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A Question of Honour: Why the Taliban Fight and What to Do About It

Scott Atran

~~University of Michigan~~

Abstract

Afghanistan is not like Iraq. What may work well in Iraq, or elsewhere, may not be a wise policy in Afghanistan. The original alliance between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda was largely one of convenience between a poverty-stricken national movement and a transnational cause that brought material help. Unlike Al-Qaeda, the Taliban are interested in their homeland, not ours. The Taliban know how costly keeping Qaeda can be. Even if the Taliban took control of Afghanistan it is not clear that Al-Qaeda would be welcome again. Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan must be dealt with on their own terms. There's a good chance that enough of the factions in the Taliban coalition would decide for themselves to disinvite their troublesome guest if we contained them by maintaining pressure without trying to subdue them or hold their territory, intervening only when we see movement to help Al-Qaeda or act beyond the region. We're winning against Al-Qaeda and its kin in places where anti-terrorism efforts are local and built on an understanding that the ties binding terrorist networks today are more cultural and familial than political or ideological.

Keywords

Taliban, Pashtun Tribes, culture of honour, Al Qaeda, U.S. foreign policy, Lord Curzon

Although reading more than a thousand years of Arab and Muslim history would show little pattern to predict the attacks of 9/11, the present predicament in Afghanistan rhymes with the past like the lines of a limerick.¹

Afghanistan is not like Iraq. And what may work well in Iraq, like propping up governments and pumping in troops, may not be so wise for Afghanistan. Iraq is part of Mesopotamia, home to world's first centralised civilisation and government. Its relatively flat and open geography and great

¹ This article develops in depth ideas originally outlined in S. Atran (2009) "To Beat Al Qaeda, Look to the East", *New York Times*, 13 December, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/opinion/13atran.html>. Support was provided by the U.S. National Science Foundation, Air Force Office of Scientific Research, Office of Naval Research, and Army Research Office.

rivers have favoured intensive agricultural production and urban development, together with easy commerce and communication, throughout history. In Mesopotamian Iraq, central governments supported by large standing armies have brought order and stability. Not so in Afghanistan, nor the border regions of Pakistan, which are also not like Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, where a strong state backed communist insurgents.

The harsh, mountainous, landlocked country of Afghanistan stands at the midway mark of the ancient Silk Road connecting China and India to the Middle East and Europe. Its critical geostrategic location has been coveted by a never-ending stream of foreign interlopers, from Alexander the Great to the generals of Soviet Russia and the United States. In 1219, Genghis Khan laid waste to the land because its people chose to resist rather than submit. He exterminated every living soul in cities like Balkh, the capital of the ancient Greek province of Bactra, home to Zoroastrianism, and a centre of Persian Islamic learning. With urban centres devastated, the region became an agrarian backwater under Mongol rule. In 1504, Babur, a descendant of both Genghis Khan and the Persianised Mongol 'Timur the Lame' (Tamerlane), established the Moghul Empire in Kabul and dominated India. However, by the early 1700s, central government in Afghanistan, which had never been strong for long, had collapsed and much of the region was self-ruled by the Afghans, also known as the Pashtun, fiercely independent tribes who speak Pashto, a Persian dialect.

The Pashtun, almost all of whom are Sunni Muslim, are divided into a few major tribal confederations, consisting of numerous tribes and sub-tribes. In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani founded a regional empire based on cross-tribal alliances between the Durrani confederation, which provided the political and landowning elite that governed the country, and the larger Ghilzai confederation, which provided the fighters. This paved the way for the foundation of modern Afghanistan.

In the 19th century, the country became a buffer state in 'The Great Game' between British India and Czarist Russia's ambitions in Central Asia. The British gave up trying to occupy and rule Afghanistan after the first Anglo-Afghan War, which ended in 1842 when tribal forces slaughtered 16,500 soldiers and 12,000 dependents of a mixed British-Indian garrison, leaving a lone survivor on a stumbling pony to carry back the news. Still, the British remained determined to control Afghanistan's relations with outside powers. In 1879, they deposed the Afghan Amir following his reception of a Russian mission at Kabul. But in keeping with anti-colonial stirrings unleashed in the wake of World War I, the Afghans wanted to recover full independence over foreign affairs, which they did following the Third Anglo-Afghan War from 1919 to 1921. At least until 1979, when the Russians (Soviets) returned for

another go at control, followed in 2001 by the American-led invasion (with Britain as the junior partner) to bring Afghanistan into the Western camp after its brief spell of independence under Taliban control.

All Pashtun trace their common descent from one Qais Abdur Rashid, through his youngest son Karlan. Folklore has it that the Afridi tribesmen of the Karlandri confederation are Rashid and Karlan's most direct descendants. Although smaller than the Durrani and Ghilzai confederations, the Karlandri confederation, which straddles the present Afghan-Pakistan border, includes the most bellicose and autonomous of the Pashtun tribes. From the time of Herodotus and Alexander, historians have described how the Afridis controlled and taxed the passage of other tribes and foreigners through the Khyber Pass. The British thought the Afridi fearsome characters and fine shots, and so paid them off handsomely or, preferably, enlisted them in the Khyber Rifles and other crack frontier units to help them keep the other Karlandri tribes at bay, most notably the Wazirs of North Waziristan and the Mehsuds of South Waziristan.

Although the Wazirs and Mehsuds were hereditary enemies who constantly fought one another, they would unite in Jihad against any foreign attempt to gain a foothold in Waziristan, spurred on by local religious leaders (*mullahs*) and their martyrdom-seeking students (*talibs*). The British army missionary T. L. Pennell described the situation a century ago in *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier*:

Waziristan (the country of the Wazirs and Mahsuds), is severely left alone, provided the tribes do not compel attention and interference by the raids into British territory; which are frequently perpetrated by their more lawless spirits... tribal jealousies and petty wars are inherent... Hence the saying, 'The Afghans of the frontier are never at peace except when they are at war!' For when some enemy from without threatens their independence, then, for the time being, are their feuds and jealousies thrown aside, and they fight shoulder to shoulder, to resume them again when the common danger is averted. Even when they are all desirous of joining some *jihad*, they remain suspicious of each other... Mullahs sometimes use the power and influence they possess to rouse the tribes to concerted warfare against the infidels... The more fanatical of these Mullahs do not hesitate to incite their pupils [*taliban*] to acts of religious fanaticism, or *ghaza*, as it is called. The *ghazi* is a man who has taken an oath to kill some non-Mohammadan, preferably a European, as representing the ruling race; but, failing that, a Hindu or a Sikh is a lawful object of his fanaticism. The Mullah instills in him the idea that if in doing so he loses his own life, he goes at once to Paradise... and the gardens which are set apart for religious martyrs.²

² Pennell, T. L. (1909) *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier: A Record of Sixteen Years' Close Intercourse with the Natives of the Indian Marches*. London: George Bell & Sons, Pp. 48–49, 60–61, 116, 124.

