



Mobilizing Identity in the Pashtun Tribal Belt

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Introduction

Today, violent conflict in the Pashtun tribal belt in Afghanistan and Pakistan is increasing and a number of experts are attempting to understand the dynamics driving this conflict. An examination of two key identities of the Pashtun people reveals how religious identity is being mobilized by one group for political purposes and ethnic identity is inadvertently being threatened by another group. The resulting vortex of threat and mobilization are the source of this increased violence. This paper analyzes the ethnic and religious identities of the Pashtun people to illustrate how identities are used to influence conflict and it will then offer ways for the US and the international community to adjust their activities to reduce conflict in the Pashtun tribal belt.

Context

Pashtun tribes span a large crescent shaped geographic area, commonly referred to as the Pashtun tribal belt, which straddles the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and stretches across Afghanistan to the Iranian border. There are 15 million Afghan Pashtuns and they comprise approximately 42% of the Afghan population and constitute the majority ethnic group (Nawaz 2009, 2). There are 25 million Pakistani Pashtuns and they comprise 15% of Pakistan's population (Nawaz 2009, 2). The 40 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan represent one of the largest tribal, ethno linguistic groups in the world. Pashtuns speak the Pashto language and follow Sunni Islam according to the Hanafi School of law (Kakar 2005, 2). There are over 350 major tribes that fall into five general groupings. Of the five groupings the Durani tribe constitutes 11.4% of all Pashtuns and is the politically dominant group (Johnson 2007, 51). President Karzai of Afghanistan is from the Durani tribe.

Afghanistan became an independent state in 1747 when Pashtun tribes united under the leadership of Ahmed Shah Durrani. Durrani was not a religious leader and he based his claim to leadership on his tribal genealogy. It was at this time that the tribal code of Pashtunwali was formally established as customary law, especially in the expansive rural areas where there was little or no state influence (Kakar 2005, 1-2). Afghanistan's eastern border was formally established in 1893 in an agreement with the British Empire. It represented the limits of British control on the Indian subcontinent at that time. The demarcation defining that limit is known as the Durand Line and it goes right through the Pashtun tribal areas. When Pakistan was established in 1947, the Durand Line became its western border with Afghanistan. The rural

Pashtuns living in that region do not recognize the line and they continue to move freely back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan as though no border exists.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is based on the belief that members of a group share a common ancestry with genetic links (Horowitz 2000, 52). It is generally associated with a geographic area where the people share many common traits like language, religion and culture. Although language, religion and culture may vary to some degree they are generally uniting aspects of an ethnic identity. Pashtuns share the common traits just outlined and they have further solidified their ethnic identity through the development of “Pashtunwali”. Pashtunwali is the set of informal, common law tribal codes that are strictly followed by the Pashtun tribal groups. These tribal codes guide the cultural practices, beliefs and behaviors of the Pashtun people. They ground the Pashtun people and make Pashtun ethnic identity the most salient identity of the Pashtun people. For Pashtuns, Pashtunwali is “so essential to the identity of the Pashtun that there is no distinction between practicing Pashtunwali and being a Pashtun” (Kakar 2005, 2).

According to Pashtuns, Pashtunwali existed before the introduction of Islam to Afghanistan. Pashtunwali codifies the myth and legend of Pashtun ethnicity by creating an additional and clearly recognizable group boundary (Horowitz 2000, 70). Over time, Pashtunwali incorporated aspects of Islam within the code and the two function in tandem today. Most Pashtuns believe that Pashtunwali follows Islamic laws and norms but Islamic scholars see significant conflicts between the two (Barfield 2007, 8). For Pashtuns, Islam and Shari’a law represent a moral code while Pashtunwali represents a code of honor that supersedes the moral code and is paramount to establishing and maintaining personal integrity and thus personal, family and community identity. By adhering to the rules of Pashtunwali, Pashtuns gain honor and are afforded the rights, protection and support of the community (Kakar 2007, 3). A loss of honor results in expulsion from the community and in the rugged, sometimes hostile environment of the tribal belt, expulsion equates to social and potentially physical death (Barfield 2006, 6).

There are four key tenants to maintaining honor and they are interpreted somewhat differently depending on the economic position of the community members and by geographic region. Adhering to all four tenants of the code, regardless of setting, maintains the honor of the individual, the family and the community. Living honorably, according to the code, is paramount in a Pashtun’s life.

