

The Challenges and Role of Structures in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

Adriana Zobrist Galád*

Abstract: An intervention in Afghanistan that has lasted longer than a decade has not brought about what was most hoped for: security for the Afghan people and stabilization of the entire region. These processes are challenged every day by the complexity of Afghanistan's social structures: its culture, values, way of life, tribal networks, politics, insurgent networks, and its history. A closer examination of examples of cultural and political structures can provide us with a perspective on this complexity, and on the deeply intertwined relationships among various actors engaged in the Afghan conflict. In this light, we can demonstrate the repeated shortcomings of liberal peace building in the case of Afghanistan.

These examples also manifest the differences in values, attitudes toward gender, and cultural and political perceptions between Afghan and Western societies. The possibilities of conflict resolution, and its foundation in traditional structures—such as local communities, tribal or religious structures, or traditional value sets—offer scenarios for feasible strategies to be explored and possibly implemented.

Acknowledgement of the Afghan reality on the ground and preparation for peace building missions can effectively improve the goals of efforts pursued and carried out by the international community, with a corresponding improvement in results. In a country that has managed to repel foreign invasions in the past, and tends not to accept dictates from the outside, our chances of success in our mission can be increased if we can admit that liberal values might not apply universally. By listening to Afghan voices directly and ensuring their involvement in the process of reconstruction, our respect for the realities of Afghan life, in the context of their values, creates the possibility to set up a successful strategy for Afghanistan's recovery.

Introduction

Afghanistan has been experiencing military and humanitarian intervention for more than ten years. “The right war”—as U.S. President Barack Obama has described this effort—carries several distinctive characteristics. It is also considered by some researchers to be a “war on Islam.”¹ This statement has been strongly denied by the Obama Administration, which took a decisive step in December 2009 to end this conflict by declaring a significant “detour” and changing its official language, bringing few new wrinkles to the process: the beginning of negotiations with the Taliban and the announced intention to withdraw all U.S. combat troops by 2014. Some others invoke this conflict's similarity

* Adriana Zobrist Galád is a Program Development professional. The paper on which this article is based was written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Advanced Studies degree at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.

¹ Steven Simon, “Can the Right War Be Won?,” *Foreign Affairs* 88:4 (July/August 2009): 130–37.

to the Vietnam War. Both critics and supporters of this war agree that, under current conditions, Afghanistan will not be able to sustain itself.

Despite the lessons of history, the international community became involved in a conflict from which an exit would be hard to envisage and in which success would be difficult to define, let alone to achieve. One of the key elements contributing to this status is the problematic nature of the goal of building a Western-style state structure in the context of a tribal society wracked by ongoing conflict. Strong calls for the prioritization of liberal values—peace, democracy, equality, and economic modernization—are omnipresent in reports and political speeches related to Western missions in Afghanistan. The shortcomings of these missions mostly relate to civilian casualties and missteps that deeply affect the cultural and religious sensitivities of the Afghan people.

Afghanistan's social structure is dominated by multiple layers made up of ethnic, tribal, clan, family, or *qawm* entities.² My primary intention—to analyze these multiple structures (political, cultural, tribal, economic, regional, military, religious, etc.)—would have been too complex to tackle, and indeed would be the work of a lifetime. Therefore, the main focus of this article will be on representative examples of cultural and political structures and their role. However, references to other existing structures and factors will remain a cohesive part of the research.

The importance of these structures inherent to Afghan society is not sufficiently acknowledged and reflected in the strategies, objectives, or current policies of ongoing missions. If they are acknowledged, approaches that take them into account are poorly implemented. Ignorance, negligence, or misinterpretation of these structures in the reconstruction and development process and their vital role in this endeavor are resulting in a relatively unsatisfactory level of positive achievements in comparison to the amount of financial, military, and human resources and efforts dedicated to Afghanistan in the last decade. Shortcomings and (dys)functionality, mostly seen in the current political structures supported by the international community, demonstrate that liberal Western values are not a workable goal on every occasion and under every circumstance. Afghanistan's social structure was buffered from outside influence over the last three decades, first by the years of Soviet occupation and then by a long period of Taliban rule. It is now being challenged in what constitutes a building up of structures and systems that are not fully suitable or compatible with Afghan values and its traditional way of living. Afghanistan is a nation in a situation that would require any state, with any set of values, time for recovery; **further, it is** currently facing multiple new challenges. New structures and ideas are being introduced, and the capacity of Afghan society to fully absorb them and incorporate them into society is proving limited. This change would be a lengthy process under the best of circumstances, but Afghanistan is being asked to undergo a major transformation within a relatively short period of time.

The first section of this essay will examine two cultural aspects, pointing out the importance of the structures that characterize Afghan society—the moral code of conduct,

² *Qawm* is a social structure based on ties of solidarity that may cross ethnic or tribal boundaries.

Pashtunwali, and the significance of the veil and the *burqa*—as two complex elements originating from deep within the region’s traditional culture. We will demonstrate what kind of challenges to Western values these two examples represent and how they influence the way of living and how deeply they shape Afghan values. More importantly, the focus will be placed on the interpretation and general approach towards these structures when they are observed from inside as well as from outside Afghan society. The second section will focus on two examples representing political organization and the current political structure. Anchored in the Afghan Constitution, the legal position of the president is very strong. The reasons for and shortcomings of this current political architecture will be demonstrated in a series of examples showing how weak this position is in reality. In the case of the Taliban, the essay will address the question of whether their ability to effectively utilize popular support based on their traditional moral code and delivery of services that the central government fails to provide can be attributes of their “resurrection” and possible future success. The third section will link these examples together and, based on specific situations in the Afghan context, will attempt to depict the complexity of how these issues arise in everyday life, as well as examine their links to examples discussed in previous sections.

On the basis of these examples of deeply rooted patterns and relationships, I will demonstrate their role and also try to determine how compatible they are (or are not) with the core values and practices that are central to the international intervention in Afghanistan. A series of questions will arise in this research: Do we lack knowledge of these structures and local values, or do our own values prevent us from implementing them? Would better understanding of Afghan culture and political structures—that is, better preparation followed by implementation of this knowledge during the mission and the reconstruction process—be a key to a successful and long-term strategy to achieve durable peace? Do these structures actually offer a solution for a feasible and sustainable political model in Afghanistan that is suitable to Afghans? What may prevent us from acknowledging or implementing them? Is it our own political agenda that the international community needs to defend and promote in order to achieve public support and availability of funding in their countries for this mission? Or do we simply ignore them for deeper philosophical reasons, possibly simply due to solipsism? What are the factors preventing Afghans from insisting on having a stronger voice on their own country’s architecture?

To understand the depth of the complex issues that bear on the subject of this analysis would require perceiving them in the regional dimension and context. However, the topic of this article will not focus on the development of the situation in Pakistan or Iran, and those connections will not be referred to in detail here. Other questions arise in the process of this critical and comparative analysis that bring the research to more fundamental questions to be asked about quality of the human resources deployed in Afghanistan at all levels and their preparedness and physical and psychological capacity for such a mission. However, full answers to these questions are subject to further research. As recent developments show, months of intensive negotiation, thousands of lives lost in conflict, or billions spent on the reconstruction process might be easily jeopardized in a

day by improper conduct, disrespect, or breach of highly prized local values, and might well result in growing local hostility. It is becoming increasingly clear that the thorough knowledge of the terrain, not only in its geographical terms, is an indispensable precondition of any military or humanitarian operation of such a scale as currently exists in Afghanistan. Finally, this article will conclude by addressing some future implications of these ideas and provide recommendations from the perspective of the practitioner.

Cultural Structures

Afghanistan: Basic and Complex

For the purpose of this article, it is essential to define the terms—*structure* and *culture*—upon which this work builds in the first section in order to offer greater clarity on the subject itself. Equally, the arguments drawn and the examples used in this research or conclusions drawn should be interpreted in the context of these definitions. The structuralist approach is used more widely in anthropology. It was popularized by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who considered “not [the] uniqueness of the societies but the differences between them as a subject [of] structural anthropology.”³ This concept has been applied in studies of language, media, religion, and culture. Clifford Geertz, in contrast to Lévi-Strauss, saw anthropology as “not [an] experimental science and search for laws but an interpretive one in search for webs of meaning.”⁴ Both agreed that the natural order of human behavior and the “web of meanings” that constitutes culture cannot be separated from the human actor and his intentions in the process of social interactions. According to Durkheim’s writings, “patterns of human behavior form established structures; they are social facts, which have established reality, beyond the lives and perception of particular individuals.”⁵

Lévi-Strauss and Giddens’ theory contains the notion that “individual and society form [an] interdependent duality. This functionalist approach views structures as constraining and enabling: while it establishes limitations on action, it is also the medium through which one is able to affect his surroundings.”⁶ Giddens defines structures as “rules and resources drawn on by individuals in the production and reproduction of social actions.”⁷ The concept of structure is now often a substantial foundation of nearly every mode of inquiry and discovery in science, philosophy, or art. The description of structure implicitly offers an account of what a system is made of – a collection of inter-related components. Therefore, a structure will be observed in a hierarchy or a historical experience, and will be present as a network of actions within tribes or families, configu-

³ Tom Ingold, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 370.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵ John J. Macionis and Ken Plummer, *Sociology: A Global Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2010), 125.

⁶ Scott A. Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles, *Classical and Contemporary Theory*, 2nd Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2012), 719.

