

‘Pashtunistan’: The Challenge to Pakistan and Afghanistan

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Theme: The increasing co-operation between Pashtun nationalist and Islamist forces against Punjabi domination could lead to the break-up of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the emergence of a new national entity: an ‘Islamic Pashtunistan’.

Summary: The alarming growth of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Pashtun tribal region of north-western Pakistan and southern Afghanistan is usually attributed to the popularity of their messianic brand of Islam and to covert help from Pakistani intelligence agencies. But another, more ominous, reason also explains their success: their symbiotic relationship with a simmering Pashtun separatist movement that could lead to the unification of the estimated 41 million Pashtuns on both sides of the border, the break-up of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the emergence of a new national entity, an ‘Islamic Pashtunistan’.

This ARI examines the Pashtun claim for an independent territory, the historical and political roots of the Pashtun identity, the implications for the NATO- or Pakistani-led military operations in the area, the increasing co-operation between Pashtun nationalist and Islamist forces against Punjabi domination and the reasons why the Pashtunistan movement, long dormant, is slowly coming to life.

Analysis: The alarming growth of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Pashtun tribal region of north-western Pakistan and southern Afghanistan is usually attributed to the popularity of their messianic brand of Islam and to covert help from Pakistani intelligence agencies. But another, more ominous reason also explains their success: their symbiotic relationship with a simmering Pashtun separatist movement that could lead to the unification of the estimated 41 million Pashtuns on both sides of the border, the break-up of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the emergence of a new national entity, ‘Pashtunistan,’ under radical Islamist leadership.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are fragile, multiethnic states. Ironically, by ignoring ethnic factors and defining the struggle with the jihadists mainly in military terms, the US is inadvertently helping al-Qaeda and the Taliban to capture the leadership of Pashtun nationalism. The central political problem facing Pakistan, largely shielded from international attention by the ‘war on terror’, is how to deal with the deep ethnic tensions

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between the Punjabi majority, which controls the armed forces, and Baluchi, Sindhi and Pashtun minorities that have been denied a fair share of economic and political power.

If history is a reliable guide, the prospects for the survival of the Pakistani state in its present form, with its existing configuration of constituent ethno-linguistic groups, cannot be taken for granted. There is no precedent in the history of South Asia for a state consisting of the five ethno-linguistic regions that made up Pakistan as originally constituted in 1947, or even for the truncated Pakistan consisting of the four regions that remained after Bangladesh seceded in 1971. The ideologues of Pakistani nationalism exalt the historical memory of Akbar and Aurangzeb as the symbols of a lost Islamic grandeur in South Asia. By contrast, for the Baluchis, Sindhis and Pashtuns, the Moghuls are remembered primarily as the symbols of past oppression.

In Afghanistan, where the Pashtuns are the largest single ethnic group, they bitterly resent the disproportionate influence enjoyed by the Tajik ethnic minority in the regime of Hamid Karzai, a legacy of US collaboration with Tajik militias in overthrowing the Taliban. More importantly, it is the Pashtuns who have been the main victims of US-NATO bombing attacks on the Taliban, who are largely Pashtuns and operate almost entirely in Pashtun territory. In one authoritative estimate, civilian casualties in Afghanistan have numbered nearly 5,000 since 2001.

The Lost Empire

The size of the Pashtun population in Afghanistan is disputed and no definitive census data exist in Afghanistan. The *CIA World Factbook* estimates that Afghanistan's population was 31.05 million in 2006, of which 13 million were Pashtuns. In Pakistan, census data indicate 25.6 million Pashtu speakers. To this must be added some 2.5 million Pashtun refugees in Pakistan. These figures suggest a total Pashtun population in both countries of 41 million.