After much bloodletting, the British realised that any attempt at permanent occupation or full-scale pacification of the warring tribes would only unite them, and that it would be nearly impossible to defeat their combined forces without much greater military and financial means than Britain could afford. So Britain finally settled on a policy of containment, institutionalised by Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India. Having come to India in 1899, shortly after a bad spate of Wazir and Mehsud uprisings, Curzon established the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) as a buffer zone, splitting the tribal areas between Afghanistan and that part of British India which is now Pakistan. 'Our policy was to interfere as little as possible with the internal organisation and independence of the tribes,' he said, and by *control and conciliation* 'endeavour to win them over' to secure the frontier.³

Control involved withdrawing British forces from direct administration of the frontier region, including parts of Afghanistan, 'for which our Regular troops were neither recruited, nor suited,' Curzon noted. Some well-defended outposts would remain to protect the roads that were being built to help integrate and secure the tribes through commerce (Afghanistan still has no railroad network). But the government would rely mostly on 'forces of tribal Militia, levies and police, recruited from the tribesmen themselves,' though trained and directed by English officers. Conciliation meant subsidising the 'friendlies' to hold off the 'hostiles' until they, too, realised that it was in their own self interest to accept British bounty for abandoning their traditional 'outlaw' ways, or at least raids against British territory.

After the partition of India in 1947, the successor state of Pakistan continued the policy of co-opting 'friendlies' with various incentives (arms, money, political position) to hold off the hostiles. Going a step further, the country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, decided that concentrations of regular troops from the Brigade level up would be evacuated from Waziristan and the other Federally Administered Tribal Areas wedged between the NWFP and Afghanistan. He aptly called his plan 'Operation Curzon.'⁴

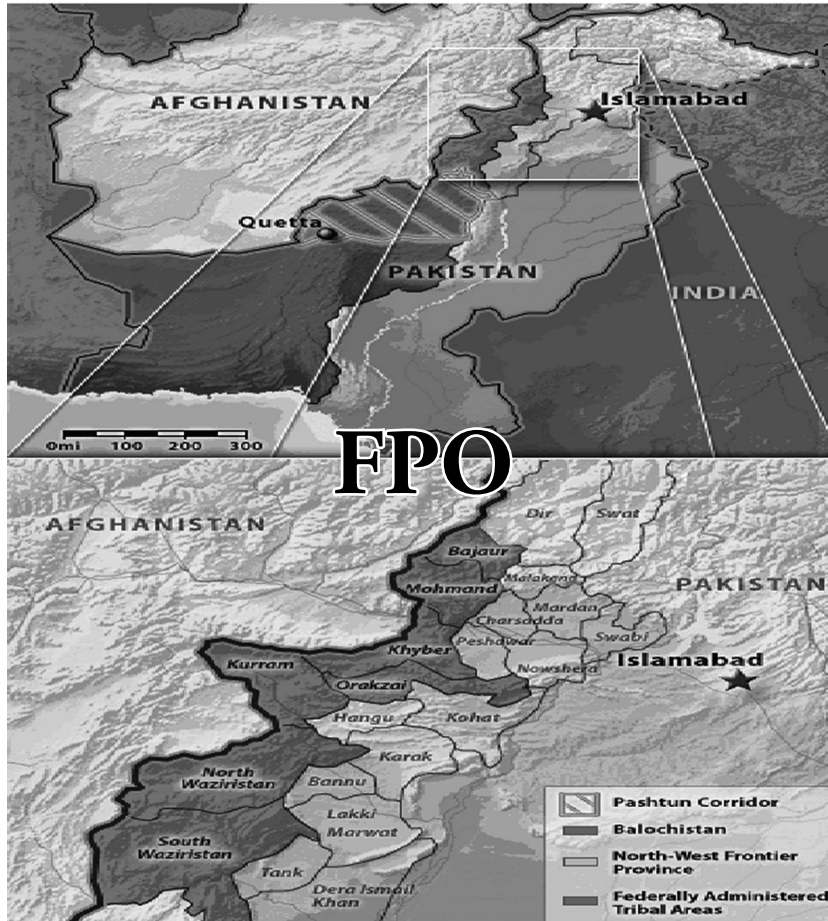
Thirty Years of War and the Rise of the Taliban

The Pashtun comprise over 40 per cent of Afghanistan's population, about the same as a century ago. The Tajiks contribute almost 30 per cent; the

³ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1908/feb/26/india-north-west-frontier-policy#S4V0184P0_19080226_HOL_23.

⁴ Hussain, H. (2004) "Waziristan — The Past". *Defence Journal* (November). Available at: http://www.ordersofbattle.darkscape.net/site/analysis/waziristanthe_past_overview_of.htm.

Figure 1: Map of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas



Hazara and Uzbeks each just a bit less than 10 per cent. The Pashtun have long dominated the country though, both politically and militarily. Except for a brief nine-month interlude in 1929, Durrani lords over the country until the Communist takeover in 1978 that killed Mohammed Daoud Khan.

Daoud’s government and its predecessor had been very wary of introducing reforms, especially concerning the status of women. They feared the kind of unrest that had unseated Amanullah, the Durrani Amir who had fought the British in the Third Anglo-Afghan War to gain full independence for his country in 1921. Inspired by the policies of Turkey’s secular reformer Kemal

Ataturk, Amanullah embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme, resulting in a rebellion of Pashtun tribal and religious leaders that removed him from the throne in 1929. He was initially replaced by an ethnic Tajik whom the Pashtuns came to view as a usurper. Then, the tribesmen threw their support behind one of Amanullah's generals, Zahir's father, who had been exiled by Amanullah for questioning the wisdom of the Amir's policies. He sacked Kabul in 1929 with mostly Wazir and Mehsud tribal forces and became king. Despite the assassination of Zahir's father in 1933 and Daoud's coup in 1973, Afghanistan enjoyed half a century (1929–1978) of relative peace and accommodation between the central government and the tribes. This was followed by thirty years of war that could still go on much longer.

