

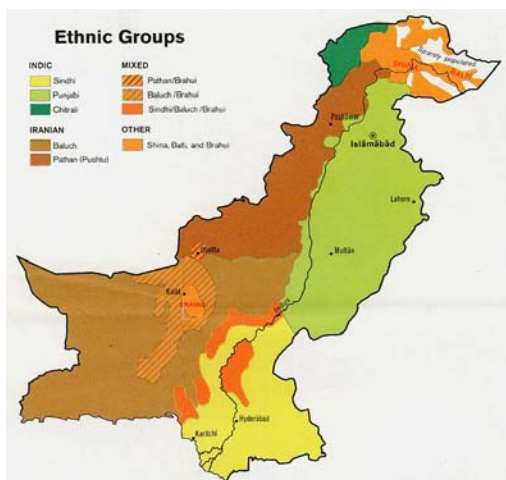
We will make an attempt to illustrate how Pashtuns, who comprise the major ethnic group in Afghanistan and North Western Pakistan, view the war on terror that is taking place in their backyard. Before we elaborate on how Pashtuns see the world, We would like to provide some information on how the world looks at Pashtuns.

Here are some maps of Afghanistan and Pakistan maps.

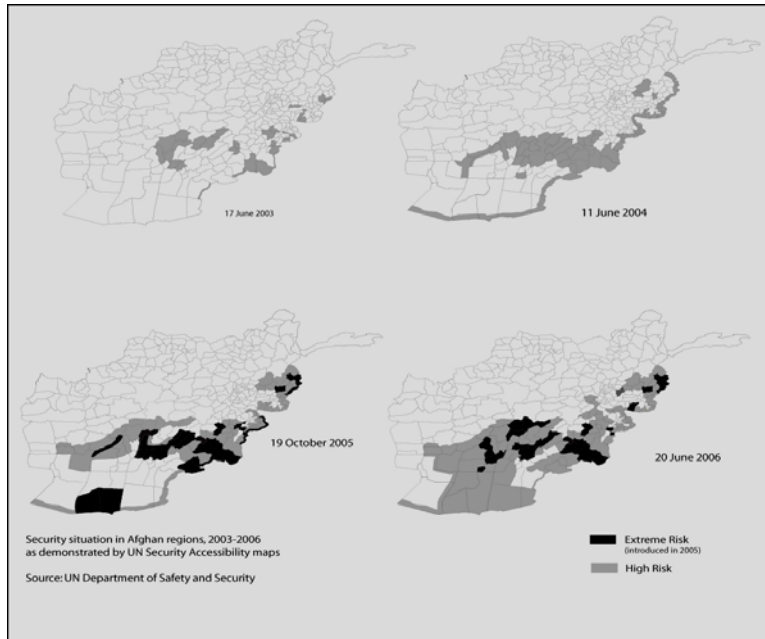


This first map is from National Geographic. The map shows the ethnic composition of Afghanistan. Based on different estimates, Pashtuns constitute roughly 55% to 60% of the total 30 million population of Afghanistan. As you can see, Pashtuns are heavily concentrated in the eastern and southern part of Afghanistan.

The next map shows the Pashtun dominated parts of Pakistan. Roughly 30 million Pashtuns constitute between 15 to 20% of Pakistan's total population. The map shows that northern and western parts of Pakistan are areas of Pashtun majority.



The next map is from the International Crisis group and shows the insurgency hit areas of Afghanistan. Opium is produced in mostly these areas of Afghanistan, especially in the Helmand province of the south.



If we compare the first map with the third map, we can come to the simple conclusion that insurgency is almost entirely confined to the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.

In the second map a pro-Taliban alliance of religious parties holds power in these provinces. In this map you can see three different locations, which are considered sanctuaries for Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

In the south is the city of Quetta, where it is alleged that the leader of Taliban, Mullah Omer, and most of his cabinet is in hiding.

In the center is Waziristan, where leading leader of Taliban, Jalaluddin Haqani and his supporters has significant influence.