In Pashtun eyes, British colonialism robbed them of their birthright. Until the Raj, the Pashtuns were politically united for nearly a century under the banner of an Afghan empire that stretched eastwards as far as the Indus River. It was traumatic for the Pashtuns when the British seized 40,000 square miles of ancestral Pashtun territory between the Indus and the Khyber Pass, embracing half of the Pashtun population, and then imposed the Durand Line, formalising their conquest. When they subsequently handed over this territory to the new, Punjabi-dominated government of Pakistan in 1947, the British bequeathed an explosive, irredentist issue that has perennially marked the rhetoric of Pashtun-dominated Afghan regimes and has poisoned the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. At various times, Zahir Shah's monarchy, Muhammad Daoud's republic and post-1978 Communist governments in Kabul have all challenged Pakistan's right to rule over its Pashtun areas, alternatively espousing the goal of an autonomous Pashtun state to be created within Pakistan, an independent Pashtunistan to be carved out of Pakistan or a 'Greater Afghanistan', directly annexing the lost territories.

Pakistan has worked single-mindedly to stifle Pashtun impulses for an independent Pashtunistan both during and after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. During the occupation, the Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI) channelled US aid to the Islamist resistance groups under its tutelage, denying significant aid and weaponry to resistance groups oriented to the former King Zahir Shah, who had supported the Pashtunistan movement during the monarchy. When the Soviet forces left, the ISI initially sought to install Afghan surrogates considered to be opposed to the Pashtunistan concept. When these groups proved unable to consolidate their power, Islamabad turned

to the Taliban, who had a Pashtun base but were dominated by clerical leaders with a pan-Islamic ideology who had no previous identification with the Pashtunistan movement. Significantly, however, when the Taliban came to power, they did not recognise the Durand Line despite Pakistani pressures to do so.

The Pashtuns today gloss over the internecine strife within the Afghan monarchy which opened the way for the intervention of the British and their allies in the early 19th century. Surveying the broad picture, however, there is more than enough evidence in the historical record to account for the emotive power of Pashtun nationalism. Long before the British arrived on the scene, the Pashtuns were struggling to preserve their identity against the onslaught of advancing Moghul emperors, who ruled tenuously over the areas west of the Indus from their capital in Delhi.

The Roots of Pashtun Identity

Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line share an ancient social and cultural identity dating back at least to the Pakti kingdom mentioned in the writings of Herodotus and possibly earlier. When a Punjabi critic asked him in 1975 whether he was 'a Muslim, a Pakistani or a Pashtun first', Wali Khan, The National Awami Party leader, gave a much-quoted reply that he was 'a six-thousand-year-old Pashtun, a thousand-year-old Muslim and a 27 year old Pakistani'. Inscriptions from the 8th century AD have been found in a precursor of the Pashtu language. By the 11th and 12th centuries, Rahman Baba and other poets were writing Pashtu folk ballads that are still popular today and, by the mid-17th century, Khushal Khan Khattak had begun to develop what is now treasured as the classic style of Pashtun poetry.

There are from two to three dozen Pushtun tribes, depending on how one classifies them, generally divided into four major groupings: the Durrani and Ghilzais, concentrated in Afghanistan; the so-called independent tribes, straddling the Durand Line; and several tribes, such as the Khattaks and Bannuchis, centred on the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. As Richard Tapper wrote:

'In spite of the endemic conflict among different Pashtun groups, the notion of the ethnic and cultural unity of all Pashtuns has long been familiar to them as a symbolic complex of great potential for political unity. Of all tribal groups in Iran or Afghanistan, the Pashtuns have had perhaps the most pervasive and explicit segmentary lineage ideology on the classic pattern expressed not only in written genealogies but in territorial distribution.'¹

However, in contrast to Baluch society, with its hierarchical structures and its all-powerful *sardars*, Pashtun culture has an egalitarian mystique epitomised by the role of the *jirgah* (assembly). Moreover, although the tribal *malik* (village headman) is the most powerful single figure in tribal affairs *per se*, the *malik* shares local power with the *mullah* in a complex, symbiotic relationship.

