



The Afghan Balance of Power and the Culture of Jihad

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DEFINING THE ROOT causes of an insurgency amounts to identifying why an otherwise docile population takes up arms against its government. Westerners and Afghans alike do not typically awake in the morning contemplating who will lead their nation that day. Most people lead lives with simple concerns. They wake up, go to work, interact with colleagues, come home, and play with their kids. Their government-related concerns typically center on mundane issues such as trash pickup and law and order. In Afghanistan, however, this balance has been upset.

What has gone so wrong that people feel compelled to revolt against their government? We will discover the root cause of the current insurgency in answering this question.

We may visualize the conflict in Afghanistan as the competition of alternative narratives—government vs. insurgent—that demands the local people choose between them. In his Tactical Directive of 6 July 2009, General Stanley McChrystal writes, “Our strategic goal is to defeat the insurgency threatening the stability of Afghanistan. Like any insurgency, there is a struggle for the support and will of the population. Gaining and maintaining that support must be our overriding operational imperative and the ultimate objective of every action we take.”

General Sir Gerald Templer, director of operations and high commissioner for Malaya, summarized this concept as early as 1952, saying, “The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the Malayan People.” Templer says that, in the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight, the people ultimately decide who wins, and success in COIN has both an emotive component (“hearts”) and a cognitive component (“minds”).

The COIN mantra—to win “the hearts and minds” of the people—has unfortunately led us into gratitude theory. In the West, we all too often confuse winning the hearts and minds of people with “getting them to like us.” We approach populations not with solutions for their grievances, but with gifts. We distribute soccer balls with International Security Assistance

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PHOTO: SGT Ajim, a 20-year-old native of northeastern Afghanistan's Takhar Province and member of 1st Battalion, 1st Afghan National Civil Order Police Brigade, speaks with a village elder in Kandahar Province, 25 February 2011. (U.S. Army, SGT Ben Watson)

Force logos and give children school supplies. These well-intentioned actions miss the point. We soon discover that the people like us, but even so, they do not support us—or their government. Thus, we fail.

We fail because we fail to protect the population. When we retreat to our forward operating bases, the insurgents punish those who accepted our gifts. We fail because we gave them the wrong gifts. We fail because we do not understand Templer's message. He did not write about getting the people to like him, but rather about getting them to make a conscious decision that it was in their own long-term interest to support their government over the insurgents.

What We *Think* is Driving the Insurgency

Current discussions suggest a number of circumstances as “root causes” of the insurgency. Under analysis, many of these presumed root causes appear to have limited relevance.

Aid projects. We often view aid and development projects as a means of reaching out to the population and favorably influencing their hearts and minds by demonstrating that the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and coalition forces can meet their developmental needs better than the insurgents can.

However, if aid projects are addressing a root cause, the investment is a very poor one. Its costs are disproportionate to its results. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan database alone lists about 22,000 ongoing provincial reconstruction team (PRT) projects.¹ Provincial reconstruction teams are so successful that locals will go to the PRT rather than their own government for a quick repair job.² Yet, if development projects are this successful, why are the people still supporting insurgents? Why, in the face of all this aid, do attacks continue to increase?

Aid projects seem to illustrate the premise in Afghan culture that giving endlessly without receiving anything in return is a sign of weakness. A vignette General McChrystal includes in his COIN guidance illustrates this point. A base receives mortar fire from

a local village, but that mortar fire ends once the village obtains school supplies. This suggests we are being shaken down for aid. Maybe we got the behavior we rewarded. Maybe we have no idea what is going on.

Poverty. We say poverty and lack of economic growth contribute to insurgency, but history does not support this premise. The 13 colonies in America were the richest part of the British Empire in 1776, but they obviously formed an insurgency. At the time of its revolution in the early 20th century, Russia had the fastest growing economy in the world. In fact, the revolution actually slowed Russia's economic growth. There are many poor countries in the world today—Tanzania in Africa, for example—but they are not wracked by insurgency. Poverty may contribute to local grievances, but it is difficult to find historical evidence that poverty is a root cause or contributor to insurgency. The “grievance” noted by Mao in his early insurgency principles can be promulgated in the richest of environs.