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 19.

rations or connections between sub-tribes, political actors, between two genders, or among **foreigners – all of these** components that are currently correlating within the Afghan context.

As was discussed above, people and their social constructs are the main subjects and actors in creating structures. Simultaneously, people's actions in the process of creation of structural networks are influenced not only by their behavior but also by existing structures. The significance of these structures can be observed, for example, in the possibility of making free choices and acting independently, but also as factors shaping action, such as social class, religion, gender, customs, ethnicity, etc. Structures should be seen as a *neuron system*, inside of a society or a country, rather than as a skeleton. The reason for that is that the structures possess not only a certain organic quality and flexibility, but they are also subject to constant metamorphosis. They also have the capacity—as does any organic matter—to reflect and respond to significant external and internal factors (e.g., invasions or emigration, technology or regime changes). This process of change and evolution is not particularly notable for its speed; however, once a new structure is established, **its impact progressively** deepens.

It is not hard to explain why the study of cultural concepts in political science, security analysis, or comparative political studies is relatively rare. First, culture is not a concept that is typically studied by political scientists or security analysts. The reason for that might be that a cultural approach complicates issues of hard evidence; simply put, culture is problematic to account for, and it is not an exact science. Second, an attempt to present intangible factors like behavior, social aspirations, and cultural patterns as evidence might fail to convey the impression of a sufficiently scientific approach. Third, cultural analysis also raises many issues and questions that cannot be answered through political science or security studies (although other branches of the social sciences might answer them more adequately).

But **what is to be understood** by our use of the term *culture*? Culture, more frequently tackled in sociology or anthropology as a central concept, has been defined in a wide variety of ways that emphasize “culture as social organization, core values, specific beliefs, social action, or a way of life,” with few variations.⁸ More contemporary analyses, however, begin with Geertz's definition of culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”⁹ This view emphasizes culture as public, shared meanings; “behavior, institutions, and social structure are understood not as culture itself but as culturally constituted phenomena.”¹⁰

⁸ Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, “Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions,” *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology* 47:1 (1952).

⁹ Clifford Geertz, “Religion,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

¹⁰ Melford E. Spiro, “Some Reflections on Cultural Determinism and Relativism with Special Reference to Emotion and Reason,” in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*,

Especially in the Afghan context, many cultural and political aspects of the current situation cannot be understood without reference to history, geography, or religion in terms of how people live their lives. The area that we presently call Afghanistan occupied a central position in the space where four great civilizations met. In spite of this heterogeneity and diversity, along with the effects of recent decades of conflict and displacement, Afghans continue to hold to their traditional values and customs that distinguish them from their neighbors, and they continue to place significant emphasis on ethnic diversity and regional differences. Despite that, the essence and roots of their culture remain strong in their consciousness and traditions. They may have changed and altered in some ways over time, but they remain identifiable. Several scientists who have carried out their research in Afghanistan in the last few decades have agreed that this great diversity, evident all around Afghanistan, adds value and richness to their culture and the complexity of their society. Multiple groups represent different spiritual beliefs in Afghanistan today: Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Sikh, Hindu, and Jew. The large number of various ethnicities also leads to ethnic rivalries, most notably between the dominant Pashtuns and Tajiks, although conflicts between Pashtuns and Hazaras and factionalism among Pashtuns themselves are ongoing aspects of Afghanistan's reality, a reality that is only complicated by the presence of many other ethnic groups: Uzbeks, Turkmen, Aimags, Baluchs, Brahuis, Pashais, Nuristanis, etc. In spite of the high level of ethnic diversity within the Afghan population, there is a strong unifying factor among Afghans. "A glance at Afghan history affirms an often repeated pattern of alternating periods of fission and fusion. Afghans may quarrel happily among themselves, but they stand together and assert their pride in being Afghan when outsiders threaten. A sense of national identity does exist, elements of divisiveness notwithstanding."¹¹ But how are we to understand the meaning of being cultured in a society where above 70 percent of the population is illiterate? How can we measure the level of culture, if in the Afghan reality it is certainly not the same as being well educated or well read? Wisdom unrelated to formal education is highly regarded and reflected in the practice of local legal customs. In this case, those individuals "who observe the rules of accepted behavior and follow the prescriptions of etiquette are highly respected. Moreover, because of vibrant oral tradition, many non-literates are well aware of their cultural heritage."¹²

Close observation and understanding of structures in the cultural or political system present in Afghanistan can help paint a complex picture about the *modus operandi* of its population and Afghan society. To a greater extent, such observation can indicate [how to approach](#) the mission that Western nations came to Afghanistan to accomplish. History shows that implanting modern, Western values into Afghan society has not been successful, despite the fact that in some cases the initiative came from their own legitimate political leadership (as will be demonstrated below by the example of the *burqa*).

ed. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 323–46.

¹¹ Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Cultural Heritage and National Identity in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23:5 (2002): 977.

¹² *Ibid.*, 978.

How great a chance do we, as foreigners, have in any similar attempt? We need to work hard to respect and recognize differences between our values and those of the Afghan people – as products of different histories, reactions to different circumstances, and expressions of differently structured aspirations.

Pashtunwali: A Code from Far, Far Away

Winston Churchill was certainly not enamored of the Pashtun moral code, which he famously described thus: “Their system of ethics, which regards treachery and violence as virtues rather than vices ... is incomprehensible to a logical mind.” This opinion remains fairly widely held, and demonstrates one of the biggest challenges we face in both the current mission in Afghanistan and in our minds. “Regardless of whether culture does or does not make sense, we live in a world which forces us to make decisions.”¹³ Another challenge for a researcher, strategist, politician, simple soldier, or humanitarian worker is a choice between multiple cultural realities – between whether to follow the familiar set of values with which we were brought up, or to apply those values that currently surround us.

This Afghan moral code, known as *Pashtunwali*, may be, in the eyes of a Westerner, old-fashioned, bizarre, or simply wrong. But for Afghans, protecting one’s honor (*izzat*) is placed above all other considerations, including acquisition of money or property. It is a pedestal upon which social status stands. Family is considered to be the most important institution of Afghan society, unlike in the West, where the individual is the primary unit of interest and rights. As one scholar has written, “Individual honor, a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfillment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence of fanaticism, and dislike for ostentation – is a cultural quality most Afghans share.”¹⁴ *Pashtunwali*—literally meaning “way of the Pashtuns”—is far more than a system of customary law. It is an all-encompassing code of conduct and way of living. Most Afghans live in accordance to some variant of this code, although non-Pashtuns do not necessarily identify their moral code by this name. However, Afghan society remains an honor-based system in which possession of honor guarantees membership in the society and drives any social interactions. “Pashtun without honor can no longer claim to be Pashtun, and he does not have the rights, protection, and support of the community.”¹⁵ Although certain aspects of *Pashtunwali* do not apply to other ethnic groups, many of the principles are the same. At the same time, this code “stresses autonomy and equality of political rights in the world of equals. This is impossible to fulfill in a class-structured society or where governments prohibit such an insti-

¹³ Richard M. Merelman, *Partial Vision: Culture and Politics in Britain, Canada and the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 232.

¹⁴ Dupree, “Cultural Heritage and National Identity in Afghanistan,” 978.

¹⁵ Kakar Palwasha, “Tribal Law of Pashtunwali and Women’s Legislative Authority” (Harvard Islamic Legal Studies Program, 2005), 3.

tution as blood feuds or demand tax payments.”¹⁶ *Pashtunwali* is not anarchy, but rather “an alternative form of a social organization with an advanced conflict resolution mechanism.”¹⁷ It accomplishes this without courthouses, lawyers, police, prisons, or executioners by using *jirga*, a quasi-legal process that resolves a majority of their issues.

Islamic religious practices and law seem to be layered over a much older tribal social code. The two systems are different, and although they coexist in relative harmony, *Pashtunwali* has deeper roots. The main pillars of this honor-based society are the concepts of chivalry, bravery, or courage (*qalang* or *nang*); hospitality (*melmastia*); clear boundaries between the sexes (*purdah* or *namus*); and council (*jirga*).¹⁸

“Chivalry is defined by two sets of normative practices: honorable actions in battle and defense of one’s honor. Honorable conduct in battle includes rules about skills in battle, bravery, and it explains who may be attacked, e.g., not civilians, and how to distribute the war spoils.”¹⁹ Defense of honor requires a response against an insult or some other shame caused by another. This defense is called *badal* (justice or revenge), and it is handled between the affected parties, as long as the retribution is not excessive, in which case a council intervenes. *Badal* has no limitation in space or time—it is valid until an adequate solution is reached—and can be passed on from one generation to another. “In the case of adultery or murder, the honor of the victim and that of his family and kinsmen are only restored by the ultimate act of killing the offender.”²⁰ This concept is unknown in the legal systems of Western societies, and in practice we often disregard its existence in Afghan society, as will be demonstrated later on in the example of gender protection programs.

Melmastia (hospitality) to strangers and friends alike increases honor; these acts increase the individual’s social network, which adds to their authority. “Hospitality

¹⁶ Thomas J. Barfield, “Weapons of the Not so Weak in Afghanistan: Pashtun Agrarian Structure and Tribal Organization for Times of War and Peace,” paper for the for Agrarian Studies Colloquium Series, “Hinterlands, Frontiers, Cities and States: Transactions and Identities,” held at Yale University (23 February 2007), 11.

¹⁷ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire,” *International Security* 32:4 (2008): 61.