The Afghan state that Ahmad Shah Durrani forged in 1747 was frankly Pashtun in character. It was a Pashtun tribal confederacy, established for the purpose of uniting the Pashtuns and shielding their interests and integrity against non-Pashtun rivals. To be sure, even at its inception, the new state was not entirely homogenous ethnically, but Afghanistan had an overwhelming Pashtun majority in the early 19th century. By contrast, the loss of the trans-Durand territories in 1823 and the consequent division of the Pashtuns left a truncated Afghanistan with a more tenuous ethnic balance. As the 'great

¹ *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1983.

game' between Britain and Russia developed during the 19th century, the British egged on successive Afghan rulers, who gradually pushed the border of Afghanistan northwards to the Oxus River. The British goal was to make Afghanistan a buffer state, and the Pashtun rulers in Kabul had imperialist ambitions of their own. Extensive areas populated by Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups were annexed by Kabul after long and costly struggles that left a legacy of built-in ethnic conflict.

The Emergence of Nationalism

Non-Pashtuns constituted at least 35% –possibly as much as 45%– of the population of Afghanistan during the decades preceding the Soviet occupation, and their relative strength has grown in the wake of the large-scale Pashtun refugee movement to Pakistan. As the ethnic balance has changed, the Pashtuns in Afghanistan have intermittently attempted to forge some form of political unity with the Pashtuns in Pakistan that would make possible a restoration of unchallenged Pashtun dominance in Kabul. By the same token, given the responsibility of the British for the division of the Pashtuns, it is not surprising that anti-British sentiment during the 1920s and 1930s sparked the emergence of a Pashtun nationalist movement on what was to become the Pakistan side of the Durand Line, Ghaffar Khan's 'Red Shirts', which called explicitly on the eve of partition for an independent Pashtunistan. In Ghaffar Khan's Bannu Declaration of 22 June 1947 he demanded that the Pashtuns be given a choice between joining Pakistan and establishing an independent Pashtunistan, rather than a choice limited to Pakistan or India.

The 'Red Shirts' boycotted the referendum that was used by the departing British as their legal rationale for handing over the North-West Frontier Province and the adjacent tribal areas, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), to the new Pakistani state. As a consequence, when it fit their purposes, Ghaffar Khan and Wali Khan were able to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the incorporation of these Pashtun-majority areas into Pakistan. For their part, Pakistani leaders, questioning the protestations of loyalty to Pakistan by Ghaffar Khan and Wali Khan, have frequently cited the Bannu Declaration.

Even though the National Awami Party has reformulated the Pashtunistan demand since 1947 as a demand for provincial autonomy within Pakistan, Islamabad has continued to doubt its allegiance to Pakistan. This distrust is rooted not only in suspicions of collusion with Afghanistan but also in the fact that Ghaffar Khan was openly opposed to the very idea of Pakistan and was actively identified with the Indian National Congress in its struggle against the British. Driven by its fear of Pashtun demands for provincial autonomy or, worse still, for Pashtunistan, the Punjabi-dominated regime in Islamabad has been seeking to resettle as many Afghan refugees and other Pashtuns as possible in Baluchistan, hoping to vitiate the strength of Baluchi and Pashtun separatism at one stroke.

With Pashtuns outnumbering Baluchis in parts of northern Baluchistan, Pashtun nationalists now propose restructuring the Pakistani state to unite all Pashtun regions in FATA, Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and northern Baluchistan in a new province of Pakhtoonkhwa that would seek greater autonomy than Pakistani provinces now have.

The inclusion of FATA in the Pashtun nationalist vision is a significant development that conflicts directly with US-backed Pakistani development plans designed to bring the vast, hitherto autonomous tribal tract under central government control. Until recently, there was little popular political consciousness in FATA. But the use of the areas as a sanctuary and staging area by al-Qaeda and Taliban forces since 9/11, leading to Pakistani military

incursions in response to US pressure, has led to unprecedented inter-tribal contacts and to a polarisation of increasingly well-organised Pashtun nationalist and Islamist forces.