Afghanistan has always been a poor country with scarce resources that depended upon plunder received from the Sikhs and Sinds and Punjabis.³ In spite of its poverty, there was no widespread insurgency from 1929 until about 1979—and poverty did not fuel the 1979 revolt.

We have preconceived notions about the nature of the insurgency that may be misguided or even



(U.S. Air Force, TSgt Rebecca F. Corey, PRT Ghazni)

SSG John Nichols, assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Team Ghazni, with his interpreter, Zabid, speaking with local shop merchants in Qara Bagh, Afghanistan, 14 December 2009.

false. We have a deeply flawed understanding of the Pashtun people and *Pashtunwali*, the way of the Pashtun. We do not understand the roles and importance of the tribes and elders, the influence of the mullahs and Islam, or the competition for power among the tribes, Islam, and the government. This seriously impedes our population-centric counterinsurgency.

Because of our eagerness to distribute aid money and our limited understanding of the internal power dynamics of Afghanistan, our good intentions are being manipulated, and we are being taken advantage of. The government of Afghanistan is not the Jeffersonian democracy we had hoped for.

The Real Root Cause: Jihad

Westerners have not come to the realization that this insurgency is an Islamic jihad. The insurgency's root cause is not lack of economic opportunity, but the desire to establish an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under *Sharia* law.

Our failure to reinstate King Zahir Shah to his throne is an example of our lack of understanding of the Afghan condition. A true parliamentary democracy with the king as the head of state could have provided solutions for problems coalition forces faced in 2009. When some alleged that the election was corrupt, the king could have held power until the issue was decided. In the eyes of many tribes, the present Durrani-based government without a Durrani king cannot provide cultural or social stability, and is not legitimate. We failed to realize that Amir Abdur Rahman Khan—the Iron Amir and father of the modern Afghan state—established the legitimacy of the monarchy for all Afghans (and in fact established that its rule and legitimacy stemmed from God).⁴

Focusing attention on tribes, clans, and elders (who compete for legitimacy and control of the people) will ultimately lead to our failure in Afghanistan.

The Orientalist Approach

Our perspective on Afghan culture is clouded by the Orientalist approach. Orientalism—the practice of examining Afghan culture from a Western perspective—provides interesting incidental and useful information, but it does not help identify the root cause of the insurgency. An examination of the

code of Pashtunwali illustrates how Orientalism can obscure our perspective.

Understanding the code of Pashtunwali is essential. Certain elements of it may contribute to the ongoing conflict, but the Pashtunwali code is not the center of gravity in the COIN fight and not a root cause driving insurgents. Nor does it offer a solution to the insurgency. Briefers teach Western troops that Pashtunwali is a tool they can use to understand Afghans and to influence them to support their government. However, the Pashtunwali code is of limited validity and utility in modern Afghanistan.

The Pashtunwali code has been characterized as a 1,000-year old culture that has elements of a perfect Greek-style democracy. It is said to provide rules for governance, justice, and personal conduct. Closer examination uncovers flaws and myths. Pashtunwali includes the concept of *bedal*, or revenge. If a Pashtun has been wronged, he and his descendants are honor-bound to seek revenge. That is why collateral damage is so detrimental to the government's cause. As General McChrystal's guidance puts it, "kill two insurgents, make 20."⁵ However, if this is really the case, why aren't the Pashtuns rising up against the Taliban for their crimes against them?

Where do city dwellers (with no village elders to consult) fit into the Pashtunwali conundrum? Of what significance is Pashtunwali to those who have grown up in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran? What do those who now call themselves elders know of it? The current generation is being led by those who only have a faint memory of Pashtunwali. What do those who have lived in London, Toronto, and Dubai make of the Pashtun honor code? Pashtunwali provides insight into Afghan cultural history and a steady income for numerous pundits as they present briefings on the subject, but it is not a central guiding principle in the lives of Pashtuns. The Pashtunwali does not cover all Pashtuns.

