

Some reflections on Pashtun nationalism from Afghanistan

Lar and Bar is once again the topic of political discourses coming from Afghanistan. Lar (afar) means Pashtun in Pakistan and Bar (highland) means Pashtun in Afghanistan. The discourses point to one direction: the ultimate destiny of the Lar & Bar is unification in one state to be built on the ashes of the state of Pakistan.

The discourses, especially among Afghan diaspora on social media, intensified earlier this year following the coming into being of PTM (Pashtun Tahfuz Movement), a peaceful Pakistani Pashtun movement for rights and justice in the areas affected by the war on terror. Manzoor Pashteen, the PTM leader, could not be clearer. He objected about the Afghan flags in public gatherings abroad in support of PTM. He keeps saying that PTM demands and struggle are within the law of Pakistan and it has no intention, no plan to go beyond the law. Some of PTM's demands have partially been addressed by the Pakistan army: return of many disappeared people & removal of the military check posts to ease people's movement. Nevertheless, the Afghans see PTM as potential secessionist movement that will eventually disintegrate Pakistan.

Correct, Lar & Bar is a social reality. People on both sides of the Durand Line speak the same language, Pashto, in its various dialects. They share some important cultural traits. It is quite understandable that there will be a desire for cross border contacts among the people. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan can and should prompt economic, educational and cultural ties between the two sides. This will enrich the larger societies in both countries.

Lar & Bar as political aspiration is not strange too. As per classic understanding of the term nation, a group of people having shared geography, cultural features and history are justified to form their own nation state. Nevertheless, unlike other nations around the world, the Pashtun ideas of nation and nation state are marred with serious confusions and shortcomings that were never confronted and addressed. The ideas are anchored in distorted history information, stereotypes and complete lack of introspection. The focus is one dimensional: hate of Pakistan, especially Pakistan army, and the Punjab.

The assumptions are these. Pakistan is the main responsible state for the death and destruction in Afghanistan. There can be no peace in Afghanistan as long as Pakistan exists as state. Pakistan's territory up to district Attock belongs to Afghanistan. Pashtuns in Pakistan are slaves of the Punjabis and waiting to be released from the slavery by the Pashtun of Afghanistan. That Pashtun of Pakistan who dissent are Gul Khans (brainwashed idiots) or not even Pashtun. They are Punjabi settlers in Pakhtunkhwa who have learnt Pashtun language, which they are now using to undermines the Lar & Bar. When the time comes all the dissenting Pashtun will be thrown into Punjab for good, if they resist reunification of the Lar and Bar. The fact that large non-Pashtun minorities living in Lar can be as opposed to unification with Afghanistan as the 'Gul Khans' and the 'Punjabi settlers' is not even worth considering. All Afghan kings, especially since Ahmad Shah Abdali, founder of Afghanistan, and presidents (with a possible exception of President Hamid Karzai) are our *Atalan* (heroes) and they never made any mistakes, or otherwise did nothing wrong. Those of the *Atalan* who did not succeed were because of foreign conspiracies. Afghans are one the best, if not the best, people in the world in terms of culture, bravery and love of the land and the world has to learn a lot from them. Afghanistan has never been occupied by foreign powers.

Some of the assumptions are too baseless to be taken seriously. Therefore, I comment on only a few of them.

Pashtun is fragmented inwards-looking tribal universe, also known as the largest tribal society in the world. Today, the tribal social structure hardly exists anywhere in the Lar and Bar, but tribal mindset exists almost everywhere in the region. Pashtun could never construct an imagined community based on modern nationhood ideals. Only ideals forming Pashtun imagined community is Pashtunwali and tribal Islam. Key components of the former are revenge, tribal honour and subordination of women and of the latter is glorification of violent Jihad. These are not the ideals modern nationhood and nation state can be made from. In fact they are anti-thesis to the modern notion of nationhood, and much of it would form crime against a nation state's law.