¹⁸ Many scholars have written about the importance of these elements of Afghan society. See Nancy Louis Dupree, “Cultural Heritage and National Identity in Afghanistan”; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Barfield, “Afghanistan’s Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralizing Power Before the U.S. Withdrawal,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:5 (2011); Peter Tomsen, *Wars on Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failure of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Frederik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); and Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, “Afghan Women in the Turmoil of Modernity,” in *Afghanistan on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Three Essays on Culture and Society* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2010).

¹⁹ Palwasha, “Tribal Law of Pashtunwali.”

²⁰ Nabi Mistdaq, “Historic Perspective on Afghanistan, its People and Culture,” panel presentation in Rayburn House Office Building, Washington D.C., 25 March 2009.

also includes *nanawati*—protection of one’s guest—literally to enter into the security of a house,” which also extends to anyone who claims protection under the code of hospitality, including enemies.²¹ Obviously, it creates complications for combatants when enemy forces request shelter from a local population. This practice has been extensively used by Taliban or Al Qaeda members and is often incorrectly understood by the international community as a sign of local support for the Taliban movement.

Boundaries between the sexes (*namus* and *purdah*) are marked between men and women’s physical space. They vary between social classes within each group in question. Each group has its private space, which is to be respected by persons of the opposite sex, even if they are visitors or strangers. Kakar Palwasha observes, “The level of separation differs among most strict *qalang* societies, to the middle grade as seen in [the] *nang* population, to the most liberal, which can be observed amongst the Kuchi community.”²² It is an open question to what extent we relate to and deal with this segregation when working with Afghans in an international working environment, and what kind of challenge it represents for Westerners who have very few nuances of gender segregation in their societies—not in their family, nor in their education system, nor in their work environments. How do we deal with practical situations related to *purdah* in Afghanistan, if gender equality is a highly **regarded value that is promoted** at the societal, political, and legal levels in Western societies?

Jirga (council) is a centuries-old institution. There is no common agreement regarding its functioning among members of Pashtun society. It is traditionally a gathering of decision makers in the tribe, village, region, or social group, who arrive at a consensus for actions, rather than following a single individual’s direction. It is similar to the Islamic *Shura*. This name is frequently used for “councils made up of respected members of the society, usually elders, belonging to landowning elite in *qalang* societies and being known for their honor, in order to have their decision accepted.”²³ Decisions of a *jirga*, this Afghan version of Athenian democracy, “are final and unanimous, as no man may be bound by the decision he does not accept. Fairness and collective justice are the ultimate good, not punishment of the individual wrongdoer in the Western sense, which for the Pashtuns is essentially an alien concept.”²⁴ Traditionally, *jirga* is open to every member of the community, but known leaders are required to attend. In reality, there are very few cases mentioned in the literature about women or young members of the group taking a part in *jirga* proceedings. The *Loya Jirga*, established in 2002 under UN auspices, which resulted in the Bonn Agreement, includes other ethnic groups apart from Pashtuns and has quotas for female representatives. It shows an undeniably democratic process, and represents a crucial modernization of this ancient and traditional decision-making institution. On the other hand, the lack of political party representatives in the

²¹ Frederik Barth, “Pathan Identity and its Maintenance,” in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Barth (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 120.

²² Palwasha, “Tribal Law of Pashtunwali,” 5.

²³ Akbar Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma Among Pathans. A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 83.

²⁴ Johnson and Mason, “No Sign,” 61.

new Parliament compared to the high number of individuals who run for elections and competition between parliamentarians undermines the possibility of introducing checks and balances, and provides the Afghan government with a platform to seek ways to encourage individual parliamentarians to support government dominance over the Parliament, mostly through corruption and bribery (which remain two of the biggest challenges facing Afghan society, right after security).

*Veil and burqa*²⁵

Many scholars, reporters, or commentators frequently make statements about Afghan society being resistant to foreign invasion or rule, using examples of British or Soviet occupations in the past. The example of cultural structure I have chosen to present will go one step further. It will not only serve the example of the historical overview of attitudes towards the *burqa* and the veil in the last century, but will demonstrate that resistance to foreign reign or ideas is not the sole characteristic of Afghan society. In fact, the deeply entrenched resistance to any modern elements that are not synchronized with the rest of the traditional structures of Afghan culture is a repetitive pattern in the society, often carried out in direct rejection of the authority of Afghan rulers or other legitimate leaders who have promoted such ideas or who have [tried to introduce modern](#) elements. If these modern elements have not been genuinely considered or adopted by a vast majority of Afghans, they are destined to fail.

Pictures taken in the 1950s and 1960s in Kabul of Afghan women, most of them bareheaded and wearing Western dress—students or young intellectuals posing in various “modern”-day jobs—most likely have an astonishing effect on those who see them now (as was likely the case then as well), given that they are in such opposition to most of the reality of present-day Afghanistan. During my research, I came across a book published in 1960 titled *Afghanistan: Ancient Land With Modern Ways*, which was full of similar images. However, these pictures, despite being true, have little to do with the actual way that the majority of Afghans actually live, whether in the past or today. The logical question following this discovery is where—or where was—the place of women within Afghan society? Are calls for gender equality just another chimera or *pium desiderium* of Westerners, or does it represent a solid ground for a feasible new strategy in this historically patriarchal society? As the former First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush, pointed out, the war on terrorism was “a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”²⁶ According to social anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, “saving Afghan women” was part of the justification for the U.S. intervention in October 2001.²⁷ Are

²⁵ *Burqa* (Arabic) or the Afghan *chaderi* both refer to a full garment that covers a woman’s entire body from head to toe, with slits for the eyes.

²⁶ James Gerstenzang and Lisa Getter, “Laura Bush Addresses State of Afghan Women,” *Los Angeles Times* (18 November, 2001); available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/nov/18/news/mn-5602>.

²⁷ Nermeen Shaikh, Interview with Lila Abu-Lughod, Asia Source: “Why we can’t save Afghan women,” access on March 06, 2012, <http://asiasociety.org/policy/social-issues/women-and-gender/why-we-cant-save-afghanwomen>.

those women hiding underneath *burqas* victims without dignity, voice, and status in their society? Is the *burqa* a symbol of oppression? Or are we mistaken in our perception? In the country reunited for a century under the Pashtun kings in the spirit of *Pashtunwali*, women had a very modest space to occupy, at least from an outside perspective. As stated, life in Afghan society is not only divided between men and women, but also between public and private realms. Women traditionally belong to the latter. Within their legitimate domain, “they are able to exercise influence and even authentic power, sometimes as a means of resistance.”²⁸

Women can also own property according to Islamic law and practice, even though some tribal rules prevent women’s right to inherit in favor of their male relatives. Their possessions, which rarely consist of land but rather shops, vehicles, or tools, are administered for them by a *wakil*, a male representative, often an older brother or uncle. This practice, undeniably discriminatory and archaic according to Western standards of gender equality, could be found in our societies as late as the late 1960s in Europe. Writing of Western media coverage of contemporary Afghan society, Taiba Rahim notes that “mainstream reporting was frequently characterized by an irritating superiority complex, implying that freedom that Western women today enjoy has always been there.”²⁹ It seems that emancipation in our societies was a lengthy process, and that most of the salutary changes came from the bottom up as a result of profound structural shifts, expansions in access to education, simple necessity and the practical demands of everyday life, and other developments within society.

Steps toward equality for women are often seen as a breach of the traditional way of life. The lesson of Afghan history shows us other specifics of this country in the way gender issues have been dealt with. The emancipation process indeed took place, however, in a very different manner. Last century’s leaders were preoccupied by the formulation and proclamation of their views on women and their place in society.

In fact, we can say that improvement in the status of women was executed from above – by decrees, and examples set by royal family females. Amir Abdul Rahman (1880–1901), also known as the “Iron Amir,” introduced multiple reforms of women’s traditional status, “going against tribal customs of forcing a widow to marry her deceased husband’s brother and asserted women’s right to inherit property.”³⁰ More significant reforms followed with King Amanullah’s (1919–29) reign. He tried to reform the seclusion of women in the private sphere and advocated for the acceptance of women in the public sphere, at least marginally. Queens and the king’s sisters served as examples in this regard. He introduced social reforms “including a new dress code which allowed women in Kabul to go unveiled.”³¹ His wife, Queen Soraya, was photo-

²⁸ Centlivres and Centlivres–Demont, “Afghan Women in the Turmoil of Modernity,” 57.

²⁹ Taiba Rahim, “An Identity of Strength: Personal Thoughts on Women in Afghanistan,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 847 (2002): 638.

³⁰ Hassan K. Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Abd al-Rahman Khan* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 173.

³¹ Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1997), 36.

graphed in a sleeveless evening dress during their European tour and without veil, which contributed to the conservative anti-Amanullah campaign. However, ever since the abolition of the veil has been perceived as the sign of woman's liberation and Western modernity.

Already in the 1920s there was a move towards female education and the rights of women. Girls' schooling was initiated in 1921, when the Esmat School was founded, and groups of girls were sent to Turkey for higher education. But the rural areas and some parts of the urban population felt disconnected from the royal reforms, and rejected them. Subsequently, these decrees were considered as violating their liberty and way of life, and were strongly opposed. A rebellion against his rule forced Amanullah to cancel most of his social reforms. As social anthropologists Pierre and Micheline Centlivres, who have both studied Afghan society for decades, concluded, "for many Afghans, these measures were an unbearable transgression of the social and divine order, a conspiracy against the fundamental notions of male honor and divine laws, in which tribal code and religious law are closely connected."³² The following kings Nader Shah (1929–33) and Zaher Shah (1933–73) continued on the path of providing training and education for women, but while preserving their segregation, and thereby reconciling higher education and *purdah*. Later on, Prime Minister Daud (1953–63) imposed the "voluntary" removal of the veil.