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Coalition thinking has long depended on advice offered by capable advisors whose insight has proved valuable. However, many native-born advisors enjoyed the benefits of higher education in foreign universities and spent large portions of their lives in various nations with lifestyles vastly different from most rural Afghans. They have given us a flawed perception of Afghan society. The current view of the insurgency's root causes overlooks many social factors in the daily lives of common Afghans, and does not address Islam as a political power.

Afghan Society

Conventional wisdom describes an almost perfect triangle of power in Afghanistan. Wise elders provide leadership and justice for the community. The government is a minor (and necessarily evil) player that tries to interfere in the affairs of the tribes, usually with disastrous results. The mullahs are supposedly little more than schoolteachers or simple country bumpkins who can neither read nor write (in spite of their *madrassa* educations).⁶ However, a new group has broken into the above

“triangle of power” and disrupted the harmony of traditional life in Afghanistan.

This group, the insurgents, has a separate agenda. It has corrupted the mullahs with guns and money, corrupted or driven out government officials, and eroded the power of the elders. We focus our efforts on reestablishing the natural order of things, in putting Afghan society back into a state of harmony. Westerners chastise the Afghan government for being corrupt and inefficient. We ignore the mullahs or despise them for overstepping their role as schoolteachers and fools. We focus on empowering the local elders, in the hope they will lead various tribes to rebel and force out the Taliban. These hopes are in vain. We do not really understand what is going on within the power dynamic, and we don't really know what motivates the elders. Further, we have not really engaged with the people. We have not done population-centric COIN.

How Does the Afghan Societal Dynamic Really Work?

We should not see Afghan society as the triangle noted above, but as the location of a power struggle



U.S. Army, SPC Christopher Baker

A mullah of Day Kundi Province speaks to a crowd of villagers on the final day of Ramadan, 20 September 2009.

for control of the population by three distinct groups: the government, the elite rural landholders, and the mullahs.⁷ This power struggle has been a facet of life in Afghanistan since the establishment of the modern Afghan state by Abdur Rahman Khan.

The Afghan state does in fact exist for the average Afghan. Afghans do identify with and accept government down to the village level.⁸ Afghans accept taxation by the state and conscription into the army. They expect the government to provide law and order and set the conditions for trade. Afghans also believe in a strong central state to defend against infidels. There is more to rural life in Afghanistan than agriculture; there is also trade and commerce.

A primary goal of the government is to simply exist across Afghanistan as an entity that can ensure patronage of the elites that it supports. To do this, it must maintain an army. To finance and fill that army, it must impose taxes and exert control over the population.

The government of Afghanistan has also aspired to maintain its autonomy as an independent Islamic state. Here the elites and intelligentsia come into conflict with conservative elements in society. The government believes that it can best maintain the Islamic State of Afghanistan by adapting modern, Western ways to achieve its goals.⁹

The rural elites. Landowners are Afghanistan's rural elites. The vast majority of rural Afghans are sharecroppers who work the land. In rural areas, loyalty is given through a system of patronage called the *Qawn*. The *Qawn* is a source of constantly shifting power and loyalty given to those who appear best able to provide for the community. The shifting loyalties keep rural Afghanistan and its power politics in a constant state of disequilibrium.¹⁰ The power of an elder is dependent upon his ability to provide favors. To perform favors, he must interpose himself between the government and the people.

There are essentially two groups competing for control and support of the Afghan people. On the one hand, the elders (warlords) intercede between the government and the people to ensure they stay in control of local trade and crime. The coalition is splitting its resources between the government and the elders. If the goal is to link the people with their government, why do this? On the other hand, the mullahs seek to control the souls of Afghans and establish a Deobandi Islamic Emirate for Afghanistan. To pursue this goal,

they are using the lexicon and jingoism of jihad. To date, the coalition has effectively ignored this. Why?