This thirty years of war began when the Communist government threw caution to the wind and immediately proclaimed a secular socialist government that tried to force far-reaching land reforms and push programmes to better the status of women. The tribes rebelled, the regime was about to collapse, and so the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 to 'save socialism.' The radical reforms were rescinded, but the Soviet occupation generated even greater tribal resistance. The call to *jihad* brought in Muslim volunteers from around the world, together with financial and logistical support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. In 1980, then-U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, swabbed in a Pashtun turban and waving an AK-47 near the Khyber Pass, exhorted the *mujahedin* to fight 'because your cause is right and God is on your side... *Allahu Akbar*!'⁵

Pashtun traditionally identify themselves first and foremost by *qawm*, which Westerners usually translate as 'clan,' a sub-tribal identity traditionally based on kinship and residence.* In the past, male members of each *qawm* were invariably blood-related. But the change towards a market economy has somewhat lessened the strict importance of kin relations and encouraged new *qawms* based on patron-client economic networks.⁶ More recently, *qawm* has come to mean any segment of society bound by solidarity ties, whether by kinship and residence, occupation and patron-client relations, religious interests or dialect. A *qawm* can involve a varying number of individuals, depend-

⁵ Madeleine Albright responded to questions by Atran and others at "The Strategic Importance, Causes, and Consequences of Terrorism: A Multidisciplinary Colloquium" at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on 11 March 2004.

* The Pashtun *qawm* shares origins with its Arab namesake. The fundamental living unit of the Arabs was the family tent (*khaymah*); a cluster of tents formed an encampment (*hayy*) whose members constituted a *qawm*. The tribe (*qabilah*) was a grouping of a number of kindred *qawm*.

⁶ Rasuly-Palczek, G. (2001) "The Struggle for the Afghan State: Centralization, Nationalism and their Discontents", in W. van Schendel and E. Zürcher (eds.) *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World*. London: I. B. Tauris.

ing on context and situation. During the Soviet-Afghan War, as in the present Taliban insurgency, the notion of qawm became even more ambiguous and flexible to allow for strategic manipulations of identity to carry out group actions in shifting contexts.⁷ Especially among the hill tribes, qawms are still heavily family-oriented and very much the primary reference groups for military action.

The mujahedin fought primarily to defend their faith and community against a hostile ideology, an oppressive government, and a foreign invader: ‘It was a spontaneous defence of community values and a traditional way of life by individual groups initially unconnected to national or international political organisations.’⁸ Their tactics differed from place to place, qawm to qawm. Although few guerrilla commanders were military professionals, Afghanistan under Daoud and Zahir had a conscript army in which most 22-year-old males served two years. The tribes scorned professional soldiers as mercenaries, but they had supported the draft because it provided basic military know-how that helped boys become men even in times of peace. Friendships made during military service also later eased cooperation between guerrilla groups.⁹

Over the course of the War, state institutions decayed. There were also profound changes in local communities that helped pave the way for the emergence of the Taliban after the War. The old elite of large landowners and tribal elders ceded to a new cadre of younger military hotshots from less prestigious backgrounds who began to play an important role in the administration of community life. At the same time, there was a sharp expansion of the role of the Islamic clergy (*ulema*). Clerics with an advanced *madrassah* education (*malawi*) and knowledge of religious law (*sharia*) enjoyed greater prestige than the boorish mullahs. The ulema were able to leverage this prestige into political influence that cut across tribal boundaries by networking with Pakistani political parties that funnelled money and supplies to the mujahedin (some provided to them by the U.S. via Pakistani Intelligence), and by morally restraining military commanders from arbitrary actions that benefitted only themselves and their kin.¹⁰

⁷ Tapper, R. (1988) ‘Ethnicity, Order, and Meaning in the Anthropology of Iran and Afghanistan’, in J.-P. Digard (ed.) *Le Fait Ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*. Paris: Editions du CNRS.

⁸ Ahmad, A. and L. Grau (2002) *Afghan Guerilla Warfare: In the Words of the Mujahideen Fighters*. Zenith Press.

⁹ Roy, O. (1994) *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Pp. 158–159.

¹⁰ Roy, O. (1990) *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Soviet forces withdrew in February 1989; however, it was only after the Soviet Union collapsed, ending all outside assistance to a local client-regime that was holding on by the skin of its teeth, that Kabul fell to the mujahedin forces in April 1992. The mujahedin immediately took to fighting among themselves for control of the city and the countryside. A near-state of anarchy prevailed as demobilised and penniless warriors became outlaws that preyed even on women and the weak. Reacting to a series of outrages around the southern city of Kandahar, a small group of religious students (*taliban*), led by their teacher Mullah Omar, killed the worst of the bandits in 1994 and proclaimed a new movement, the Taliban, that would unify the country by using the sword of pure virtue to cut away all vices (including the playing of music, shaving the face, and educating women). With Pakistan's aid, their power spread to other Pashtun areas. Taliban forces took Kabul in 1996 (although Mullah Omar chose to remain in Kandahar) and extended control over the whole country, except the Tajik-controlled north-east, by 1998.

Final victory came to the Taliban on 9 September 2001, when, with Al-Qaeda's assistance, a suicide bomber posing as a journalist managed to kill Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary Tajik commander of the Northern Alliance known as 'The Lion of Panshir.' Two days later, Al-Qaeda attacked the United States apparently without informing the Taliban leadership of any plans. Most probably, Bin Laden assumed that by helping the Taliban to win Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda was free to use the country as its base from which to launch attacks. Taliban religious leaders, however, judged that Bin Laden had abused his status as a 'guest' in the country and urged Mullah Omar to 'invite' Bin Laden to leave.

The U.S. would not wait upon such customs, which were judged insincere (but wrongly so, as we'll see later). With U.S. air and special forces to clear the way, the Northern Alliance entered Kabul in November 2001. In Afghanistan, a governing coalition rapidly emerged of Afghanistan's Durrani President Hamid Karzai and Tajik-led successors of the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance. The Taliban opposition in the country has come to include disaffected Durranis, Ghilzai, and factions of the Karlandri confederation (such as the Haqqani of the Zadran tribe, whose leader Jalaluddin was called 'goodness personified' during the Soviet-Afghan War by then-Congressman Charlie Wilson,¹¹ and is today one of Al-Qaeda's principal allies.)