Many other societies now organized in nation states were tribes at some point of time, but before reaching the nation state level they had developed some modern sense of belonging to an 'imagined community' transcending tribal affiliations. Successful nationalists in Muslim contexts too (such as young Turks under Attaturk) rose above tribalism, took minorities within and outside Islam hand in hand and showed remarkable openness towards women's rights. Motivated by these modern ideals their nationalist struggle led to nation state.

The Pashtuns got a state, an Afghan state, under Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1747. The state did not emerge a consequence of political struggle on the part of the Pashtun as a nation. Instead, it emerged in the chaos triggered the killing of Abdali's boss, Nadir Shah Afshari, the king of Persia, and in the vacuum created by the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in India, which also included large parts of Afghanistan as its territory. Tribal hordes joined the Abdali *Lashkar* to plunder the rich lands towards the east, which had been made convenient by the chaos.

Proponents of the Lar and Bar glorify the history of the Afghan state and look upon it as modern state. To call the Afghan state a nation state is misleading. A modern state means an organization where the state made laws and institutions regulate the society. In Afghanistan, the state law and institutions never became deep seated in Afghanistan. It remains a tribal confederation where the state is just one among other power sources to be engaged with to negotiate for tribal or/and individual interests. The state rarely tried to challenge the tribal or private interpretations of Islam and Pashtunwali, minus in some urban centres. It never brought the entire population under the law, and where it tried, it had failed in face of violent opposition from the tribal society. This state has never been sovereign. Its external sovereignty was subservient to other states and internal sovereignty to the tribal society.

Inspired by the success of the Young Turks in modern Turkey, the Afghan king, Ghazi Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) did try to raise 'Young Afghans' but failed due lack of internal sovereignty of Afghanistan in face of Pashtun tribal inwardness. Another reason he failed was that Afghanistan's ruling elite and the Pashtun masses lived in parallel social universe. The Persianized elite, although ethnically Pashtun, looked down upon Pashtun culture. They spoke Persian/Darri and often did not even bother to learn Pashto as their second language. During his visit to Kabul, Bacha Khan, a Pashtun nationalist leader allied with the Indian National Congress in Lar, almost shamed King Amanullah for the Kabul elite's aversion to

Pashto language. Pashto, on the other hand, was the only language of the tribes challenging the internal sovereignty of the state.

Communication gap between the state and the society was enormous. There are examples around the world of elites speaking a different language than the population they ruled were successful in converting their tribal societies in some kind of 'imagined national communities'. The situation in Afghanistan was different. There the state was not the final lawgiver and enforcer. The tribal society had its own regulatory norms and values and was practically not subservient to but shared power with the state. This means that communication via a common language was important as an important part of the state backs effort to construct a shared 'imagined community' beyond the tribal lines. The arrogant Persianized elite failed to rise up to the occasion. They simply could not open up their elitism to Pashto language. The Lar and Bar proponents have never looked upon the arrogance of the elite is one of the reasons of the Pashtun tribal backwardness.

It is also claimed that the area from river Oxus to river Indus belongs to Afghanistan. Historically, the area neither exclusively belongs to Afghanistan nor it is entirely Pashtun in terms of demography. Hazara region, Malakand and big urban centre areas in Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar, Kohat and DIK, are have large non-Pashtun minorities who are as much indigenous to the area as Pashtun and in some cases even older than Pashtun. It is uncritically assumed that they non-Pashtun minorities idealize Lar and Bar unification in one state. Contrary examples, such as the Hazara region's opposition to renaming NWFP to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa on the basis that the latter name hides the separate Hazarwal identity of the region, are rejected out of hand.

The area west of Indus was part of Punjab under the Delhi Sultans, the Mughals and the Abdali state. It was only the British who out of strategic consideration carved out in 1901 a new province, North-West Frontier Province, NWFP, now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa from the Punjab, a division that were resented by the Hindu minority of the Punjab. The Pakistani tribal area (formal FATA and now the western districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) was not under direct control of Afghanistan since Afghanistan was not internally sovereign, especially in the peripheral mountainous tribal region.