In July, 2002, the Pakistan army sent a division of troops into FATA, focusing on areas believed to be transit points for al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in and out of Afghanistan. Pressed by Washington for action, Pakistani forces, using helicopter gunships and heavy artillery, launched operations in October 2003 and the first three months of 2004 that displaced some 50,000 people, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, inflicting heavy civilian casualties. 'The use of indiscriminate, excessive force undermined the military's local standing and alienated the locals', reported the International Crisis Group. A Pashtun former Federal Law Minister reported 'seething anger' throughout FATA. Musharraf concluded that further military pressure would make FATA ungovernable and authorised peace agreements with tribal leaders in Waziristan, bitterly criticised by the US, in which Pakistani forces suspended military operations in return for efforts by tribal leaders to prevent the use of FATA by the Taliban as a staging area for Afghanistan. But the damage was already done, and the FATA populace is now politicised and radicalised as never before.

The architect of the peace deal was a retired Pashtun Army Lieutenant General, Jan Orakzai, Governor of the NWFP. In October 2006 General Orakzai was quietly negotiating a similar deal in the Bajaur area of FATA, but many Pakistanis suspect that US intelligence got wind of it. Precisely what happened next has not been clearly established, but on 30 October 2006, 83 students at a *madrassa* in the Bajaur village of Chenagai were killed in a missile attack. *The News* of Karachi reported eyewitnesses saying that the missiles were fired from a pilotless US Predator drone aircraft that had circled overhead for hours. However, the Pakistan Army claimed credit for the attack, and US and Pakistani spokesmen said that the seminary was an al-Qaeda training facility. Whatever the truth, the raid led to massive protests, especially in FATA, and retaliatory suicide bombings in the Malakand tribal district.

The radicalisation of the Pashtun areas straddling the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has intensified both Islamist zealotry and Pashtun nationalism. In the conventional wisdom, one or the other, either Islamist or Pashtun identity, will eventually triumph, but an equally plausible possibility is that the result could be what Hussain Haqqani has called an 'Islamic Pashtunistan'. At a Washington seminar on 1 March 2007, at the Pakistani Embassy, the Pakistani Ambassador, Major General (Ret.) Mahmud Ali Durrani, a Pashtun, commented that 'I hope the Taliban and Pashtun nationalism don't merge. If that happens, we've had it, and we're on the verge of that'.

Islamabad and the Pashtuns

Sceptics who question the potential of Pashtun nationalism point to the fact that the Pashtuns are better integrated into Pakistan than the more openly rebellious Baluchi minority. During British rule, Pashtuns from the more aristocratic, urbanised families were given powerful posts in the army and bureaucracy. Pashtun officers constituted a significant bloc in the upper ranks of the army following partition, until many of them were pushed out in the late 1950s, when the Punjabis increased their power. Even today, however, there is still a significant number of Pashtuns in high places in Pakistan.

Geographically, the Pashtun areas are not as cut off from other parts of Pakistan as the Baluchi areas, which partly explains why the Pashtun areas are better integrated with the overall Pakistani economy than the Baluchi areas are. But in Pashtun eyes, this integration has serious disadvantages, since it brings what is seen as an excessive

dependence on Punjab province and makes the Pashtun areas vulnerable to exploitation by big-business interests centred in Karachi and Lahore. Pashtun antagonism towards Punjabi domination focuses, in large part, on alleged economic discrimination against the North-West Frontier Province in allocations of development expenditure both in industry and agriculture.

Among the standard charges levelled by Pashtun leaders is that Islamabad deliberately holds back on electrification of the Pashtun areas because it does not want them to become industrialised –that even the electricity produced there goes primarily to Punjab province, and that most of the tobacco and cotton grown in the North-West Frontier Province is used to supply cigarette and textile factories located in other provinces–. Islamabad even discriminates against the Pashtuns in agricultural development, Pashtun spokesmen argue, channelling funds for the expansion of irrigation primarily to Punjab or to areas in other provinces where Punjabi settlers will benefit most.

Pashtun dissatisfaction also focuses on the role of Punjabi civil servants in the provincial administration and on Islamabad's resistance to the use of the Pashtu language as the medium of instruction in education. At present, Urdu is the medium in state schools, with Pashtu taught as an optional subject up to the eighth grade. Pashtun children not only must attend classes conducted in Urdu but must also use textbooks written in Urdu, though English is permitted in civil service examinations and in university and graduate school entrance examinations. The language issue is important in Baluchistan, Sind and the North-West Frontier Province alike, but it is more important in the Sindhi and Pashtun areas than in Baluchistan, because Sindhi and Pashtu are more standardised and better developed as literary languages than Baluchi and thus more readily adaptable for educational purposes.