When U.S.-backed forces first swept through Afghanistan, many of the remaining Taliban commanders fled for sanctuary in the Pashtun border regions of Pakistan. The Americans then began bombing these sanctuaries

¹¹ Crile, C. (2007) *Charlie Wilson's War*. New York: Grover Press.

from the air and intermittently prodded the Pakistani army to make fitful incursions into tribal areas. The result was that hitherto unaligned Pakistani Pashtun began joining forces with the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. This, in turn, has enabled Al-Qaeda to survive, the Afghan Taliban to regroup and take the fight back into Afghanistan, and the Pakistani Taliban to emerge as a threat to Pakistan itself.

Pakistani Taliban are mostly enlisted from factions of the Mehsud, Wazir and other Karlandri tribes. Before 2001, many of these tribal factions were largely unresponsive to the Afghan Taliban programme to homogenise and integrate tribal customs, and suppress tribal independence, under a single religious administration that claimed strict adherence to *sharia* (in fact, a peculiarly Pashtun version of sharia with a heavy dose of tribal custom). The Pashtun border tribes became outraged at the Pakistani government too for sending troops into the area and allowing Americans to bomb their homelands in an effort to kill off Al-Qaeda and root out the Afghan Taliban. In Pakistan today, the designation ‘Taliban,’ or ‘religious students,’ applies to almost any Pashtun tribesman who takes up holy war against the infidel — the U.S.-led coalition — or those reckoned to act in the service of infidels. There’s no overarching Taliban organisation that commands and controls the actions of its numerous tribal factions and unaffiliated adherents (often foot soldiers who fight for pay, status, and other rewards).

In the past, the Afghan Taliban tried to suppress tribal sentiments and the role of the qawms. Now, the new Taliban vies with the U.S.-backed coalition to enlist these sentiments to turn the qawms into militia. Both sides have grudgingly bowed to the fact that Pashtun politics are indeed truly local, and that local politics must be mastered before grander schemes are tried. The problem is that the Taliban are far better at this than are we.

A Matter of Honour

A key factor helping the Taliban today is the moral outrage of the Pashtun tribes against those who would deny them autonomy of action, including a right to bear arms to defend their tribal canon, known as *Pashtunwali*. Its sacred tenets include protecting women’s purity (*namus*), the right to personal revenge (*badal*), the sanctity of the guest (*melmastia*), and sanctuary (*nana-wati*). All Pashtun tribes organise along patrilineages, where inheritance, wealth, social prestige, and political status accrue exclusively through the father’s line. Within such a social structure there must not be any suspicion that the male pedigree (often traceable in lineages that span centuries) is ‘corrupted’ by doubtful paternity. Thus, revenge for sexual misbehaviour (rape,

adultery, abduction) warrants killing seven members of the offender's family, as compared to cases of murder, which call for the killing of the actual murderer (or in some cases one of the murderer's close kin). But hospitality trumps vengeance: If a group accepts a guest, all must honour him, even if prior grounds justify revenge. Violating the guest brings eternal shame to all, which is one good reason why the U.S. offers of millions of dollars for betraying Bin Laden continued to fail.

Afghan hill societies have withstood many would-be conquests and bouts of turmoil by keeping order with Pashtunwali in the absence of central authority and state institutions.¹² When seemingly intractable conflicts arise, like repeating cycles of revenge, or problems caused by hosting guests and giving sanctuary, rival parties convene councils (*jirgas*) of elders and third parties to seek solutions through consensus.¹³ Although the Taliban argue that sharia always supersedes Pashtunwali, in fact, the Taliban's idiosyncratic version of sharia incorporates Pashtunwali's main tenets. For example, in allowing executions for murder or violations of women to be carried out by members of the aggrieved family, state punishment is confounded with personal revenge.

A common view in the West is that the blood-feuds and the restriction of women 'to the home or the tomb' are intrinsic to the Muslim religion or to the primitiveness of the Pashtun. However, anthropologists will tell you that the constant fission and fusion of the tribes, and stringent enforcement of women's isolation from men, has more to do with the way some societies at the margins of the desert and the sown have adapted their social structures to extreme fluctuations in the availability of resources and the intense competition for them. Arabs and Kurds,¹⁴ Pashtuns and Pathans,¹⁵ Persian Bakhtiaris and Baluchis,¹⁶ all share this basic social structure.

This social structure, which resembles a constantly branching tree, but where the branches become ever more entangled through marriage alliances, generates myriad ways of manoeuvring for control over women, flocks, land, political allies and other resources. When resources become scarce and competition intensifies, tribal relationships may contract and the patrilineages

¹² Barfield, T. (2003) *Afghan Customary Law and Its Relationship to Formal Judicial Institutions*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace. Available at: www.usip.org/files/barfield2.pdf.

¹³ Wardak, A. (2002) "Jirga: Power and Traditional Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan", in J. Strawson (ed.) *Law after Ground Zero*. London: Cavendish.

¹⁴ Atran, S. (1985) "Managing Arab kinship and marriage". *Social Science Information* 24: 659–696.

¹⁵ Barth, F. (1954) *Political Leadership among the Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone Press.

¹⁶ Pehrson, R. (1966) *The Social Organization of the Marri Baluch*. Chicago: Aldine.

begin to tear apart at their branching points — thus, the saying: ‘Me against my brother, brothers against cousins, cousins against the clan, clans against the tribe, the tribes against the world.’ These tribal segments, or factions, may then go on to seek out alliances of convenience even with distant and unrelated groups — hence, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, even if the enemies of the moment are from one’s own kin group and the friends are from another.”*

A structural corollary to maintaining this flexible system of alliances is the honour-bound duty to harbour the ‘guest,’ whether friend or foe (because any foe is also a potential friend, and vice versa). As Pennell noted, ‘the relationship between host and guest is inviolable.’ He leveraged this fact to get the mullahs, who otherwise would have had his head, to tolerate his medical missionary work: ‘After having offered us hospitality and broken bread with us, we should be recognised as guests of the mullah, and any opposition which he might have been contemplating against us would be seen at once by the observant Afghans around to have been laid aside in favour of the reception due to an honoured guest.’¹⁷

Here is how anthropologist Thomas Barfield analyses the internal Taliban debate over what to do with their Qaeda guests shortly after 9/11:

With a nuanced approach that would have done credit to any Pashtun tribal *jirga*, the assembled clerics told Omar that he must indeed protect his guest, but that because a guest should not cause his host problems Osama should be asked to leave Afghanistan voluntarily as soon as possible. It is notable that the question Omar tabled was not one of *sharia* jurisprudence, but rather an issue of *Pashtunwali*. Very fittingly, the last major policy decision of the Taliban before they were driven from Afghanistan was based on good customary law standards in which religious law provided only window dressing.¹⁸

* Yet, this same branching structure can also merge into ever more inclusive and strongly-tethered groups when opportunities to expand the resource base arise. For the most part, this social adaptation to a resource and security environment in flux predates Islam, though parts of Muslim religious tradition have codified and fixed aspects of it in places and situations far removed from the original context. Indeed, it is by harnessing the structural possibilities inherent in the segmentary lineage system, and in the codes of honour and loyalty associated with it, that Mohammed (PBUH) and his successors were able to unite the fractious Arab tribes in one poor, small corner of the world, and expand their dominion across three continents. Of course, the lineage system strongly supported tribal loyalty, and it took great skill for Mohammed (PBUH) to transfer the primary loyalty of his followers from their tribes to a community of believers.

¹⁷ Pennell, T. (1909) *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier*. Pp. 122–123.

¹⁸ Barfield, T. (2003) *Afghan Customary Law and Its Relationship to Formal Judicial Institutions*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace, Pp. 36. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/files/barfield2.pdf>.

Instead of keeping pressure on the Taliban to resolve the issue in ways they could live with,* the U.S. ridiculed their deliberation and bombed them into a closer alliance with Al-Qaeda. Pakistani Pashtun then offered sanctuary to their Afghan brethren and guests.

Recently, someone who served with the U.S. Afghan mission for some years asked if I would be willing to help evaluate U.S. success in winning hearts and minds. The first thing I asked her was: ‘Do the Afghans you’re in contact with accept Americans as guests, and do the Americans act as if they were guests?’ A bit startled, she answered, ‘Of course not, we’re here because we have to be.’ I then asked, ‘Do they act as if they are the hosts and masters?’ She didn’t respond at first, so I gave her this scenario: ‘Surely you must have seen or heard about accidents on the road involving a U.S. military vehicle colliding with some Afghan’s donkey-drawn cart. What happened? Do the American military personnel come out of the vehicle and try to help the poor fellow?’ Her answer: ‘Never. They leave the scene, those are the rules of the engagement; any Afghan knows where to find us to lodge a complaint or make a claim.’ I told her that I’d bet my bottom dollar that Al-Qaeda doesn’t behave that way, because they understand what it means to be a guest, and that’s one good reason why they have survived among the Pashtun tribes.

In the Summer of 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: ‘We and our Afghan allies stand ready to welcome anyone supporting the Taliban who renounces Al-Qaeda, lays down their arms, and is willing to participate in the free and open society that is enshrined in the Afghan constitution.’¹⁹ To get tribesmen to lay down arms that have preserved them for the sake of a flag that many do not even know represents the country (some only recognise it as being the colours worn on enemy uniforms) is about as farfetched as getting the National Rifle Association to support a

* While Mullah Omar readily gave sanctuary to Bin Laden after his expulsion from Sudan in 1996, Al-Qaeda’s attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole*, focused intense international hostility on the Taliban. In June 2001, Omar declared that Bin Laden had no authority to issue *fatwas* of any kind, confiscating the Qaeda leader’s satellite phone and putting him under armed guard. The 9/11 Commission Report notes (p. 65) that Mullah Omar had previously ‘invited’ Bin Laden to move to where he might be easier to control after the Al-Qaeda leader gave an inflammatory interview on CNN in 1997 that violated circumspection. For their part, a number of *jihadi* leaders denounced Bin Laden’s association with the ‘infidel’ Taliban, religious deviants worthy of excommunication (*takfir*) who were ‘created and controlled by Pakistan’ and its intelligence services (ISI) (see Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2007) *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa’ida 1989–2006*. Pp. 14ff. Available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Harmony_3_Schism.pdf).

¹⁹ Kravev, N. (2009) ‘Clinton to Taliban: Forsake al Qaeda’. *Washington Times*, 16 July.

constitutional amendment to repeal the right of Americans to bear arms. Moreover, as Marc Sageman rightly observes, ‘there’s no Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and no Afghans in Al-Qaeda.’²⁰ The original alliance between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda was largely one of convenience between a poverty-stricken national movement and a transnational cause that brought material help. U.S. pressure on Pakistan to hit the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in their current sanctuary birthed the Pakistani Taliban, who forge their own ties to Al-Qaeda to undermine the Pakistani state that attacked them. While some Taliban use the rhetoric of global jihad to inspire their ranks or enlist foreign fighters into their insurgency, they show no inclination to hit Western interests abroad. The continued presence of Al-Qaeda remnants in Pakistan, and Pakistani Taliban attacks on the state, including at least three attacks on nuclear²¹ facilities, warrants concerted action in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. Pakistan understands this and engages unaligned Taliban against anti-government and pro-Qaeda Taliban to meet the threat (well aware that all Taliban support insurgency against foreign troops in Afghanistan).^{22, 23, *}

²⁰ M. Sageman, personal communication, July 2009.

²¹ Gregory, S. (2009) “The terrorist threat to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons”. *CTC Sentinel* 2(7). Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss7.pdf>.

²² Rahimullah, R. (2009) “The significance of Qari Zain’s assassination in Pakistan”. *CTC Sentinel* 2(7). Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss7.pdf>.

²³ In June 2009, Qari Zainuddin Mehsud, an important Taliban tribal commander with links to Pakistani security forces, was shot dead in NWFP by his own bodyguard. The assassination was ordered by fellow tribesman Baitullah Mehsud, Pakistan’s Public Enemy No. 1, a week after Qari Zain went on national television to declare war against Baitullah and his Pakistan Taliban Movement (Tehrik-i-Taliban, TTP), an alliance of 13 Pashtun tribal factions that chose Baitullah to lead them in 2007. Qari Zain claimed to oppose Baitullah and the ‘renegade’ Taliban Movement for having brought terror to Pakistan in a campaign of ‘un-Islamic’ suicide attacks that began with the December 2007 assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and spiraled on to kill or wound thousands of Muslims in mosques, madrassas and markets. Just days before Qari Zain’s death, Baitullah had pointedly rejected a call from Mullah Omar, the Amir of the Afghan Taliban to whom both Qari Zain and Baitullah claimed loyalty, to stop killings in Pakistan and focus on fighting U.S.-led allied forces in Afghanistan. An even greater motivation to oppose Baitullah was Qari Zain’s belief that Baitullah had betrayed their fellow clansman, Abdullah Mehsud, to Pakistan security forces in Baluchistan (where, in July 2007, Abdullah blew himself up with a hand grenade rather than give himself up). Interned at Guantánamo after surrendering to the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance in December 2001, Abdullah had returned a hero to his native Waziristan following his release in 2004. There he gathered a force of up to 5,000 Taliban fighters to attack coalition forces in Afghanistan, and commanded a regional following and respect that made Baitullah jealous. When Qari Zain proclaimed himself successor to Abdullah, Baitullah denounced both as thieves and ‘puppets’ of the Pakistani government.