Kabul elites were the only women who did not wear the *burqa* or at least a veil during the 1960s and 1970s, a period during which those stunning pictures were taken. The rest of the Afghan female population did not show the same support for this "modernity," and the provinces responded with even greater reservations, as they do today. When Daud Shah became President of Afghanistan in 1973, he continued in his reforms of women's rights, and their participation increased in the judicial, educational, administrative, and political sectors. But again, this was not a result of any feminist movement within Afghanistan. There were no Afghan-style suffragettes agitating for increased rights; rather, progress for women was the outcome of the political agenda of a man in power. Nancy Dupree formulated it precisely in her brief paper: "they had come out of their homes and taken off their veils, because male leaders, of their own volition, decreed they can do so."³³ The wave of liberation reached Kabul in the 1970s, and certain liberalization of custom went along with the reforms. Girls went to school and universities unveiled, and even miniskirts could be seen, especially in Kabul. This was both a spur to and a by-product of the 1977 Constitution, written during the Republic, which explicitly stated the equality of rights and obligations between men and women. Despite three decades between 1950–80 that improved women's conditions, their acceptance and public involvement, there was still a considerable cultural gap between the capital and main cities and the countryside.

³² Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, "Afghan Women in the Turmoil of Modernity," 66.

³³ Nancy Hatch Dupree, *The Women of Afghanistan* (Islamabad: published by the Office of the U.N. Coordinator for Afghanistan, 1998), 5.

When the Marxist coup in 1978 hardened and reached the intensity of open war, many of the elites, including educated women, emigrated. In general, the implementation of Marxist-Leninist ideas in the reality of mostly rural and Muslim Afghanistan, together with the ideas of equality in male–female relations, was not received positively. The Peoples’ Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was promoting female emancipation, and those female supporters of the regime went out bareheaded or wearing only a little scarf. However, during the same period, “the veil was often worn by educated Afghan women opposed to the regime; it was a symbol of resistance against Soviet presence in Afghanistan.”³⁴ All regimes in their own way proclaimed their commitment to women’s rights, including the current government. Communists wanted to free them from patriarchy and subordination, the *Mujahedeens* to save them from “impiety and promiscuity introduced by Communists, and the Taliban claimed to protect them from insecurity and attacks during the *Mujahedeen* regime and moral degradation and Western influence.”³⁵

The closure of educational institutions for girls and the exclusion of women from public life resulted in a situation where only a small number of medical professionals in the country were permitted to carry out their work. Following the Taliban’s decree requiring women to wear the *burqa*, they became an invisible part of society once again. In the decade since the Western intervention began in November 2001, the situation has improved to “normal” or, as many have said, “back to before.” The 2004 Afghan Constitution again guarantees equality for women. Schools have reopened, at least in the larger towns, and medical clinics and hospitals are accessible to women, as are most academic institutions. Women participate in political life and hold public positions despite the fact that these achievements are often the result of gender quotas. Employment is available for women, and it is possible for women to go alone to the market, use public transport, etc. Key institutions have been established—such as the Ministry for Women’s Affairs, the Human Rights Commission, the National Assemblies—where women play an active role.

However, the *burqa* has not vanished from the streets of Afghan cities and towns. Does abandoning the *burqa* equal gaining rights for women in the Western perspective? Is it still today a symbol of male domination or female oppression? In all the possible color variations that are seen in different regions, the *burqa* remains a symbol of belonging, both to Islam and to Afghanistan. It has also gained some cultural meaning. According to the words of a Kabul woman, “it has become a part of a culture. We will not take it off just because the West wants us to do so.”³⁶ Does the *burqa* need to be redefined? The presumption that only uneducated and downtrodden women wear it might be common among the Western media. In fact, the *burqa* or *chaderi* is considered a town garment. In rural areas, wearing such long clothing would be highly impractical in the performance of daily agricultural labor and housework. When moving to urban areas, or moving to the town from the countryside, a *burqa* is the first item women hurry to pur-

³⁴ Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, “Afghan Women in the Turmoil of Modernity,” 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

chase. It gives them anonymity and freedom to go to public places, the comfort of looking at others while remaining unseen. According to Pierre Centlivres, “it symbolizes the role, ambiguous as well as complementary, of weakness and protection: the weakness and protection of women against the insult of a glance, the weakness and protection of men against the dangerous brilliance of a woman’s face.”³⁷

Most of the Afghan female staff I worked with wore a *burqa* after their duties in office. With a few exceptions, they used it during the time they spent on public transportation, or when they traveled to parts of town with which they were unfamiliar. The extent to which they observed other social codes of conduct, personal choice, courage, their families’ religious views, as well as familiarity with the environment all played a role in how and when women chose to wear the *burqa*. None of them were uneducated women. All of them were educated, bilingual (at the very least), and in several cases were the primary breadwinner in their family. They were certainly prime examples of young, educated, economically independent Afghan women. What the *burqa* provided for them was a sense of security or protection in a time of growing insecurity in the country. The same purpose for its use has been followed by numerous international female civilian staff serving across Afghanistan who often, depending on their duty station and deployment, purchased this typical Afghan garment as an optional means of security and protection, generally known as an “emergency *burqa*” among expatriates.

Anthropologist Hanna Papanek, who conducted her research in Pakistan, labeled the *burqa* as a form of “portable seclusion,” and Lila Abu-Lughod, another Western anthropologist working in the Middle East and Afghanistan, calls them “mobile homes.” She describes them as “a symbol that frees women to move around in public and among strange men in societies where women’s respectability and protection depends on association with their families and homes, which are the center of family lives. Many women around the Muslim world who wear these different forms of cover describe this as a choice.”³⁸ She also pointed out that humanitarian operations conducted in Afghanistan have rhetorical elements that are missionary in nature, and ideas of “saving” Afghan women reinforces a sense of superiority of Westerners’ model of liberty for women. This fact—that Afghan women may want different things than we would like for them—should be recognized and taken into consideration. Traditions, history, and religion have evolved differently in their country than in the West, but not in total isolation; rather, this evolution is a result of interconnection with other worlds, cultures, and influences. However, the primary ideal that Westerners call “freedom” may not rank high on their scale of values, or at least not in the form that we understand and exercise in the West. The mission *civilisatrice*, one of the core ideas of the liberal order, might not be necessary in this case. In the context of growing insecurity, pervasive fundamentalism, and

³⁷ Pierre Centlivres, “Bouddha masque, femme voilée,” in *Points de vue. Pour Philippe Junoud*, ed. Danielle Chaperon and Philippe Kaenel (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), 339–55.

³⁸ Nermeen Shaikh, “Why We Can’t Save Afghan Women,” interview with Lila Abu-Lughod, *Asiasociety.org* (accessed on 3 March 2012); available at <http://asiasociety.org/policy/social-issues/women-and-gender/why-we-cant-save-afghan-women?page=0,0>.

rejection of values promoted or imposed by foreigners, Afghan women's future often relies on the patterns of resistance from their past.

Political Structures

Strong Weak President

This section will focus, as did the previous one, on two examples of political structures present in Afghanistan and their complex relations in the context of tribal Afghanistan. First, with the example of the role of the president, we can demonstrate how the present basic political structures play a significant role in the state, and how [their interactions with other factors influence](#) the political process. Power in Afghanistan is often analyzed by academics through special attention to the relationship between tribes and the state. Both of them are characterized by distinct and strongly defined structures. What is often unclear, however, is how symbiotic (or not) they are, and what links exist between law, tribal background, personal charisma, or patronage. Do these factors in combination result in intended success, or do they cause more shortcomings than has been originally thought? How is this interaction reflected in the reality of governance represented by the highest political office in the nation, and what role does it play in the stabilization of Afghanistan?

The political architecture of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is anchored in the Constitution that evolved out of the Afghan Constitution Commission that was mandated by the Bonn Agreement and was adopted by the Grand Council *Loya Jirga* on 4 January 2004. It created a nation that pledges to be both Islamic and democratic. The 2004 Constitution provided a legal basis for a strong presidency, a national assembly composed of two houses, and a judicial system. It proclaimed equal rights for women. Its Preamble describes Islam as the country's sacred religion, but guarantees protection for other faiths. These significant elements are also the ones that hold potential for legal discord, or show the practical gap between written legislation and tradition and practice within Afghanistan.³⁹

Chapter III of the Afghan Constitution establishes a legally strong office of a president possessing large competences over executive and legislative powers, as is indicated in Article 64 and many following ones. Practically, however, a president's ability to execute and implement his powers in the provinces—mainly by nominating thirty-four provincial governors and several hundred district sub-governors—is limited. In this section we will examine what causes this discrepancy, what frictions exist between the president and other elements of the Afghan government, and what undermines this legally powerful office.

In addition to understanding the nation's legal basis, gaining a grasp of the complex composition of the Afghan populace and the relationships between ethnic groups is a fundamental task in studying Afghan social or political structures. The last King, Zahir

³⁹ The full text of the 2004 Afghan Constitution is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/404d8a594.html>.

