Great Game between the Russian and British empires. That was Afghanistan in the late 19th century, configured as a buffer state between Russian Central Asia and the Raj. The Brits needed it to block the road to India and the sea of Oman to the Russians, who were getting ever closer after they set a protectorate in Bukhara in 1873.

Drawing up the Russo-Afghan and Sino-Afghan borders was not a problem. The real issue was the border with the Raj along the 1893 Durand line, dividing the territory of numerous Pashtun tribes just so imperial Britain could control the main access points to the Indian subcontinent, the Khyber pass and the Quetta corridor. The Durand line was only definitively drawn in 1921. It divides Pashtun lands in two – and was never, and will never, be recognized in Afghanistan as a real border.



So if we had the first Afghan state with a strong Pashtun majority, the second was a colonial invention bearing a complex ethnic mosaic. Before the 1979 Soviet incursion and the 1980s jihad, that accounted for 40 to 55 percent of Pashtuns, 35 to 45 percent to Persian-speaking ethnic groups, and 10 to 15 percent to Turkish-speaking ethnic groups. It hasn't changed much since.

The creator of modern Afghanistan, 'Iron Emir' Abd-ur-Rahman, actually 'Pashtunized' northern Turkestan, transplanting sedentary Pashtun populations from the south from the Durrani and Ghilzai tribal confederations, and then encouraging nomads to migrate.

And that's one of the reasons why the ethnic composition of Afghanistan is extremely tricky, especially in the west and in the north. Everyone is in perpetual movement – alliances included (the Taliban profited from it for their lightning fast surge before arriving in Kabul on 15 August).

What is immutable is that across a structurally unstable nation, Pashtuns consider themselves top of the heap – and the 'owners' of the Afghan state. And yet their perpetual intra-ethnic strife always wins over communitarian solidarity. There's always a huge clash between the Durrani – who in fact took over the state since the mid 18th century – and other Pashtun groups, especially the Ghilzai. The Ghilzais are more egalitarian in spirit and do not accept Durrani hegemony: they just consider them more manipulative.

Mullah Omar, for example, is Ghilzai. But former Afghan President Hamid Karzai is from Sadozai Durrani descent, an impeccable lineage, and later he inherited the leadership of the Popalzai sub-clan.

The Durrani elite supported Karzai in late 2001 because they identified him as their own return to power after the socialist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), civil war and Taliban interregnum. Other tribes were deeply disorganized and could not agree on anything. The only other possible option would have been Massoud the Tajik, a true nationalist, and respected even by Pashtuns. But he was assassinated on 9 September, 2001.

Down with the nation-state

Pashtuns have a natural aversion to the Westphalian notion of the nation-state. After all, they see themselves as an empire within the empire. Centralized power usually tries to neutralize them by bribery built as a system of government (that was the modus operandi during the Karzai years).

Afghan political life, in practice, is set in motion by factions: sub-tribes, Islamic coalitions (what the Taliban de facto forged to come back to power), and regional groups, usually led by warlords since the 1980s jihad. Add to it religious conflict, with hegemonic Sunnism, the Shiism of the Hazaras and the Ismailism of the Pamiri Tajiks always clashing.



In Afghanistan, Islam is as much ideology (the 2004 constitution recognizes an Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) as religion. It's the stepping stone of Afghan identity, Pashtun or not. Every tribal member adheres wholeheartedly to Islam, even when there are glaring differences between sharia and pashtunwali. Afghans as a whole may be defined as the quintessential Natural Born Muslims.

The 'historic' 1990s Taliban – who now compose the majority of the interim government – are Pashtun tribals who speak Pashto and so affirm their identity, much more than emphasizing being member of a particular tribe. What is unshakeable for these men issued from rural conservatism is their suspicion of the city – especially Kabul and its modernists – and the Pashtun superiority complex in relation to other ethnic groups.

Even as the NATO-occupied Karzai years were a disaster, the Taliban were also in crisis and in internal disarray most of the time. Their ideology could be accused of being more Pakistani than Afghan: after all, the Taliban as a movement was born in Pakistani madrassas, and the leadership all these years was based in Balochistan.

Taliban 2.0 may suggest they are venturing beyond tribal identity, and the perennial Durrani-Ghilzai confrontation is being pushed to the background. But the bitter negotiations for the interim government seem to spell otherwise, opposing the Doha 'moderates,' some of them Durrani, some Ghilzai, to the 'warrior' Haqqanis, who are Karlanri.

In Afghanistan, prior to the latest horrendous four decades of war, the center of the rural political order revolved around landowning khans. As a rule, they were allies of the state. But then, starting with the 1980s jihad, this old elite was smashed by young, self-made military commanders who rapidly built their own political bases. The new generation, who fought NATO on the ground, now also expects to have a future in the new Kabul arrangement. As far as state building goes, this will be extremely tricky to negotiate.

So the big question now is how the old Pashtun breed, having learned the lessons of their dismal governing experience in 1996-2001, will be able to circumvent the inherent weakness of every Afghan central government. The periphery tribal system is bound to remain very strong, with nearly autonomous territories controlled by warlords that are not tribal chiefs, but in fact competitors for regional power and sources of income that should be feeding the state coffers.

And here is the ultimate challenge for these Pashtun warriors: to forge an Islamic system where the center can hold. The dire alternative, to paraphrase Yeats, will be mere anarchy loosed upon the Afghan world.

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