In August 2009, Baitullah and his wife were killed in an American drone missile attack on his father-in-law’s house in South Waziristan. Tribesmen immediately began fighting over succession (Hakimullah Mehsud, who is from the same sub-tribe as Baitullah, won). Although

Here, despite U.S. pressure, Pakistan prefers a policy seasoned by wars of ‘respect for the independence and sentiment of the tribes’ advised by Lord Curzon as ‘we are dealing with an enemy habituated to every form and habit of guerrilla warfare, even if [military action] attended with maximum success, no permanent results can be obtained,’ while the Afghan frontier would be ‘ablaze from one end to the other [causing] an intolerable burden on finances.’^{24, *}

U.S.-sponsored ‘reconciliation’ may be fatally flawed in demanding that Pashtun hill tribes give up the arms that have kept them independent (or that they join pro-government militia), and support a constitution that values Western-inspired rights and judicial institutions over customary canons and forms of consensus that have sustained the tribes against all enemies. U.S. presidential envoy Richard Holbrooke suggests that victory in Afghanistan is

U.S. presidential envoy Richard Holbrooke urged Pakistan to take advantage of the confusion and focus on shifting forces from the western border with India to try and finish off the Taliban in the East, the Pakistani army was well aware that no previous military campaign had ever succeeded against the combined forces of the tribes of Waziristan or the NWFP. The army and government also knew that the most effective way to reduce the Taliban threat in their own country was to avoid uniting the tribes against them, which a full-scale invasion of the western frontier regions would do. However, Hakimullah stepped up a suicide campaign against Pakistani security forces in the Autumn of 2009, provoking large-scale army incursions into the tribal areas. These continued even after Hakimullah’s reported death in early 2010 by another U.S. drone missile.

²⁴ http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1908/feb/26/india-north-west-frontier-policy#S4V0184P0_19080226_HOL_23.

* Still, Sir William Harcourt, a leader of the opposition, noted a dire contradiction in the military’s public call to step up activity that is similar to that of today: For ‘the Commander of the armies in conflict with those tribes says — civilisation and barbarism cannot exist conterminously [so] that the tribes should be controlled and disarmed. . . Well, I object altogether to any man in command of the armies proclaiming his own opinions upon a policy without authority from the Government under which he serves. It is contrary to the Constitution of this country. . . That is the way in which the independence of the tribes is to be respected [and] the tribes are to be conciliated[?] That is the mischief which has been the cause of the Afghan Wars.’ (http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1898/feb/15/address-in-answer-to-her-majestys-most#S4V0053P0_18980215_HOC_113). In October 2009, Gen. McChrystal publicly opined that counterterrorism must be replaced with a full-blown counterinsurgency to defeat the Taliban (this echoed McChrystal’s report to Defense Secretary Robert Gates in August 2009; see http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf). Obama’s Security Advisor Jim Jones intimated that the General was out of line. The U.S. Constitution would seem to disallow anyone in the military from appealing to the public without the consent of the executive branch of the civilian government in order to influence policy. (There is one recent legislated exception: The Goldwater-Nichols Bill requires all and only members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to speak candidly to Congress when asked, even if their statements contradict the President.) That is one reason that Lincoln relieved Gen. McClellan and Truman properly fired Gen. MacArthur.

possible if those Taliban who pursue self interest, rather than ‘ideology,’ can be co-opted with material incentives. But as veteran war correspondent Jason Burke said to me: ‘Today, the logical thing for the Pashtun conservatives is to stop fighting and get rich through narcotics or Western aid, the latter being much lower risk. But many won’t sell out.’²⁵ Although newer, fair-weather Taliban are deep into drug trade, as are government allies who help to make it Afghanistan’s main economy, committed veteran Taliban have tended to avoid it on moral grounds.

Outsiders who do not understand local cultural and group dynamics tend to ride roughshod over values they don’t grasp. To improve women’s status in Pashtun lands may take time (it took women’s suffrage a century in our country) and, as the Soviets learned there, not by foreign programmes. As we find again and again — in our research in Morocco, Palestine, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia²⁶ —, helping to materially improve lives will not reduce support for violence, and can even increase it²⁷ if people feel such help compromises their most cherished values.²⁸ After all, do we really want to help build up a society with so-called friendlies or reconcilables who can turn to or away from us on a dime, rather than working with the other side’s sacred values even if some are hard to stomach?

When Less is More

Al-Qaeda is treading on thin ice globally, with ever dwindling financial and popular support, and a drastically diminished ability to link up with other extremists worldwide, much less command and control them for major operations against us. Its lethal agents are being systematically hunted down, while those souls it seeks to save are increasingly revolted by its methods and its abuse of religion. In an October 2009 briefing to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Marc Sageman noted that:

²⁵ J. Burke, personal communication, January 2009.

²⁶ Ginges, J. and S. Atran (2009) “Non-instrumental reasoning over sacred values: An Indonesian field experiment”, in D. Bartels, C. Bauman, L. Skitka, and D. Medin (eds.) *Psychology of Learning and Motivation, Vol. 50: Moral Judgment and Decision Making*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

²⁷ Deghani, M., R. Iliev, S. Sachdeva, S. Atran, J. Ginges and D. Medin (2009) “Emerging sacred values: Iran’s nuclear program”. *Judgment and Decision Making* 4:530–533.

²⁸ Atran, S., R. Axelrod and R. Davis (2007) “Sacred barriers to conflict resolution”. *Science* 317: 1039–1040.