The tenets of Pashtunwali include: 1) honor and chivalry, 2) hospitality, 3) gender boundaries, and 4) the jirga. Possibly the most important tenet of Pashtunwali is the legislative council or “jirga”. Pashtunwali is administered by the community council. The community legislative council provides a complex and sophisticated means of governance and conflict resolution which includes administration of legal codes. Council members are selected for their honorable status within the community and are usually older male members; “elders” or “whitebeards” (Barfield 2007, 3). Jirgas provide an advanced conflict resolution mechanism without the aid of courts, jails or prisons, lawyers or law schools, policemen, judges or guards. They do it without resorting to vigilante justice or disintegrating into anarchy and they do it with an estimated 95% success rate (Johnson 2007, 61). Pashtuns believe that their means of addressing social conflict

is superior to those that require all of the aforementioned bureaucratic agencies and associated personnel. As the state attempts to establish a formal legal system it comes into conflict with the informal community council system. However, because the formal system is poorly administered and has limited reach it was largely rejected. Pashtuns prefer their own informal system to external ones because they believe that theirs is superior on a number of levels. First, and foremost, it is adapted to the community that it serves and garners compliance through shared community participation. Today, the formal system is seen as ineffective if not outright corrupt and “80-90% of disputes-criminal and civil-are resolved outside of the formal system” (Barfield 2007, 3).

Pashtunwali operates within a system based on two key concepts: equality and autonomy (Kakar 2005, 12; Barfield 2007, 8; Johnson 2007, 60). Power is bottom up and established by councils of male equals. Decisions of jirgas are not handed out until consensus of all members is reached even if it takes months to reach consensus. All community members have a representative on the jirga and decisions are binding. The jirga process is final because it is an arbitration process that is voluntarily enjoined by all parties. In this way, social order is maintained in the absence of a central government. Autonomy is maintained by the localized interpretation and execution of the concepts of Pashtunwali. Because autonomy and equality are so highly prized the Pashtun tribes completely reject “a central authority that operates from a distant place” while having complete “confidence in the ability of local leaders to provide protection to their communities and to provide an environment in which they can live according to their own laws and practices” (Burki as quoted in Nawaz 2009, 6). This belief in the superior nature of cultural practices is common among ethnic identity groups, especially when a group begins to feel threatened by external actors (Horowitz 2000, 70).

Religious Identity

Pashtuns are Muslims who follow Sunni Islam according to the Hanafi School of law. Sharia law has four schools of jurisprudence and the Hanafi School is the oldest and most liberal. Sunni's who follow the Hanafi school use “reason or opinion in legal decisions” (Globalsecurity.org 2009, par 1). Abu Hanafa was its founder and he sought new ways of applying Islamic rules to everyday life. It is decentralized in practice and its followers resist centralized control by state organizations (Globalsecurity.org 2009, par 2). Tribal beliefs and behaviors, codified in Pashtunwali, predate Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan and have been in existence for centuries (Johnson 2007, 43). Customary law, as represented by Pashtunwali and Hanafi jurisprudence coexist, but historically when there is a conflict between the two Pashtunwali takes precedence.

Traditionally, tribal mullahs and clerics were subordinate to tribal leaders. They provided religious guidance to the community but their role at community meetings and jirgas was simply to open and close the meetings with prayers. They were not decision makers within the community and they were generally poor and dependent upon the community for life support (Nawaz 2009, 14). However, throughout history a number of mullahs have risen to challenge the Pashtunwali tribal code by attempting to gain power via religious fanaticism. These movements, sometimes referred to as “Mad Mullah” movements, were stymied by Pashtun elders who maintained political control of tribal leadership (Johnson 2007, 52).

Religious identity is deeply held and is seated in the belief that moral and spiritual guidance is derived from religious texts, scholars and a prototypical leader. As a result, “religious feelings can mobilize people faster than any other element of their identity” (Rothbart and Korostolina 2006, 218). In the 1970s and 1980s religious leaders were empowered with arms, ammunition and money by external actors who sought to assist Afghanistan in ousting the Soviet occupation. When a religious leader gained political control of a district, the Pashtunwali system of jirgas was “replaced with conservative political-religious leadership cells comprising local mullahs” (Johnson 2007, 53). This supplanting of the socio-cultural structure led to a more established and durable mad mullah movement, i.e. the Taliban. Because of the length of time that the Taliban was supported by external sources and then ruled as a central authority they became more entrenched in the society of the Pashtuns than previous mad mullah movements.

The original Taliban, which means “students,” were Pashtun refugees who fled Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and occupation. They lived in refugee camps in Pakistan and were educated in conservative Islamic religious schools, madrasahs, largely established and funded by Saudi Arabia. After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, years of internal conflict, fueled by war lord rivalries, created a traumatized and weary population that embraced the Taliban’s promise of a return to peaceful Islamic ways (Gandhi 2003, par 4). The Taliban were seen as honest, fierce and devout. However, as their hold on the country increased and their religious excesses became apparent, many Pashtuns and the international community rejected them. The Taliban’s version of sharia law is not consistent with the Hanafi School of jurisprudence under which most Afghans lived. Furthermore, the Taliban completely supplanted the jirga structure and the common law practices of Pashtunwali became subordinate to an extreme version of sharia law. It was not until the Afghans received the support of the US that they were able to oust the Taliban.