Mullahs. We have been led to believe that the importance of the mullah as a powerful figure in Pashtun culture is a recent phenomenon. However, mullahs have inspired Pashtuns to make life difficult for numerous Afghan rulers and even challenge the might of the British Empire. Today's Mullah Omar follows in the footsteps of the charismatic mullahs of yesteryear—Mullah Hadda (1893); Mullah Powinda (1893-1907); the Faqir of Ipi (1936-1960); Mawlana Faizani (1970s); and Qazi Amin (1970s-1980s). Each was a charismatic leader who raised and led large armies. It is notable that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such religious leaders expelled tribal leaders and elders from the Pech Valley because they claimed the elders lacked the vigor to fight the government.

The Mullah's Life

On becoming a mullah, a man enters an entirely new existence. No longer constrained by the social status of his father, the mullah's influence can dramatically rise. Education and tradition give him the means to do so.

In rural Afghanistan, one's place in society is typically tied to the position held by one's father. If the father was a great leader in the community or a great landowner, the son will follow in his footsteps. If an individual was born a landless peasant, it is unlikely that he will achieve any higher position within his community. There is very little social mobility for young men in rural Afghan society. In the past, the government was an outlet for young men seeking to escape the bonds of the rural power structure to climb the social or financial ladder. However, elders interested in getting their share of donor money have blocked access to what little government presence there is in the Afghan countryside. There is really only one alternative for the ambitious young Afghan: the madrassa-mullah-jihad option.

At the madrassa, young men get a new father (the *pir* of the madrassa), are free to take a new name, and can break formal tribal and familial bonds. As mullahs, young men have social freedom. They then leave the madrassa, establish their own mosque, and cultivate their own group of followers. They can travel freely across Afghanistan because they are holy men.



COL Stephen Quinn, 189th Infantry Brigade commander, eats lunch with village elders after a *shura* at the Shinkai District Center, Zabul Province, Afghanistan, 17 February 2011.

As such, they are free of tribal and familial affiliations and limitations.¹¹ A mullah may be the only one in his community who can read; this gives him the ability to interpret the Koran. He has the power to say who is a good or bad Muslim. He can even excommunicate people, a punishment often tantamount to a long, slow death. The mullah's power base supposedly derives from Allah. If a cleric credits himself with a miracle, or claims to have had dreams that included divine instruction, his prestige and power increases significantly.¹²

Finally—and significantly—a mullah is the only figure in Afghan culture who can call for a jihad. This is important for two reasons. First, tribal fighters believe it is not honorable or feasible to fight outside one's *kehl* (local area). Second, unless one is fighting in a jihad, society will not consider him a martyr upon his death. Clearly, a mullah's declaration of jihad is important, and in Afghanistan, jihad is the only form of fighting that has national significance. Jihad creates a highly motivated fighting force. Consequently, the mullah is very powerful in Afghan society.

Why We Got It Wrong

Modern Westerners are not accustomed to considering religion as a political power. As a society that often expects quick solutions, we search for

instant remedies to problems as complex as solving an insurgency. That we are being played by all sides in Afghanistan is clear—plenty of evidence points to it. Well-intentioned or not, the advice offered by educated Kabulis and “Halfghans” has not always been productive in determining a path forward. Our perspective has been clouded by the lens of Orientalism, seeking the root cause of the insurgency through a Western rather than an Afghan perspective.

The Beginning of Success

A successful way forward must take into account the factors noted above. We need to recognize that whatever we call it, the current conflict is jihad, Afghan style. While solving local problems with solutions unique to our own “valley” or area of operations, we need to think about the nation of Afghanistan and support national-level players. The government of Afghanistan is not *of the people*—it is only *of some of the people*. Facing up to this fact is the first step in changing the situation. We need to end the disconnect between Afghanistan's government and its people.