Seventy-eight per cent of all global neo-jihadi terrorist plots in the West in the past five years came from autonomous home-grown groups without any connection, direction or control from Al-Qaeda Core or its allies. The ‘resurgent Al-Qaeda’ in the West argument has no empirical foundation. The paucity of actual Al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorist organisation plots compared to the number of autonomous plots refutes the claims by some heads of the Intelligence Community that all Islamist plots in the West can be traced back to the Afghan-Pakistani border. Far from being the ‘epicentre of terrorism,’ this Pakistani region is more like the finishing school of global neo-jihadi terrorism, where a few amateur wannabes are transformed into dangerous terrorists.²⁹

The real threat is home-grown youths who gain inspiration from Osama bin Laden but little else beyond an occasional self-financed spell at some makeshift Qaeda-linked training facility in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia or the Sahel.

That said, this weakening viral movement that abuses religion is on the threshold of a new lease on life in Afghanistan and Pakistan because *we* keep pushing it and the Taliban together. By building an unmerited sense of threat from Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, we are making it a greater threat to Pakistan and the world. Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan are unlike Iraq, the ancient birthplace of central government, or Vietnam, which had a strong state backing insurgents. They must be dealt with on their own terms.

We’re winning against Al-Qaeda and its kin in places where anti-terrorism efforts are local and built on an understanding that the ties binding terrorist networks today are more cultural and familial than political. Consider recent events in Southeast Asia. In September, Indonesian security forces killed Noordin Muhammad Top, then on the F.B.I.’s ‘most-wanted terrorists’ list. Implicated in the region’s worst suicide bombings — including the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton bombings in Jakarta on 17 July of the same year — Noordin Top headed a splinter group of the extremist religious organisation Jemaah Islamiyah (he called it ‘Al-Qaeda for the Malaysian Archipelago’). Research by my colleagues and me, supported by the National Science Foundation and the Defense Department, reveals three critical factors in such groups inspired by Al-Qaeda, all of which local security forces implicitly grasp but American counter-intelligence workers seem to underestimate.

What binds these groups together? First is friendship forged through fighting: The Indonesian volunteers who fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan styled themselves as the Afghan Alumni, and many kept in contact when they returned home after the War. The second is school ties and discipleship:

²⁹ Sageman, M. (2009) “Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the threat in Afghanistan and beyond; Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, October 7”. Available at: <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2009/SagemanTestimony091007p.pdf>.

Many leading operatives in Southeast Asia come from a handful of religious schools affiliated with Jemaah Islamiyah. Out of some 30,000 religious schools in Indonesia, only about 50 have a deadly legacy of producing violent extremists. Third is family-ties: As anyone who has watched the opening scene from ‘The Godfather’ knows, weddings can be terrific opportunities for networking and plotting.

Understanding these three aspects of terrorist networking has given law enforcement a leg up on the jihadists. Gen. Tito Karnavian, the leader of the strike team that tracked down Noordin Top, told me that ‘knowledge of the interconnected networks of Afghan Alumni, friendship, kinship and marriage groups was very crucial to uncovering the inner circle of Noordin.’³⁰ Consider Noordin Top’s third marriage, which cemented ties to key suspects in the lead-up to the recent hotel bombings. His father-in-law, who founded a Jemaah Islamiyah-related boarding school, stashed explosives in his garden with the aid of another teacher at the school. Using electronic intercepts and tracing family, school and alumni ties, police officers found the cache in late June 2009. That discovery may have prompted Noordin Top to initiate the hotel attacks ahead of a planned simultaneous attack on the residence of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

In addition, an Afghan Alumnus and nephew of Noordin Top’s father-in-law was being pursued by the police for his role in a failed plot to blow up a tourist cafe on Sumatra. Unfortunately, Noordin Top struck the hotels before the Indonesian police could penetrate the entire network, in part because another family group was still operating under the police radar. This group included a florist who smuggled the bombs into the hotels and a man whose eventual arrest led to discovery of the plot against the president. Both terrorists were married to sisters of a Yemeni-trained *imam* who recruited the hotel suicide bombers, and of another brother who had infiltrated Indonesia’s national airline.³¹ Had the police pulled harder on the pieces of social yarn they had in hand, they might have unravelled the hotel plot earlier. Still, their work thwarted attacks planned for the future, including that on the country’s president.

Similarly, security officials in the Philippines have combined intelligence and training from American and Australian sources with similar tracking efforts to crack down on their terrorist networks and, as a result, most extremist groups are either seeking reconciliation with the government — including the deadly Moro Islamic Liberation Front on the island of

³⁰ Gen. Tito Karnavian, personal communication, 10 December 2009.

³¹ International Crisis Group (2009) ‘Indonesia: Noordin Top’s support base’. *Asia Briefing* 95(27 August). Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6289&l=1>.

Mindanao — or have devolved into kidnapping-and-extortion gangs with no ideological focus. The separatist Abu Sayyaf Group, once the most feared force in the region, now has no overall spiritual or military leaders, few weapons and only a hundred or so fighters.³²

So, how does this relate to a strategy against Al-Qaeda in the West and in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

In the West, Al-Qaeda's main focus, there has not been a successful attack directly commanded by Bin Laden and company since 9/11 (though the 2005 London Underground attack included someone who attended a small Al-Qaeda training facility in Pakistan). The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan decimated Al-Qaeda's core of top personnel and destroyed its training facilities. Bin Laden went into hiding in the adjacent border regions of Pakistan, unable since to form a new cadre of Al-Qaeda leaders or set up facilities as remotely sophisticated as those destroyed.

After the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London train bombings, various European security and law enforcement agencies stepped up coordination in tracking local jihadi groups, as well as community outreach programmes to immigrant Muslim youth, and stopped plots from coming to fruition. Similar steps have been taken by Turkey, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

Now, we need to bring a similar perspective to bear in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is smart about cultures, customs and connections because the present policy of focusing on footprints and drones, and trying to win over people by improving their lives with aid programmes that we concoct, only follows a long history of foreign involvement and failure.

Of course, anti-terrorism measures are only as effective as the local governments that execute them. Afghanistan's government is corrupt, unpopular and inept. So what do we do? There's no Taliban central to talk to (although the U.S. and NATO are talking to locals who fight them, with some local successes). To be a Taliban today means little more than to be a Pashtun tribesman who believes that his fundamental beliefs and customary way of life, including the right to bear arms to defend the tribal homeland and protect its women when threatened by foreign invaders and local associates.³³ Although most Taliban claim loyalty to Afghanistan's Mullah Omar, this allegiance varies greatly: Pakistani Taliban leaders, including Baitullah Mehsud who was killed by an American drone in August 2009, and his successor

³² Chalk, P. (2009) "The Philippines' continued success against extremists". *CTC Sentinel* 2(8). Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss8.pdf>.