Shah, and the current Afghan President Hamid Karzai are both Pashtuns. Therefore, a closer examination of Pashtun tribal relations is crucial to analyze and unravel the source of the issues affecting the highest political level. With regard to the natural tribal links, it is not clear whether the current president represents the best possible leader for a war-torn country, or if his background exacerbates some traditional enmities disregarding his professional or political capacity. To what extent does the ethnic and tribal relationship influence political development in Afghanistan and the potential for stability if “questions of ethnicity are critical in assessing implications for future Afghan political and social stability”?⁴⁰

Pashtuns represent the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims, of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence, considered to be the most liberal of the four schools of Sunni Islam. As has been already substantiated in the previous section, they subscribe to *Pashtunwali*, an all-encompassing code of conduct and way of life. Pashtuns have been the subject of more academic study than all the other major Afghan ethnic groups; therefore, there is more information on Pashtun ethnicity and tribal structures compared to the others. The complex structure of their society varies greatly from region to region. Geographical terrain and conditions influence the structures of power in Afghanistan – the flat terrain in the south is more dominated by hierarchical or autocratic structures, while in areas of more difficult terrain and in mountainous or border areas, egalitarian or more democratic social orders are present. Pashtuns living in more isolated mountain regions are less rigid in their social structure, as the condition of isolation causes social groups to identify themselves more with their immediate environment and location rather than with their tribal lineage.

The Afghan President Hamid Karzai is a Pashtun, born in the south, in Kandahar city. He traces his origins to a southern Sarban lineage represented by the Durrani supertribe and *sardars* of the Popalzai tribe of the Sadozai clan (see Appendix).⁴¹ “Since its inception in 1747, Afghanistan was ruled—with few short-lived Tajik-dominated periods—by Pashtun *sardars* of the Sadozai and Mohamadzai clans until the last Afghan King, Zahir Shah, was overthrown in August 1973,” as Amin Saikal confirms in his detailed history of modern Afghanistan.⁴²

The Bonn Agreement revived this tendency in 2001, when Karzai was appointed to head the new Afghan Interim Government. Despite claiming a link to a long lineage of leaders, the southern Sarban lineage represents only a small percentage of the Afghan population, and is spread into two lineage groups: the Zirok (known as Durrani), and the Panjpai.⁴³ Both groups further divide into nine tribes, of which the Popalzai is one. (See the Appendix for a diagram of Pashtun sub-groups, along with a map showing their dis-

⁴⁰ Thomas H. Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition: The State of State-building after War,” *Central Asia Survey* 25:1-2 (March–June 2006): 7.

⁴¹ Sardars are descendants of tribal chiefs and royal descendants of Afghan kings.

⁴² Amin Saikal, Ravan Farhadi, and Kirill Nourzhanov, *Modern Afghanistan: History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

⁴³ Various sources indicate that between 11–16 percent the Afghan population are southern Sarbans.

tribution.) “Panjpai estrangement from the national government and their political underrepresentation in the past Durrani royal circles might be a reason why they are better represented in the Taliban leadership and their avid participation in the insurgency.”⁴⁴ The Pashtun Ghilzai supertribe, which represents approximately 20–25 percent of the Afghan population, including many Kuchis (Pashtun nomads), are known as “skilled warriors and are viewed by others as the most violent Pashtuns, and they see themselves as the strongest supertribe and true warriors of the Pashtun ethnicity.”⁴⁵ The Ghilzai have a long history of internal conflict, and have been constantly at odds with the Durrani rulers. This resentment eventually led to the communist overthrow of the Durrani-led government in 1978. They supplied considerable parts of the Afghan fighting force in every war against a foreign invader. The Hotak tribe is viewed as Ghilzai royalty. In this regard it is important to note that the Taliban’s spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, is a Hotak tribesman.

Within tribal society, leaders are generally selected on the basis of personal charisma, character, respect, and their patronage network. Leaders who do not meet the expectations of their tribe are likely to be removed from their position and replaced by another member of the tribe, usually a rival. When dealing with outsiders, tribal leaders are more inclined to take a utilitarian stance, as their power is largely related to their capability to provide for their members.

Tribal leaders’ position toward state bodies and international or state officials is often perceived as growing from their notions of how their tribe will profit from that liaison. Hamid Karzai, who had played an insignificant role in Afghanistan’s wars, emerged as the international choice to lead the country. As Alexander Nicoll writes, “Before his assumption, as a compromise choice, of the interim leadership, few people inside and outside Afghanistan had ever heard of him. He cannot claim acceptance among either non-Pashtun Afghans, or among the tribally heterogeneous Pashtuns.”⁴⁶ President Karzai is known as a compassionate man, hardworking, a devout Muslim and an Afghan patriot, but he does not possess the particular charisma that is generally seen in a leader among Afghans. He cannot claim legitimate succession from a royal ancestor, nor can he serve as a reuniting figure for the Pashtun clans. But he is undeniably a politician – “most significantly he demonstrates his high skill in exercising the Afghan *jirga* tradition and staying on the top of the Afghan tribal summit.”⁴⁷ Karzai is not a natural when it comes to exercising military power, which distinguishes him from charismatic martyred commanders like Abdul Haq and Ahmed Shah Masood. They would probably have been

⁴⁴ “Putting it Together in Southern Afghanistan,” *Tribal Analyses Center* (May 2009), 6; available at <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/Research-Completed.html>.

⁴⁵ Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 12.

⁴⁶ Alexander Nicoll, “The Road to Lisbon,” in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, ed. Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, Adelphi Series 425–26 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), 33.

⁴⁷ Peter Tomsen, *Wars on Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failure of Great Powers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 641.

much more categorical in their dealings with the warlords and in diminishing Afghanistan's dependence on foreigners.

The process of the Bonn Agreements, under the auspices of the UN, brought together representative groups in an attempt to shape an agreement and a new political architecture for Afghanistan. However, Afghan leaders played little part in engineering the nature of the transition from conflict to "peace." In fact, others made the key decisions about the change. Despite U.S. support, Karzai's political position was not secure until the elections in 2004. Peter Tomsen, who served as U.S. President George H.W. Bush's Special Envoy to Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992, gives a detailed record of the event in his *Wars on Afghanistan*. In 2002, the *Loya Jirga* in Kabul was supposed to choose the interim president who would lead the country until the first free presidential elections. On 10 June 2002, 900 of the 1500 delegates banded together near the *Loya Jirga* meeting to support Zahir Shah as transitional president instead of Karzai. Shah's chief adviser, Abdul Wali, was asked by a journalist whether the former king would play a leading role in the country. Wali's response was that "the decision was up to the Afghan people. The king would follow whatever the Afghan people decide."⁴⁸ This indication made Karzai's election no longer a certainty. The schedule for the following day's selection was changed, and the change was followed by a demand by Zalmay Khalilzad—appointed by George W. Bush as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan between November 2003 and June 2005—to Wali that "Zahir Shah read a statement to the media, prepared by Karzai's staff, to deny that he is a candidate to lead the transition."⁴⁹ The news release reporting the king's statement at the press conference convened that afternoon was broadcast by the media nationally and abroad, and was delivered to delegates in writing. The mood during the conference was understandably dampened by the news. The delegates formally elected Hamid Karzai a few days later. Delegates "complained afterwards that they have not been able to elect the leader they wanted. By bluntly interfering with the Afghan leadership selection process on behalf of Hamid Karzai, the United States fumbled a rare opportunity to let Afghans themselves choose a leader who would not be seen as imposed by outsiders."⁵⁰ U.S. support in 2002 in the *Loya Jirga* fortified Karzai's political position to compete in the elections in 2004, which confirmed him as president for the next five years, with 55.4 percent of the votes cast. The renewed presidential mandate in the 2009 elections was, however, highly questionable, and elections with low participation were generally associated with accusations of electoral fraud.

Political survival in Afghanistan requires the formation of a personal patronage network, especially if warlords control a significant part of the country. To gain their support, "Karzai set about co-opting or buying them off with offers of cabinet posts and governorships like *Khaki Shah Madart*—a cunning magician in Afghan history famous for manipulating others by promising them lucrative positions—as the President has

⁴⁸ Ibid., 641.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 642.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 642.

been jokingly referred to by some Afghans.”⁵¹ The loyalty and capability of ministers, chiefs of police, and the presidential staff acquired through these means remains questionable. They assumed their position without deviating from their personal agendas. As a result, the concept of central government remains surrealistic outside of the capital. Power continues to be localized, held by a range of local actors. Because of a lack of regional support, government in the provinces remains weak. Regional leaders are the key to strengthening the government, but they have little motive or obligation to do so.

Certain academic analyses of Afghanistan have argued that “tribes, particularly in rural areas instead of central government, have historically determined the fate of Afghan society, and thus need the support of the international community in order to mitigate insurgent groups and their extremist religious ideology and attempt to subsequently balance Afghan society.”⁵² Instead of considering substantial support for the regions, the international community focuses on supporting the central government, despite the limited reach of its power and repeated cases of large-scale corruption. The latest scandal of extensive financial corruption in the Kabul Bank prompted the president’s decision to set up a special prosecutor’s office and court. His decision to pursue this course, instead of referring the case to the attorney general in order to address the fraud of more than USD 900 million and demanding that “all bad loans must be repaid within two months” suggest the presence of political motives behind the decision, especially if we consider Karzai’s family ties to this financial institution.⁵³ The risk of jeopardizing foreign aid funding for Afghanistan would affect ordinary citizens and development projects across the country, yet Karzai does not respond to demands from donor countries to address corruption according to their expectations. As one journalist has noted, “Doubts about his capacity to handle this level of authority became widespread and were fuelled by leaked diplomatic cables from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry. A report stated that he [Karzai] is at the center of the governance challenge, and that he struggles to strike a correct balance between institutional and traditional governance. Eikenberry went on to say that Karzai was unable to grasp the most rudimentary principles of state building.”⁵⁴ In 2008, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as number 175 in a survey of 180 countries for its Corruption Perception Index. In 2009, Afghanistan fell to third from the bottom, ahead of only Myanmar and Somalia. The bottom three positions remained unchanged in the 2010 survey.⁵⁵

Hamid Karzai has been confronted with a complex situation – an active and violent insurgency, the presence of foreign troops, and limited power and control over Afghan territory. The country’s dependency on foreign donors and the frequent occurrence of

⁵¹ Ibid., 802.