If Islamabad were to offer significant economic and political concessions to the ethnic minorities, such as the provincial autonomy envisaged in the defunct 1973 Constitution, the possibility of a compromise would be greater with the Pashtuns than with the Baluchis and the Sindhis. But successive Punjabi-dominated military governments, including the Musharraf regime, have shown no disposition for compromise. Moreover, the turmoil in the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Durand Line, generated by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and more recently by 9/11, have kept the fires of Pashtun separatism simmering.

The Pashtun refugees who poured into the North-West Frontier Province from Afghanistan after the departure of the Soviet forces, uprooted from their tribal moorings, have provided a fertile recruiting ground for the Jamaat-i-Islami, Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam and other Islamist groups. Strengthened by its 2004 alliance with Musharraf, the Islamist forces eclipsed secular Pashtun political forces in the NWFP, centred in the National Awami Party (NAP), founded by the late Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, which does not subordinate ethnic Pashtun identity to Islamic identity. But in the 2008 National Assembly election, with Musharraf weakened, the ANP won all 10 seats in the NWFP.

Both Islamist and secular Pashtuns share a common desire to escape from the domination of Islamabad. Both share Pashtun traditions and historical memories with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. The Pashtunistan movement, long dormant, is slowly coming to life and its re-emergence appears increasingly possible during the years ahead in the context of the overall growth of instability and political disintegration in Pakistan and Afghanistan alike.

Conclusions: What should the US, NATO and the EU do to defuse the 'Pashtunistan' time bomb? First, in both Afghanistan and the FATA, minimise air strikes that risk civilian casualties, like the 12 March attack in North Waziristan on a suspected Taliban hide-out in FATA that killed nine civilians. In place of air strikes, greater reliance should be placed on commandos and special forces. In Afghanistan, this de-escalation of air strikes should be accompanied by political probes designed to split off moderate Taliban elements from hard-core factions linked to al-Qaeda. Michael Semple, the British expert on the Pashtun tribes who held high EU, UN and British Embassy posts in Kabul, was expelled from the country by right-wing elements of the Afghan government for conducting such probes. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian* on 16 February, Semple estimated that peace deals are possible with 'two thirds' of the local Taliban factions in Afghanistan. Semple is a well-respected figure and his estimate should be taken seriously.

The Taliban is effectively exploiting Pashtun dissatisfaction with Kabul, recruiting many of its fighters from disaffected tribes in the Ghilzai branch of the Pashtuns, who resent the favouritism President Hamid Karzai has shown to higher-status tribes such as his own Durranis. Mullah Omar, the key Taliban leader, is a Ghilzai. Karzai should be encouraged to put leading Pashtuns from the large Ghilzai tribes into key security posts in Kabul, replacing minority Tajiks.

In Pakistan, the US and the EU should press for a return to the defunct 1973 Constitution, which guarantees provincial autonomy to the ethnic minorities. The return of parliamentary government following the recent elections is a step in the right direction but is not enough to defuse the Pashtunistan movement. As a first step, the new government soon to take office in Islamabad should accede to Pashtun pressures for a consolidated Pashtun Pakhtunkhwa province that would link FATA with the Pashtun-majority areas of the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. The FATA could then participate in Pakistani politics and secular Pashtun forces led by the National Awami Party would be strengthened. The NAP won all 10 seats in the NWFP in the recent election, and the best way to counter Pashtun separatist sentiment would be to strengthen the NAP by granting its long-standing demands for provincial autonomy.

To be meaningful, in short, democratisation in Pakistan must include provincial autonomy for the ethnic minorities. This is the key precondition not only for combating the *jihadist* forces in Pakistan more effectively but also for the long-term survival of multi-ethnic Pakistan in its present form.

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