³³ Giustozzi, A. (ed.) (2009) *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hakimullah Mehsud rejected Mullah Omar's call to forego suicide bombings against Pakistani civilians.

It is we who hold the Taliban together. Without us, their deeply-divided coalition could well fragment. The resurgent strength of today's Taliban depends on support by notoriously unruly Pashtun hill tribes in Pakistan's border regions unsympathetic to the original Taliban programme of homogenising tribal custom and politics under one rule. The Taliban could also well kick out Bin Laden if he became more obnoxious to them than we are: Al-Qaeda may have close relations to the Haqqani network of the Zadran tribe in North Waziristan and to the Shabi-Khel sub-tribe of the Mehsud of South Waziristan, but Al-Qaeda is not so popular with many Taliban factions and forces.

We have already been through one round of cranking up forces in Afghanistan, and it backfired. Until 2004, the U.S.-led NATO coalition had a modest footprint in Afghanistan of about 20,000 troops, mainly to protect Kabul, and there were few terrorist acts, such as suicide attacks and roadside bombings: Fewer than ten from 2001 to 2004. During 2005, the coalition started to ratchet up troop levels in order to wipe out the last vestiges of the Taliban and to eradicate poppy crops. According to data collected by Robert Pape, suicide attacks increased by an order of magnitude — with nine in 2005, nearly 100 in 2006, 142 in 2007, and 148 in 2008.³⁴ There were 739 roadside bombings in 2006, nearly 2,000 in 2007, and more than 3,200 in 2008. Unlike Iraq, nearly all suicide attacks and roadside bombings have targeted coalition forces and installations rather than the civilian population. By 2009, Western forces were deployed in all major regions, including the Pashtun areas in the South and East, and numbered well over 100,000, on par with the Soviet military involvement two decades before that produced the conditions for the emergence of the Taliban in the first place.

In August 2009, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. general in Afghanistan, wrote to Defense Secretary Robert Gates that the situation had become 'serious... we face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans — in both their government and the international community — that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents.'³⁵ McChrystal's report explained that a radical change in U.S. policy was needed for two reasons: '[O]ur conventional warfare culture has alienated the people,' and there is a lack of 'responsive and accountable government' to win them over. The report recommended 'radically expanded

³⁴ Pape, R. (2009) "To beat the Taliban, fight from afar". *New York Times*, 15 October.

³⁵ http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf.

coalition forces at every echelon,’ to gain the initiative and to protect ‘those critical areas where the population is most threatened.’ But the history of the region suggests that more foreign footprints are more likely to rally the tribes against us than to us.

There was precious little in the report to suggest that our continuing support of the central government would make it any less corroded. As one senior U.S. counter-narcotics official put it to me in September 2009:

My personal opinion is that Karzai’s brother is a crook, and is involved in constructing the framework of what Afghanistan is becoming, where there is no other economy than the drug trade. With the fox in the henhouse, the hens will never be safe. [The Departments of] Defense and State have spent close to 10 billion [dollars] to counter [the drug economy] in Afghanistan. If you look at just eradication, it’s close to 4 billion. There were some years where we eradicated less than 500 hectares per year, or more than 10 million per hectare, which doesn’t make sense.

Even in a ‘good’ year, like 2008, only 5,000 hectares were eradicated out of more than 150,000 cultivated. A three per cent risk on losing a crop would deter nobody from planting poppies for huge profit.^{36,*}

~~When the Taliban ruled they~~ were morally rigid and did detestable things, especially to women, but by and large they were not corrupt. The people hardly loved the Taliban, but appreciated that they stopped widespread rape and pillage, and effectively brought order to the country.

The original Taliban were just as aggressive as the communists in trying to use military force to impose a single political administration and worldview on the fractious Afghan population. But the Taliban were far less centralised, and their worldview was far less alien to the Pashtun tribes whose children, orphaned and separated from their elders by the war against the communists and then civil war, had become the foot soldiers of the Taliban’s New Order.

~~General McChrystal’s report relied on a number of celebrity politicians, although only one had considerable experience with the people of Afghanistan.~~

³⁶ See also Dickey, C. (2009) “Losing Afghanistan’s drug war”. *Newsweek*, July 31. Available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/209830>.

* Other moral issues plague U.S.-backed policies in Afghanistan. For example, offers of amnesty have perversely allowed people to fight on until they feel it is not in their interests, because their offer of surrender could be accepted at any time, even if they have massacred before or have broken away to fight again. This has allowed serious killers to go free, while Taliban cooks and drivers were left rotting in Afghanistan’s Bagram prison and Guantánamo Bay (see Nathan, J. (2009) “A review of reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan”. *CTC Sentinel* 2(8)). The Pashtun tribes readily see their customary practices as much fairer and effective in the long run, than such arbitrary justice.

(former National Public Radio reporter Sarah Chays).³⁷ The five teams of a two-year ‘Human Terrain System’ experiment in Helmand, Paktia and other Afghan Pashtun areas, which embedded uniformed and armed cultural anthropologists in infantry units, also provided ‘peripheral input’ (as one team member put it to me). Nevertheless, the report was a public relations and political success, despite the constitutional efforts of our nation’s founders to ensure that the military would never be able to directly shape public policy. It prodded President Obama to commit 30,000 more troops to a counter-insurgency effort against a major segment of the Afghan population, with the focus on converting a deeply unpopular and corrupt regime into a unified, centralised state for the first time in that country’s history. All of this supposedly to prevent Al-Qaeda’s return to a place where they would not likely be welcome in any event.

Unlike Al-Qaeda, the Taliban are interested in their homeland, not ours. Things are different now than before 9/11. The Taliban know how costly keeping Al-Qaeda can be. There’s a good chance that enough of the factions in the loose and fractious Taliban coalition would decide for themselves to disinvite their troublesome guest if we contained them by maintaining pressure without trying to subdue them or hold their territory, intervening only when we see movement to help Al-Qaeda or act beyond the region. A long leash on the Taliban is likely to be far more effective than a short one. Furthermore, in the fight against violent extremism more generally, as far as our direct involvement goes, less just may be more.

³⁷ Rosen, N. (2010) “Something from nothing: U.S. strategy in Afghanistan”. *Boston Review*, January/February. Available at: <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR35.1/rosen.php>.