⁵² Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition.”

⁵³ Emma Graham-Harrison, “Kabul Bank Scandal,” *The Guardian* (U.K.) (4 April 2012); available at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/04/kabul-bank-hamid-karzai-special-tribunal.

⁵⁴ Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, ed., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi Series 425–26 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), 86.

⁵⁵ Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2010; available at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results.

high-level corruption, together with frequent criticism of his office by his supporters abroad, could have a negative impact on the development of the country. His political decisions should be driven by high concern for the prosperity of Afghanistan, but it appears that this may not always be the case. Protectionism and political compromises to smooth over or cover up for the network of patronage or relatives do not earn him sympathy with his Western friends and donors, nor does it make a positive impression among Afghans. The need for change in this highest political position—or a thorough reconsideration of his political priorities—would be both vital and wise under current circumstances.

Taliban: (Un)popular Again!

Using the example of the Taliban in this section, we will point out some crucial facts related to the Taliban movement and their influence and relevance to existing Afghan structures. In order to do so, we need to look back to the social code *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun tribal system, as well as to Afghan history to get a clear picture of the current situation. Summarizing these facts, we could draw some logical conclusions on how to undermine the Taliban by supporting local structures. To achieve the desirable end state in Afghanistan, coalition forces should defeat the Taliban insurgency. Among the many ethnic groups living in Afghanistan, only Pashtuns are present in the Taliban movement in considerable numbers. The generalization that all (or most) Pashtuns are Taliban is hugely misleading; however, it is true that “most Taliban insurgents are Pashtuns.”⁵⁶ Therefore, examining the context of Pashtun culture and society is more than relevant in this context.

Despite the fact that their regime was defeated in 2001, the Taliban did not vanish from the daily life of many Afghans. On the contrary, they almost instantaneously recovered, began to rearm, and started rebuilding their structures, using safe havens in neighboring Pakistan. In fact, in sizeable parts of east and south Afghanistan, the Taliban is once again playing the role of government, which adds to its legitimacy and power. They have set up “shadow” administrations, and they provide justice to the local population when the central government fails to do so.

As was indicated in the previous section, Pashtuns are proud, free, and independent people who do not hesitate to utilize violence in defense of their way of life. Their laws and strict code of conduct are led by the sense of independence, justice, forgiveness, hospitality, and tolerance, along with four personal core values: honor, revenge, freedom, and chivalry. In general, the Pashtun have high respect for group consensus to resolve a conflict, rather than imposing judgment from a higher authority. Serious matters are referred to the *jirga*, a council whose decisions are given the full weight of law based on an egalitarian form of group consensus. The strong egalitarianism in Pashtun social structures makes their submission to military command or discipline nearly unachievable. For this reason the British would not allow their enlistment into the British forces

⁵⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.

in India. Despite the fact that “they were considered as skilled fighters, they were unreliable and would frequently desert once they passed the boundaries of their ancestral lands.”⁵⁷ This historical pattern can be observed on a large scale today, since the issue of desertion from the Afghan National Army or the Afghan police forces could very likely be explained in this light. However, Pashtuns are largely underrepresented in the Afghan National Security Forces.

But this pattern has an exception: if Pashtuns perceive an external threat, they will temporarily submit to military authority that would be exercised by a respected religious leader, a *mullah*. The Soviet invasion in 1979 caused the conditions that led to the establishment of the Taliban. “The Taliban, contrary to the *Pashtunwali* traditional system, adopted a much newer and completely different social construct—the strict version of Islam known as Wahabbism.”⁵⁸ This movement, which has its roots in the late eighteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula, seeks to implement a purer, more conservative type of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Mohammed and his original followers, and compliance with a strict version of *Sharia* law. Prior to the Soviet invasion Wahabbism was nearly unknown in Afghanistan. After December 1979, Muslims from around the world assembled to fight the Soviets, and Saudi fighters imported the Wahabbist form of Islam to Afghanistan. As Ahmed Rashid writes, “Funded by [the] Saudi Arabian government and charities and the United States and controlled by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence directorate,” these groups of “holy warriors,” or *Mujahedeens*, succeeded in finally pushing the Soviets out of Afghanistan.⁵⁹

Facing foreign invasion, not only Pashtuns but Afghans in general obviously had no problem in temporarily modifying their personal autonomy and submitting to religious leaders for the purpose of a holy war. This was a traditional way for Afghans to fight invaders. This time, they did it together with their foreign allies, who were gradually gaining influence over factions of the Pashtun resistance. The spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, acquired growing authority and legitimacy “in the eyes of his followers as a commander in time of war.”⁶⁰

Wahabbist practice grew stronger in parallel with the increase in strength of the Taliban regime. Public beatings of women who left home unescorted were not uncommon, nor was it unusual for women to be stoned to death for accusations of adultery. Girls were forbidden to go to school, men were obliged to grow beards, and entertainment and music were banned. In particular, imposing countless rules resulting in the use of physical punishment against adult males and females was at odds with *Pashtunwali*. On the contrary, this code based on social consensus perceives Pashtuns as independent, and not taking orders from any other man. But the *Sharia* version promoted by the Taliban was enforced by religious leaders through a strict hierarchy, and “frequently im-

⁵⁷ Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition,” 50.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: The United State and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 10.

⁶⁰ Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition,” 63.

posed the death penalty for homosexuality, adultery, drug use and other offenses.”⁶¹ These practices were in stark disagreement with Pashtun social structure, values, or cultural norms. Initially a voluntary and reciprocal system serving a military purpose (ejecting an invading power) was misused to impose itself permanently on all Afghans. The Taliban’s attempt was to take over Afghanistan’s traditional social structure and replace it with its own construct in order to maintain authority over the tribes in order to gain a support base and recruitment pool for their military forces.

They exploited (and continue to exploit) the traditional concept of protection (*nanawati*) and hospitality (*melmastia*) and used tribal loyalties to fortify their alliance. First, positioning themselves as legitimate defenders against foreign invaders—Soviets in the past, and Americans and their NATO allies today—helps them to win voluntary support. Second, they are capable of filling the power vacuum beyond the reach of the central government, and are able to deliver services that the government cannot. The local population might succumb if they have no alternative or no strength to resist their power. Last but not least, the Taliban have built *madrassas*, which were initially established for the millions of Afghan refugee children living in Pakistan near the Afghan border. Initially they gave one to two years of “indoctrination to thousands of young Afghans, followed by military training. At that point they were sent across the border to confront the invading army.”⁶² In some locations even today, if parents wish to send their sons to school to learn to read and write, a *madrassa* might be the only available option. Providing ordinary Pashtuns or any Afghans with the possibility to choose an alternative seems like a solution to diminish the Taliban’s legitimacy and fight the insurgency with success. Despite the fact that the Taliban enjoys significant popular support, there is an involuntary element to their popularity when the people have no real option to resist. The Taliban’s dependence on local support is simultaneously their strength and their weakness.

In one of the poorest countries in the world—a country where the estimated GDP per capita in 2011 was USD 1000, most of which has been gained over the last decade through the vital support of foreign donors—“buying in” local support is close to effortless.⁶³ Economic disparities between the capital and other urban centers and the rural countryside, where the majority of the population lives, is still very high. The Taliban’s legitimacy as defenders against outside invaders will cease if no legitimate grievance or cause for armed struggle is present. Their role in traditional Pashtun society might vanish. General Afghan disapproval of the Taliban’s version of *Sharia* law could be exploited. Promotion and the strengthening of the traditional tribal process in Afghanistan by the national government or the international community by investing in education, building up the infrastructure, and funding economic reconstruction projects would

⁶¹ Robert D. Crews and Amid Tarzi, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2009), 135.

⁶² Tomsen, *Wars on Afghanistan*, 198.

⁶³ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book: Afghanistan*; available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

weaken the Taliban and allow traditional structures themselves to deal with the Wahabis as they had dealt with intruders for hundreds of years.