A religious element is the root cause of this insurgency. Young rural men who are frustrated by their lack of opportunity or upward social mobility turn to the rhetoric of jihad to improve their

prospects. The GIRoA's absence in rural society exacerbates their frustration, as do the elders who ensure that all money and opportunity flow through their own hands.

We may believe that Afghans do not want the Taliban or jihad, but each year young men do fight for the Taliban—a group whose leadership is, essentially, religious. We cannot forget this. The otherworldly siren song of jihad promises glory and opportunity.

To end the insurgency, we must employ strategic and tactical approaches simultaneously, incorporating the elements outlined below.

Strategic approaches. Strategically, we must do the following—

- Recognize the mullahs as nationwide influencers and bring them to our side.
- Defeat the jihadi message.
- Emphasize that Talibanization means the death of Pashtunwali.
- Stop trying to change Afghanistan's culture.
- Connect the government to the people.
- Hold district elections.
- Stop appointing district governors in the President Tariki fashion (patronage).
- Continue to push for a larger Afghanistan National Security Force to support the GIRoA.
- Continue funding the Afghanistan National Security Force after the coalition leaves.
- Continue pushing for Pakistan to arrest Afghan Taliban.

Tactical approaches. We must take the following tactical approaches to ending the insurgency:

- Protect the population.
- Consult with the local mullah.
- Arm our junior leaders with a knowledge of the Koran. (“The ink of the scholar is as important as the blood of the martyr.”)
- Give mullahs aid money for local projects they sponsor.

Real Progress

Through our emphasis on development, we have enmeshed ourselves in looking for gratitude, which does not advance the COIN fight. We have failed to understand the competition between entities in Afghan culture, the mullahs' historical influence and current power, and jihad. Because we have failed to understand the dynamic of competition, we have also failed to conduct population-centric COIN. We must understand this dynamic and stop being manipulated by societal actors.

If not, we will fail to address the root cause of the insurgency—a stagnant power structure that provides radical Islamists with the opportunity to take advantage of the disenfranchised and recruit them with Islamic rhetoric and dreams of glory, martyrdom, and social mobility.

Recognizing that the mullah is a national player in what is truly a jihad and following the recommendations above at the strategic and tactical levels will advance us toward a more effective solution. **MR**

NOTES

1. Mark Ward, Special Advisor on Development to the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, “The Role of Provincial Reconstruction Teams,” Center for International Studies Lecture, 20 February 2010.

2. Ibid.

3. Hamish Nixon, “How Do You Govern Afghanistan,” National University of Singapore, 26 February 2009.

4. David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 82. Abdur Rahman sent a huge tapestry out across Afghanistan with a proclamation outlining the extent of his terrestrial control. By placing a mosque at the center of his kingdom and calling himself Amir, he established his link to Allah, his legitimacy, and his right to call for jihad.

5. “ISAF Commander's COIN Guidance,” GEN McChrystal, 25 August 2009, 2.

6. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81.

7. Edwards, 82.

8. Oliver Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2001), 21.

9. Ibid., 64.

10. Ibid., 23.

11. Kilcullen, 81. In this passage, the elder's words are very illuminating. It is not “as if” the Taliban are their own tribe. They are, quite literally, their own tribe. Because they are from the madrassa, they are seekers of religious knowledge and truth. They frustrate the elder. He cannot control them because they are outside of his tribal paradigm. In Ammanullah Khan's bid to oust the British from greater Pashunistan in 1919, he uses the mullahs to act as de facto liaison officers to keep the tribes fighting the British and not each other. He also used them to act as logistics officers because the tribes are not arrayed to provide for logistics in their fighting styles.

12. Mullah Omar claims to have had a dream in which two female spirits visited him and told him that he had to save Afghanistan from the warlords. In his march to power, he goes to the mosque in Kandahar and puts on what is claimed to be the cloak of Mohammed. There is a well-known superstition that whoever finds and wears the cloak of Mohammed can save Afghanistan.