In the north is Bajuar, where there are strong indications that Al Qaeda second-in-command, Al Zawahiri, is hiding.

As you can see all three areas are in Pashtun dominated parts of Pakistan.

Considering this information, it is easy to link the opium trade, political extremism, obscurantism, and the Pashtun people together. This is the first impression of Pashtun people many reporters, visitors, and politicians have in mind when they land in Kabul or Islamabad (both areas lying at the periphery or outside the Pashtun footprint).



On top of all this factual data, federal establishments in both Pakistan and Afghanistan by nature of their composition and vested interests are better off blaming all this regional mess on the Pashtun people. And they often do so. We will elaborate further on the insecurities of both Islamabad and Kabul.

Pakistan as a country was formed on the basis of religion by putting together geographically and culturally diverse nations into one country. The experiment has not worked very well. Half the country of East Pakistan was lost to a nationalist uprising and resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Currently there is also a moderate level of uprising in Balochistan which is one of the four remaining provinces of Pakistan. Over the years Pakistani establishment which is dominated by its military is of the view that strong national Islamic identity can suppress all other ethno-nationalist ideologies, especially in the areas that are bordering Afghanistan.

Over the last three decades Pakistani establishment has systemically supported religious extremism in both Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is a wide spectrum of views to justify this strategy. Some people in Pakistani establishment consider this policy as a strategic necessity while others agree with it out of religious convictions. Its hard to tell who falls in which category.

Over the years while pursuing this policy Pakistani establishment has made many mistakes, it has facilitated religious elements in the military and ideological training of numerous terrorist outfits in the world. In the last five years a significant portion of terrorists who are involved in various terrorist plots around the world have some kind of connection with Pakistan. Pakistani establishment has been accused of tacitly supporting insurgency in Afghanistan. Nuclear proliferation is another major issue regarding Pakistan. Nowadays there is so much international scrutiny of Pakistan that the best option the current establishment can think of to exonerate itself from these allegations is to blame it all or most of it on the Pashtun people (maintaining the same distrust shown by early governments in Pakistan which had themselves even resorted to shooting on civilians in the fifties, dismantling democratically elected assemblies in the seventies to using them as scapegoats in the present situation).

The situation in Kabul is also very hostile towards Pashtun. President Karzai who is a Pashtun has limited powers, he has no genuine political base in any part of Afghanistan, and he has no Pashtun militia that supports him. Almost all the key government posts especially in the security apparatus has been dominated by a small Panjsheri segment of the Northern alliance. Every one knows that if portfolios and high government positions are distributed in proportion with the population many of the key power brokers sitting in Kabul will lose their positions. So it is only natural for them to keep on reminding the international players that Pashtun and Taliban are different sides of the same coin.

In such circumstances it is important to know the Pashtuns' side of the story. There is consensus among Pashtuns that regional powers have manipulated perceptions about Pashtuns to fit their own needs. Pashtuns are neither extremists nor are they the prime beneficiaries of the effects of the current insurgency and the opium trade.

With abject poverty, high unemployment, poor health care, poor education system and extreme lawlessness in their areas Pashtuns are so occupied with their daily life struggles that to believe that they could sacrifice their lives for extremist causes is naïve to say the least. Contrary to popular beliefs, Pashtuns have a strong culture and traditions that are usually at odds with religious extremism.

This brings us to the next logical question, if Pashtuns are a peace loving, non-extremist people, then why have so many extremists from all around the world found refuge in Pashtun areas? And why is the insurgency gaining momentum in Afghanistan? To understand the source of the current insurgency in Afghanistan we have to explore trans-border influences that have shaped Pashtun society for the last three decades.

I will emphasize two main causes for the growth of extremism in Pashtun areas.

- First we will talk about the history and current mode of financing of extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- And then we will elaborate on how extremism was systematically imposed on the Pashtun society.

Here is a snapshot of the Pashtun economy in the mid seventies.