Reconstruction or Deconstruction

*When we entered Afghanistan in 1979, people gave us a very nice welcome. Exactly a year later, 40 percent of the population began to hate us. Five years later, 60 percent of the population hated us. And by the time we were to pull out, 90 percent hated us. So we understood, finally, that we are fighting the people.*⁶⁴

Lt. Gen. Ruslan S. Austhev, USSR

The desire of Afghans to live without external interference is a fundamental principle of *Pashtunwali* and other moral codes that are in place in Afghan culture, and is a result of Afghanistan's historical experience. Internal independence is important. Tribal and cultural alliances are foremost linked to the family and tribe or *qawm* units, and only then to the government, and only if local and tribal interests and needs have been met in the first place. In most societies, security and safety are the primary interests of groups and individuals at any level, and Afghanistan is no exception. In the report provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Afghan government identified "three essential pillars of reconstruction: security, governance and rule of law, and social and economic development."⁶⁵ Traditional security providers include the tribal forces *lashkar* and *arbakai*, both of which depend on the approval and involvement of all members of the social unit. Local populations often regard protection that is provided from outside of traditional social groups with suspicions and doubt. Thorough consideration of the cultural environment and Afghan-specific structures and subtle differences would likely improve military results in fighting the insurgency as well as in implementing civilian programs. In June 2009, upon his appointment as Commander of ISAF and Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal stated that "we have operated in a manner that distances us—physically and psychologically—from the people we seek to protect." After his evaluation of the situation in Afghanistan and recognition of the need to change the strategic approach, a member of his strategy review team said that "the kind of COIN (counterinsurgency) doctrine that they are talking about requires a level of knowledge that I don't have about my home town."⁶⁶ It leads us not only to the acknowledgment of the fact of the complexity of the Afghan reality, but also to the necessity to adjust implementation methods and the preparation of members of the international community who are serving their missions in Afghanistan.

The topic of cultural awareness is part of the pre-deployment training curriculum of different military formations at NATO headquarters or within Afghanistan. Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia is responsible for the principles of the

⁶⁴ Quoted in Megan K. Stack, "The Other Afghan War," *Los Angeles Times* (23 November 2008), <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/nov/23/world/fg-aushev23>.

⁶⁵ International Monetary Fund, "Afghanistan: National Development Strategy: Executive Summary 2008–2013," Report 08/153 (May 2008).

⁶⁶ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 150.

operational training, which is then executed at its subordinate headquarters, primarily at the Stavanger Training Center. However, responsibility for course preparation and its content lies with the individual nations participating in ISAF. In this regard, the transfer of knowledge and best practices between ISAF forces is unreported. The military took the step of providing members on the ground with basic instructions about behavior and conduct in a Muslim environment in the form of a card. Some servicemen are provided with simplified instructions for conduct in Afghanistan, as is the case in the U.S. armed forces and Belgian military forces. Contrary to these, the German Bundeswehr does provide training, including cultural information, but does *not* provide simple card instructions on this matter, only rules of engagement. In order to avoid or diminish the unintentional alienation of the local population, it is highly recommended that all personnel receive pre-deployment training, including information on Afghan culture. Admittedly, there is a wide gap between the preparation and training of officers and enlisted soldiers in terms of length of time and level of knowledge, but a basic effort has been made. On the other hand, there is still space for improvement and further training. Cultural studies and reports similar to the topic of this article could be conducted as part of a pre-deployment training in order to raise sensitivity to the uniquely complex Afghan social structures that diverge across competing ethnic groups, tribes, religions, and geographic boundaries.

The preparation of civilians deployed for humanitarian missions in Afghanistan is less institutionalized and less developed. Similar to the armed forces, such training is a responsibility of each agency. The UN provides compulsory training for every official appointed internationally by any agency that is a part of the UN security umbrella prior to the individual's arrival to the duty station in Afghanistan. This Advanced Security Online Training does not contain any section on the cultural specificity of Afghanistan, and relates exclusively to security measures. Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environment (SSAFE) training, developed by the UN System Staff College, is targeted mostly at security officers of affiliated agencies. This course combines theoretical work with practical exercises and simulations, but it is not routine for international staff serving in high security risk locations (or any other intensely demanding environment), and it provides a minimum of information about security challenges linked with cultural context. Briefing information provided upon arrival to the duty station by security officers of humanitarian international organizations is insufficient and unsatisfactory regarding cultural or political circumstances. Despite the fact that every humanitarian vacancy contains the requirement of the candidate's cultural sensitivity, it is the category that is never scrutinized or verified at any level. During an interview conducted with the senior officer of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), part of the UN Secretariat responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors in the field and the main coordination agency of civilian-military coordination, he confirmed the deficiency in the cultural preparedness of international staff. He stated that "previous experience in a similar context [Muslim] country is an asset but it does not make them

automatically sensitive to reality there [in Afghanistan].”⁶⁷ He added that “our own security measures and rules are preventing us from having an effective dialogue with local actors who can guarantee our security and access to remote areas, if we want to reach our beneficiaries.” Therefore, adjusting security rules and their effectiveness in different areas of the country would be another task and challenge for the humanitarian community.

The confinement and boredom that result from restricted movement caused by high security risks are factors that neither humanitarian workers nor soldiers are trained for. **Their individual capacity** to manage their behavior and attitudes under these constraints varies greatly. The use of already existing studies and trainings of a high level of professionalism and quality that engage cross-disciplinary approaches in teams of academics, practitioners, civilian and militaries to work together on knowledge transfer and sharing would be highly recommended. During this research I discovered several well-structured, comprehensible materials and already developed hands-on training programs accessible for operational use. One of the best examples, a program that provides the substance of Afghan ethnicities, religions, social norms, etiquette, and culture, has been developed by the University of West Florida.⁶⁸

As the first section of this article pointed out, the sense of honor is paramount value for Afghans – possible disgrace risks exclusion from the community. This is an important factor when conducting operations or working directly with Afghans in a professional environment. If a soldier forces entry into a Pashtun’s home, he is dishonored. If they enter the home’s female quarters and breach *purdah*, his women are dishonored. If he is corrected, or his errors are pointed out publicly in his work environment, he is dishonored, and the consequences can be dangerous. Knowledge of culturally-specific etiquette, body language, gestures, and awareness of different notions of time pressure and deadlines would not only be a distinct advantage but also a life-saving skill in this environment. Even a high-quality training program does not prepare us for the variety of situations arising in this honor-based society, with codes of conduct that are strange to Western values. Are we prepared to deal with *purdah* and gender separation in a professional working environment? Or with a request by male staff to eliminate females from their work process? Does the deployment of women in this context represent a distinct disadvantage? Professor Pierre Centlivres, an ethnographer with decades of study experience in Afghanistan, suggests an answer to this dilemma of foreign women in terms of perception, but he does not address practical problems that occur in everyday interactions: “Only a foreign woman may enter both the female sphere and the male world. In men’s eyes, the foreign woman before being a woman is a person whose female character is neutralized by the quality of being a European guest, and by her independent, manlike status and behavior. Thus, her presence can be accepted in places where their own wives, daughters, and sisters are not allowed.”⁶⁹ His observations are correct, al-

⁶⁷ Interview with senior OCHA officer conducted on 2 March 2012 at UN OCHA HQ, Geneva.

⁶⁸ See <http://uwf.edu/atcdev/Afghanistan/index.html>.

⁶⁹ Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, “Afghan Women in the Turmoil of Modernity,” 54.

though respect for foreign women does not come automatically. Rather, it is a matter of trust and confidence building, and once it is acquired it is mutually well-deserved.

Gender equality is confirmed in the Afghan Constitution, and is largely supported by the international community, but it has a specific context in Afghanistan. The constitution states that “the citizens of Afghanistan—whether man or woman—have equal rights and duties before the law,” and includes special provisions to encourage women’s access to education and government. But traditional Islamic law treats men and women differently in some cases, and existing law in Afghanistan maintains some of these distinctions. “If a conflict arises between an international [human rights declaration] and the country’s law, it doesn’t say which has precedence. If we have a conservative judicial system—which we do—it will interpret the laws in a conservative way,” said Ahmad Nadery, Commissioner of Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission, in an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*.⁷⁰ Various programs of international humanitarian organizations or NGOs that seek to protect female victims of trafficking or domestic violence face issues connected to *badal* (revenge) being sought by the victim’s families. If they run away and find shelter with humanitarian organizations, they are considered to have dishonored the family and are condemned to death by the *Pashtunwali* moral code. The father will carry out this penalty, and if he does not succeed, it will pass on to his eldest male descendant. This factor represents a threat to the security of the other victims living in the shelter and to all humanitarian workers, both locals and expatriates. The international community cannot guarantee for how long high security surveillance can be maintained in the future. Their engagement in mediation with communities and families and finding more sustainable solutions would be more constructive and less dangerous.

The population often rejects any change that is rushed or imposed by the government, disregarding the level of its legitimacy, as the example of the *burqa* demonstrated. Emancipation efforts will take time, and projects promoting women’s rights and their active participation in society should be implemented with a high level of sensitivity and the perspective of a long-term endeavor. Education is certainly the best and the most natural way to encourage and support women and men in Afghanistan about the process of irreversible change. The challenge remains to consider emancipation in a larger context, and one that is almost never discussed by the international community: that of age. Many young Afghans want to acquire more independence and to participate in the decision-making process, but find few avenues open to them.

A first step to challenge political structures would be to ensure that functional governance be more efficient. The Afghan government should allow local communities, tribes, or local villages to select through their own socio-political processes their own leadership below the district level. All Afghan ethnic groups in the rural areas already have a community-based government *Shura* or *jirga* system at the tribal level making decisions by consensus to resolve important issues. Improving ethnic, social, economic

⁷⁰ Sharon Otterman, “Afghanistan: The New Constitution,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder (6 January 2004); available at <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/afghanistan-new-constitution/p7710>.

and political structures and connecting them to the Afghan governmental structures is a difficult long-term task, but it is achievable if it is facilitated as part of an overreaching strategy by the international community. However, such an effort should start at the district level, or preferably below. This move would require a major change in the approach from the Afghan President himself, as he possesses expansive powers to nominate not only his cabinet and part of the *Jirga* but also the governmental officials in the regions. He should act as a wise, mature, and experienced politician, considering the welfare and prosperity of his nation as his highest interest.