Salient Identity; Threat and Mobilization

An examination of the identities at play in the Pashtun communities reveals several important points that highlight the salience of ethnic identity above all others and the strength or actuality of ethnicity to Pashtuns. Salience identifies a person’s core identity while actuality defines the relative level of importance being placed on that core identity at any given time. When an identity is threatened it moves into a heightened status and when a salient identity is threatened conflict is likely (Korostolina 2007, 20). Culture, religion and national identity are less important to Pashtuns than their ethnic identity. The Pashtun tribal belt is geographically vast and a multitude of tribes span the region. One of the core key concepts of Pashtunwali is that it allows for local autonomy in its interpretation and implementation. The result is that regional variations result in a variety of cultural and religious practices that are not uniformly shared by all Pashtuns. Some communities have slightly different interpretations of gender separation and strict requirements for women and girls to cover and veil while other communities are less rigid and have no requirement to veil. These variations illustrate different cultural practices based on region. The fact that there are variations in cultural practices within the ethnic group highlights the importance of ethnicity as a unifying identity over culture (Ashmore 2001, 43).

A characteristic that points to the salience of ethnicity above religion is the historic narrative of the modern Afghan nation (Korostelina 2007, 20). The modern narrative states that Ahmed Shah Durrani is the father of Afghanistan. He was a Pashtun and he justified his right to leadership on his tribal genealogy, not on an Islamic endorsement or divine right. The current President, President Hamid Karzai is also a Pashtun. In addition to linking the country's origin to an ethnic group, the Pashtuns rejected Taliban rule and have no desire to see a return to extreme religious laws. Although Pashtuns are Muslims, religious identity is not their dominant identity and when Islamic norms conflict with Pashtun norms the Pashtun norms have precedence.

In countries where the rural village community is dominant, as is the case in most of the Pashtun tribal belt, "the primacy of the caste; and rigid, stratified forms of social and religious organization" (Cohen 2007, 30) still strongly influence cultural practices and the salience of ethnic identity. Rural agrarian communities rely on family and community for survival and security. Many develop identities and cultural practices based on communal or collective interests. This is clearly the case with the Pashtun people where families and tribes represent the core of the ethnic identity and every family acts to maintain the integrity of this structure. According to Afghan scholar M. Jamil Hanafi,

The Afghan individual is surrounded by concentric rings consisting of family, extended family, clan, tribe, confederacy, and major cultural-linguistic group. The hierarchy of loyalties corresponds to these circles and becomes more intense as the circle gets smaller . . . seldom does an Afghan, regardless of cultural background, need the services and/or the facilities of the national government. Thus, in case of crisis, his recourse is to the kinship and, if necessary, the larger cultural group. National feelings and loyalties are filtered through the successive layers (Haefi, 1978. Quoted in Johnson 2007, 51).

Centralized government direction with associated laws and norms presents a threat to Pashtun ethnic identity. National identity is not relevant to most Pashtuns. International and Afghan efforts to establish a centralized national government constitutes a threat because it takes away authorities presently granted to tribal elders.

When an identity is threatened its relative importance is elevated and when the threatened identity is salient the result is a defense of identity which frequently leads to conflict. This is clearly the case for the Pashtuns. External actors, represented by the US and the international community are attempting to impose control on all of Afghanistan through a centralized government apparatus. Pashtuns see this as an attempt to take away their autonomy and impose laws and rules that don't reflect the Pashtunwali tribal codes. This is a direct threat to ethnic identity. The Pashtuns were largely pleased with the overthrow of the Taliban and they expected a return to Pashtun ways but over time they have found that the Taliban was replaced by another, similarly threatening, and even less identifiable group. As the threat posed by the international community continues Pashtuns have begun to move closer to the group that challenges the presence of the international community. The challengers are insurgent remnants of the Taliban who are gaining in popularity among the Pashtun tribes. As noted earlier, the Taliban originated from elements within the Pashtun tribes. From a boundary perspective the Taliban more closely resemble the Pashtuns while the international community is completely outside the ethnic boundary (Korostelina 2007, 29). The result is that the contrast between the Pashtuns and the Taliban is significantly smaller than the contrast between the Pashtuns and the international

community. This degree of relational metacontrast explains why some Pashtuns are supporting the Taliban and why the insurgency is growing (Korostelina 2007, 25).