### **A snap shot of the Economy and society of Afghanistan in Early 1970's**

Major segments of Economy      Agriculture, Tourism and limited exports of agriculture products, precious and semi precious stones and oriental rugs.

Drug trafficking      Limited production of Hashish for domestic consumption. Links with international drug trafficking almost nonexistent. No major opium trade.

Network of Religious Schools      Very limited number of religious schools funded locally. No organized and foreign funded network of religious schools.

Upper class      Upper class was progressive consisted of agriculturist, growing number Western educated professionals and traders.

In the early and mid 1970's Afghanistan was a poor developing country where greater number of population was slowly getting exposed to better education and healthcare. Majority of the population was dependent on agriculture. The limited irrigation system that Afghanistan had was intact at that time and agriculture fields were free of mines. Tourism was also a big component of the economy, which brought with it much needed foreign currency. At its peaks it is estimated that roughly 500,000 foreigners per year visited Afghanistan.

Hashish was grown for domestic use and Kabul was a very important stop on the "hippy trail". But opium production was limited. Drug trafficking did not constitute a significant part of the GDP.

There was disparity of income, yet this disparity among the population was not as stark as it is today. Dollarization of the economy had not started yet and local resources including real estate was priced in parity with the local income levels.

The Upper class was progressive and it consisted of agriculturist, growing number Western educated professionals and traders and workers in the public sector. There was no organized foreign funded network of religious schools and most of the religious schools were funded locally.

Pashtun areas in Pakistan during early seventies were economically poor compared to the rest of the country. Apart from agriculture employment opportunist were limited in other sectors. Agriculture was the dominant sector of the economy. Most medium and large scale landowners were secular as far as their religious orientation was concerned. These landowners were not perfect; some of them acted as feudal's. Landowner and workers relations were poor at times.

But on the other hand these landowners were gradually investing their savings in other sector of the economy like manufacturing, transportation and tourism. Drug trafficking was very limited and the network of religious schools was not extensive.

In the last three decades economic and social structure of Pashtun society has turned upside down, progressive elements are systematically being shunned from recourse accumulation. Religious extremist are now the dominant players both socially and economically in Pashtun areas. Lets examine how all this has changed in the last three decades.

Ever since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Afghanistan claimed sovereignty over the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. This started a mutual distrust that developed into a full-fledged interference in each other's internal affairs. From 1952-1962, Mohammad Daud Khan served as the Prime Minister of Afghanistan. During this time the governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan tried to gain the sympathies of the Pashtuns along the border. The Afghan government offered scholarships to Pashtun students from Pakistani side of the disputed border and allotted agricultural land to many Pashtuns from across the border

The Pakistani government came up with an ingenious economic plan to sway the sympathies of the Pashtun people. It created what was later known as the culture of "Bara market." So enormous was the impact of this plan that even today almost all dominant players in the Afghan economy can trace their origins back to these markets.

Historically custom tariffs were and still are much lower in Afghanistan than in Pakistan. Electronic goods, household items, vehicles, auto accessories, clothing and cosmetics imported into Afghanistan from around the world and then smuggled into Pakistan can make a huge profit. Smuggling through an extremely porous border is not very difficult. However what is difficult for the smugglers is to sell these non-customs paid goods to retail customers in Pakistan without the fear of prosecution from the Pakistani authorities.



To overcome this problem, the Pakistani government created “Bara markets” where the sale of non-customs paid goods was tolerated. Initially shops and warehouses in these markets were allocated to tribesman who were considered pro-Pakistani--especially those who projected a more conservative and religious attitude.

After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, traders from Afghanistan were also allowed to open their businesses in these markets. Again the criteria for selection stayed the same only those Afghans who supported one of the Islamic resistance groups in Afghanistan were allowed to open their businesses on Pakistani side of the border.