Despite complaints about constrained resources, coming mostly from the Afghan side but occasionally from international organizations and NGOs, many activities and projects are planned on a scale far beyond what the Afghan society can in fact effectively assimilate in a given time or in terms of money. Building the training components into every project and including on-site training as a part of our assignment should be the leitmotif of our missions. Robert Lamb writes, “Governance in Afghanistan cannot become ‘good’ in the way Afghan and international development strategies and official communications often define it, for at least a generation, and efforts to speed that process—through conventional state-building and democratization activities on a massive scale—are fuelling corruption and undermining prospects for stability.”⁷¹ Randall Hoffmann concurs: “An unnecessary gamble and, potentially, the insurmountable obstacle to success in the current U.S. strategy is its over-reliance on building a strong central Afghan government in the hopes that its growing military strength will become strong enough to strike the individual ‘legs’ of [Al Qaeda] or the Taliban.”⁷²

This essay suggested another possible option for fighting insurgency in a constructive way, respecting the traditional values represented by *Pashtunwali* and natural ties of tribal affiliation. The improvement of local governance through decentralization by supporting tribal or hybrid (formal and informal) systems—enabling changes that would be visible in small but real improvements in the life of Afghan society and the private sector—would most likely be sufficient to keep most Afghan communities from turning to insurgents for services or other assistance if they receive sufficient support from the national government or the international community. Although official high-level political statements proclaim support for the central government, the reality on the ground is driven by more practical needs, common sense, and the work to implement the projects. The military component (represented mostly by Provincial Reconstruction Teams) as well as humanitarians operating in the field are working in closer collaboration with local authorities on the tribal or provincial level than with the central government. Local leaders participate in the reconstruction process, and *jirga* or *Shura* are engaged or consulted if there is a need for hiring a larger number of local workers, or if community projects are being developed and carried out. This approach not only strengthens the

⁷¹ Robert D. Lamb, “Governance and Militancy in Afghanistan” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2011), 2.

⁷² Maj. Randall S Hoffman, “The Way Ahead: Reclaiming the Pashtun Tribes through Joint Tribal Engagement,” in *Applications in Operational Culture*, ed. Paula Holmes-Eber, Patrice M. Scanlon, and Andrea L. Hamlen (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 84.

honor of the *Jirga* and the traditional social order; it also facilitates trust building and it makes the local community less vulnerable to Taliban influence.

Afghanistan's constitutional architecture creates dependence of low-level governance on the center in nearly all aspects of life, but the central government, with its limited reach outside of the capital, is not in the position to fully exercise its duties. Many central government officials are not willing or capable of carrying out the full responsibility of their office, but they are also not willing to lose their privileges, prestige, influence, and the right to distribute patronage. Several analysts, including Peter Tomsen, have concluded that "in fact, a major catalyst for Afghanistan's corruption is the sheer amount of international attention and uncontrolled money entering the country in the form of military contracts, expensive aid projects, democratization and electoral reforms, technical capacity building, pressure for formal decentralization, international contractors and advisers, and other common elements of international state-building portfolios. Compared to Afghanistan's needs and problems, these efforts are inadequate; but compared to what Afghanistan can realistically absorb, these efforts are excessive and corrupting."⁷³

Conclusion

This article is necessarily limited in its length and scope, and does not attempt to provide an ultimate answer to the complex issues the international community faces in Afghanistan. What it attempted to do was to draw attention to cultural and political structures and their linkages through patterns and history—deeply rooted factors in Afghan tribal society—in order to highlight their importance, presence, and functions. In the ideal situation, these factors should be used as operational tools to achieve the primary goals—stabilization and reconstruction of a war-torn state—and get our projects and strategies to be accepted by the people they are intended to serve.

According to critics, the last decades in peace building have "displayed the tendency to abstract the tasks of peace building goals from their political, cultural, and historical context. This tendency has encouraged a social-engineering approach to the concept of peace building."⁷⁴ The liberal, peace-focused approach is considered to be "either fundamentally destructive, illegitimate, or both."⁷⁵ Examples of its shortcomings can be seen in many countries around the world: a focus on short-term instead of long-term goals; an emphasis on political rights and agendas, including early elections, instead of resolute economic recovery and social reconciliation; and support for the central government instead of local communities and traditional local leadership. Additionally, this approach often leads to the creation of social and economic inequalities and to the imposition of moral criteria that often oppose the traditional rules of the local population,

⁷³ Lamb, "Governance and Militancy," 16.

⁷⁴ Mats Berdal, *Building Peace after War* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), 19.

⁷⁵ Roland Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding," *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010): 338.

which are “regarded as ‘alien rules’ that deny ‘human dignity.’”⁷⁶ These errors have emerged in past peace building missions, and they continue to be repeated, without any lessons being learned.

Historically, Afghan rulers were governed by a political system that could be categorized in present political terms as “federal and consultative.” It can be explained by the fact that Sunni Hanafi doctrine is non-hierarchical and decentralized, which has made it difficult for twentieth-century rulers to create strong centralized state systems. The international community undermined the opportunity for Afghans to choose their own leader through its active intervention and favoritism toward Hamid Karzai’s presidential ambitions during the early selection of the Afghan leadership. Apart from other negatives, it triggered—most likely unwillingly and unintentionally—a patronage bond that would be difficult to dismantle without consequences. As this research shows, there is great academic knowledge and a vast body of analytical information related to various factors in the context of Afghan society, tribes, politics, culture, etc. Therefore, the claim that we lack sufficient knowledge about Afghanistan is simply unfounded. Better utilization of that knowledge and experience through the interactions with local population could result in a reassessment and more effective implication of strategies and goals, leading to a desirable end state for our missions.

What prevents us from connecting theory, knowledge, and practice? There is no single answer. First, the political agenda of the international community and our values are not compatible with many values that Afghan society shares. Propagating and financing an “Afghan friendly” strategy, based on Afghan values, would not be popular among the European or U.S. public, especially in a time of austerity and economic crisis. Second, the concept of solipsism could offer a possible explanation – a solution to the problem of explaining why human knowledge of the external world must always remain limited or impossible. Simply put, we cannot see beyond ourselves far enough to genuinely know the world beyond us on its own terms. However, this theory has been largely criticized, and the philosophical counter-arguments are numerous. In my view it is the complexity of the situation itself that leads to a certain level of inability or unwillingness to approach Afghanistan on multiple levels and in multiple fields in parallel.

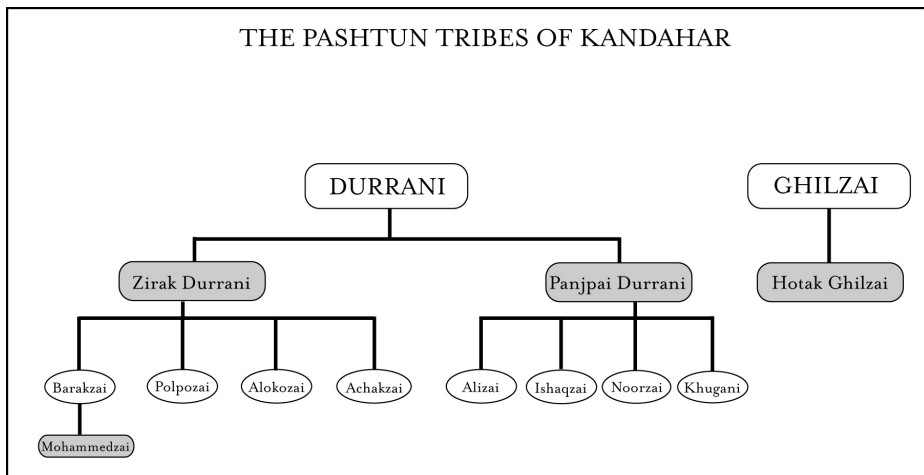
Closer observation of the structures of Afghan society, in fact, could offer feasible options to solve the most urgent matters: confronting the insurgency, strengthening political structures, and providing economic support to local communities. Despite the verbal narrative that stresses the necessity for Afghans to take charge of their own security, the international community and humanitarian organizations present in Afghanistan should design their programs in a way that encourages Afghans to find Afghan solutions to their own problems. Active participation of Afghan nationals in project design, which is usually decided overseas, in the United States or European capitals, should be a coherent part of planning and programming. Long-term engagement to pursue the original goal—stabilization of the country, but also to rethink the way in which this goal is

⁷⁶ William Bain, “In Praise of Folly: International Administration and Corruption of Humanity,” *International Affairs* 82:3 (2006): 525–38.

achieved—should be fundamental to any further steps that might be taken. We should offer the tools and training to enable their actions, not detailed recipes of how to do it.

The reduction of NATO troops in Afghanistan has been called “condition-based”; however, the withdrawal is to take place by 2014. More clarity about details and the possibility of any further presence and military participation in Afghanistan might be forthcoming. What the real operational capacity and efficacy of the Afghan security forces will be by 2014 is difficult to estimate. With less than two years left, some of NATO’s ambitious transition plan will likely remain unachieved. The humanitarian presence will hopefully continue and extend its assistance for a reasonable length of time after 2014, but ultimately only Afghans themselves should decide what their desires and needs are and how and in which system they want to continue to live.

Appendix: Tribal Map of Afghanistan



Source: Institute for the Study of War; Carl Forsberg, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, November 2009).