Identity Management

Identity-based conflict resolution theory recommends a number of strategies for reducing conflict. The following strategies are recommended for this conflict. First, there must be a serious effort to embrace and accommodate the Pashtun ethnic cultural practices in order to reduce threat to ethnic identity (Korostelina 2007, 207, 212). Second, a concerted effort must be developed that returns power to tribal elders who will counter religious extremists' efforts to mobilize the Pashtuns around grievances associated with ethnic identity threat. Third, there should be a parallel project that delegitimizes Taliban authority. Last, there must be programs to develop a national identity that is inclusive of and recognizes the contributions of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Korostelina 2007, 223).

Understanding and valuing the Pashtun culture is the first step toward accommodation. Pashtunwali has provided the Pashtun people a durable, highly structured, generally peaceful, socio-cultural community based on the principles of equality and autonomy which are also prized in western cultures. However, many western nations will point to the unequal position of women and children within the Pashtun community as a basis for rejection of the culture in general and thus the need to impose western standards on the Pashtuns. This attitude and approach is insulting and highly threatening and it is a mistake that must be addressed. Like the US, and many other developed nations, the status of women and the protections afforded children have developed over time and are still evolving. It is neither fair nor prudent to reject Pashtunwali simply because their views concerning the equal treatment of women is not the same as that of western countries. A review of our own history shows that women did not get the right to vote until 144 years after the ratification of our constitution. If we allow the Afghans the same learning curve they still have 140 years for their culture to adapt to include equal rights for women.

The second critical element to addressing this conflict is to restore the balance of power within the tribal leadership. There are two components to this. First, eliminate the notion that the solution is to extend the reach of the central government and establish the rule of law where none exists. As noted earlier in this paper, a sophisticated, although informal rule of law does exist throughout the Pashtun tribal areas. There are a number of concerted efforts by members of the international community to establish an Afghan National Police Force with all associated legal institutions. This presupposes that the rural Afghan communities require western style policing and legal institutions in order to maintain peace and a rule of law. Again, this assumption makes it clear that we neither understand nor value Pashtunwali. By imposing western legal institutions, directed by a central and arguably corrupt government, on Pashtun communities we invite resistance. Anthropologists working for the Ministry of Defense in the UK who are studying how societies change and operate have concluded that "initiatives to establish in-group policing or cross-group information sharing are unlikely to succeed when imposed from above..." (Tomlinson 2009, 4).

The second component to restoring balance is to re-empower the tribal elders. One way to do this would be to amend the Afghan constitution so that provincial governors and deputy governors are elected directly, “rather than the current method of having outsiders imposed upon the Pashtun provinces by fiat from Kabul” (Johnson 2007, 74). As the Afghan government and the international community engage with local communities they must do so through the established tribal leadership structure. Pushing development specialists, police and military personnel with assets and resources out into the Pashtun communities creates additional turbulence and undermines the authority of the existing leadership.

The next and more difficult step is to return religious leaders to their “traditional role of spiritual advisors and mentors to the people rather than that of community decision makers” (Johnson 2007, 74). One way to do this is to give the resources being provided by the international community directly to the tribal leaders and let them determine how they will be used. Finally, moderate, peaceful religious leaders must be embraced and their message must spread to counter the message being propagated by the Taliban.

As Afghanistan and Pakistan struggle with this insurgency they must both work to establish an overarching national identity that is inclusive and embraces the multitude of ethnic groups within their respective countries. At present, both countries have dominant ethnic groups that hold the majority of political power. This is a situation that breeds identity based conflict. A national identity must begin with the leaders. The leaders must first speak of a national identity and then follow it with policies and laws that ensure an inclusive government and society. They must ensure that education is available to all citizens and that the education is replete with examples of a national and civic responsibility.

Conclusion

When external actors, whether they are “mad mullahs” or central governments, attempt to insert themselves in the Pashtun system they are violently rejected. Most Pashtuns reject the Taliban just as they rejected the British and the Soviets before them. They were initially supportive of US and international efforts to eject the Taliban but that support dwindled over time when it became apparent that the Taliban were being replaced by another form of centralized direction represented by the Karzai government. My findings are that our policies in the Pashtun tribal areas are, in fact, generating conflict and alienating the Afghans who we sought to help. The resulting backlash is lending support to an insurgency that is being driven by Taliban fighters who draw on religious, in-group identity to support their cause. “It has been repeatedly observed that individuals seeking to enhance their political status will deliberately encourage the sense of threat posed by other ... groups, thus enabling them to argue for their ascension to power on the basis that they will better safe-guard the group’s interests” (Tomlinson 2009, 34). This is perhaps the basis for some of the support that the Taliban seems to enjoy from many Pashtuns who feel threatened by the interference of foreign actors. In order to turn this situation around the international community and the Afghan government must work with the tribal groups to restore power to tribal elders and embrace Pashtun tribal practices which do represent an informal but effective rule of law.

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