During the last three decades other sources of cash flow were added to the mix, first the centuries old Indian system of money transfer, the “Hawala system,” was introduced. The Hawala system made it easier for these traders to do international transactions in hard currency. The other purpose that the Hawala system served was injecting Arab donations into the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation. Hawala system is not like formal banking system where each and every transaction is being properly tracked down. In the Hawala system the demand and supply of foreign currency is netted out at every location and only the net amount is transferred. For example on any given day if an importer of Bara market in Peshawar Pakistan needs one million dollars to import some goods from Dubai and an Arab charity in Dubai wants to give one million dollars to an extremist group in Pakistan . The trader will deposit Pakistani rupees equivalent to one million dollars in the Hawala office in Peshawar and the Dubai charity will deposit One million dollars in the Hawala office in Dubai. Pakistani trader or his representative will get his million dollars in Dubai while the extremist group will get one million dollars worth of Pakistani rupees in Pakistan. All this can be done without a single transaction in international banking system. (Show in a diagram)

Apart from Hawala system opium trade also became another major source of hard cash during this time. Initially the transit trade infrastructure was used to accommodate the opium trade, but so extensive was its growth that formal financial institutions like the BCCI (which became one of the biggest banks in the world) got involved to facilitate it. The line between transit traders and opium traders became so blurred that it became difficult to differentiate one from the other. In fact, many trading families operated in both forms of businesses.

Decades of war gradually destroyed almost all sectors of Afghan economy and the new war economy consisting of smuggling, opium trafficking and Arab donations took in Afghanistan. On Pakistani side of the border there was no war so a combination of overt and covert government policies was adopted to shift resource distribution from traditional elites to Islamic extremists. First land reform act was adopted in all of Pakistan in the mid seventies but it was only enforced in Pashtun areas of the country. Under this act land belonging to big landowners in Pashtun areas was nationalized and was allocated to workers on the land.



This resulted in thousands of lawsuits most of which are still ongoing today. The traditional elite of Pashtun society lost their economic strength especially to invest in other sectors due to these reforms. Instead people involved in the above mentioned trades gradually replaced them. Tourism which was another big factor in Pashtun areas of Pakistan and also a very important mode for interacting with people from all around the world also dried out because of the emergence of government sponsored extremist group “Tehreek- e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi” in these areas. Lack of employment opportunities resulted in millions of Pakistani Pashtuns migrating to other parts of the country and to the Gulf state

Before the fall of the Taliban regime, opium trade, transit trade, and Arab donations constituted more than 60% of the GDP of Afghanistan and around 55% of the GDP of Pashtun areas of Pakistan.

After the fall of Taliban regime billions of dollars have been invested in the Afghan economy, and millions of Afghan refugees have returned back home. Unfortunately, Afghanistan still has the same war economy it had under the Taliban regime. The percentage of transit and opium trade in the Afghan GDP is roughly the same. The same conservative groups that have deep links with extremism still dominate all aspects of the economy. Opium production has grown extensively. More than one million people are now involved in opium production, yet the wholesalers and facilitators of the trade still make most of the profits.

On Pakistani side of the border the situation is no different; in fact now that pro-Taliban political parties control provincial governments in Pashtun areas, even government contracts are now directly awarded to the Jihadi elite created over the past few decades. The federation has a strong grip on Pashtun resources. Except for limited agricultural small land holdings and foreign remittances, almost all other economic sectors in the Pashtun areas in Pakistan are now being controlled by groups that have an extremist agenda.

Under such circumstances it's no coincidence that Taliban insurgents and extremist have all the funds they need to sustain a prolonged insurgency.

Now let's discuss how and why extremists from around the world find sanctuary in Pashtun areas. The stereotypical answer to this question is that Pashtuns are sympathetic to extremist causes. In reality that's not correct. Any one who is familiar with the basics of Pashtun culture and traditions will tell you that in Pashtun areas people do not take male guests inside their homes. Instead, male guests are kept in common guest and community centers called “Hujras.” This widely practiced tradition makes it extremely difficult for ordinary Pashtuns to hide anyone from others in the community.

Over the last three decades there has been a dramatic increase in the number of religious schools in Pashtun areas. On one hand these schools provide free room and board plus education to students, an arrangement those appeals to many impoverished Pashtuns. On the other hand, though, these religious schools not only indoctrinate



extremist views but also provide refuge to local and foreign extremists. There might be some local funding in the operational aspect of these religious schools but overall most funds utilized for the construction and operation of these schools comes from Arab sources directly and indirectly through collaborators in the Pakistan establishment.

Another ideal place for extremists to hide is within the big castle type villas constructed by the trading class and the Jihadi elites that I mentioned before. These people invest heavily in real estate. They have constructed big villas surrounded by high walls all across Pashtun land in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is in these villas that perhaps dozens of people can hide at a time.

In short, Pashtun society is not the source of extremism but a place where extremism is tacitly supported by others for their own vested interests.

Now let's shift to the current situation in Afghanistan. Taliban rule was so repressive and barbaric that any other government looks better by comparison. The majority of Pashtuns are happy that the Taliban are gone since most Pashtuns considered them a puppet regime supported by outsiders.

But this does not mean that Pashtuns are very happy about the composition or the track record of the regime that replaced the Taliban. Combinations of warlords who are no less barbaric than the Taliban are now part of the ruling coalition. Pashtuns generally feel disfranchised as a small ethnic minority is controlling almost all major government departments with little Pashtun representation.

If we go back a few decades almost all guerrilla leaders who fought against the brutal Soviet occupation were either trained or supported by Iran or Pakistan. The majority of them were indoctrinated with extremist views. The more extremist their views were, the more financial and logistical assistance they received. Almost all groups were accused of gross human rights violation. When the Taliban came to power, guerrilla leaders who were dependent on Pakistani supply lines for logistics and finances gave way to the Taliban, while others who had assistance from other sources like Iran, Russia and India resisted. As we explained before, it was not financially and logistically possible for Pashtuns to resist the Taliban. Thus it is incorrect to say that the relatively quick spread of Taliban rule was due to the sympathies of the Pashtun people.

It is misleading to paint all Pashtuns as extremists. This notion that all Pashtuns are extremists and all guerrilla leaders who opposed the Taliban are not, still persists today even among some of the coalition partners.

To sum up, it is important to note that the intentions of the global community towards both Afghanistan and Pakistan are very noble. It is in the interest of all to see these countries prosper and curb the spread of extremism. But the perceptions about Pashtun culture, habitat, and loyalties that have developed in the international psyche is flawed.



Conservative Pashtun culture is being misunderstood as leaning towards extremism, Pashtun inability to control their resources is being judged as an overdependence on opium trade, lack of formal schooling system is being viewed as preference for the Madrassa system. Even there is effort to combine Pashtun nationalistic feelings with broader religious extremism.

The problem of extremism in the region and the insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be eliminated by vilification of the Pashtun people. On the contrary, it can be decreased only by reaching out directly to the Pashtun people. If Pashtun problems and limitations are better understood and addressed, the situation in Afghanistan and around the region would be significantly improved. Because of their unique historic and cultural setup, Pashtuns could act as catalyst for the induction of modernity, democratic thought and human rights principals not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in the Muslim world at large.

This brings us to the final point on how Pashtuns feel about the presence of NATO led troops (including Canadians) among themselves. Some people in Canada oppose the presence of Canadian forces in Afghanistan, their argument is that Canadian troops should get out of Canada as soon as possible and let the Afghans rule themselves.

We do not agree with this argument because before the allied forces there were Taliban, before them the Mujahideen and before them the Russian supported regimes. For the last three decades there is uninterrupted interference in Afghanistan's internal affair by all its neighbours. If the international troops leave now this interference will increase manifold.

The Pashtun people by in large understand the need of international stabilization force in Afghanistan and they do support it. The Pashtun society is at the threshold of either finding its progressive roots or face complete annihilation of the Pashtun culture with its assimilation into extremist Wahabi hegemony in the region. We all hope that the international community will understand this important fact.