Also, importantly, the Afghan state had no fixed territorial limits until the British and the Russians not only forced it to have boundaries but also fixed the boundaries for it. The Afghans question the British-drawn Durand Land but are silent on other Afghan borders also drawn by the British and Russians. For example, upon the conclusion of Anglo-Russian Joint Commission, 1896, Afghanistan was forced to include Wakhan area in its territory in order to fulfil its buffer state role between the two empires. Going by the territorial claims, Punjab probably have a better claim on Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa than Afghanistan and India has an even better claim over Punjab including its Pashtun areas and even the area up to Kabul in Afghanistan. In today's world the will of the people is more important than territorial claims anchored in past states' histories. The Lar and Bar proponents take it for granted that the will of the diverse population of Pashtun area is with them.

Many states around the time of Ahmad Shah Abdali did plunder other states. Nevertheless, they did use some of the plundered wealth to generate stable revenue sources in the states. The Abdali state could never generate its own revenue sources. It relied on plunder to finance

itself. The plundering became impossible when came in the age of Great Game between the Russian and British Empires who reduced the Afghan state status to a strategic space between the two empires. Capitalism (or socialism), industrialization, monopoly over violence and administrative surveillance of entire population through modern educational institutions, offices, hospitals remained alien to the Afghan state. Moreover, the British, in understanding with the Russians, frequently made the Amirs (rulers of Afghanistan) to compulsory retire on British pensions, which including allowances ensuring luxuriant life style of the Amirs. This also questions the claim that Afghanistan was never occupied by foreign powers.

The Abdali state stretched up to Delhi. Following Abdali's death, the state plunged into tribal warfare and soon large parts of it (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and parts of former FATA) were snatched by the Sikh state under Ranjit Singh, who soon gave up the area to the British. Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa lived only about 50 years with the Abdali's tribal confederation and since then is (nearly two centuries) under the modern state set up- British and Pakistani combined. When the Lar & Bar proponents ask Pashtun of Pakistan to join Afghanistan, they are basically asking them to turn the clock back by abandoning the modern state set up for a tribal confederation set up.

Following the Russian-Anglo understanding in the post-2nd Afghan war, the Russians presented the Pashtun Barakzai clansman Abdur Rahman, a ward of the Russian general Kauffman, as Amir of Afghanistan and the British accepted it. Both empires allowed the Amir Abdur Rahman internal autonomy, while foreign affairs remained under the British control.

Amir Abdur Rahman went on to build the Afghan state through exploitation of Islam and sectarianism. Hanafi Islam was the official religion of the state, excluding other sects of Islam which did exist in Afghanistan. Sharia courts were formed in the governable areas of the country. The Amir himself, arguably a debauch, had concubines, but incorporated stoning as punishment for adultery in the law. He converted by force entire Kafirstan population to Sunni Islam. Kafirs on the other side of the Durand Line, in Chitral survived his atrocities because their area came under the British who were tolerant towards indigenous minorities. The Khurram Shias were threatened so much that they requested the British to take the area in British protection, which they did. The Qizailbash Shia in Afghanistan are even said to have practiced *Taqiyya* (protective dissimulation to save life or property) in face of anti-Shia persecution in the country. Hazara Shias also suffered persecution and many took refuge in Quetta under the British government. The Amir won over tribal public legitimacy for his power through oppression of religious minorities and exploitation of Islam. There are no proponents of the Lar and Bar who have shown even a slightest intention to tender apology to the religious minorities or even acknowledge that the religious minorities suffered prolonged oppressions in Afghanistan's state backed exploitation of Islam and sectarianism.

The King Ghazi Amanullah Khan did try to modernize the state but failed due to tribal and Islamic revolts against the government. He also failed to raise a professional army that could have crushed the tribal revolts to his modernization agenda. Consequently, he was forced to abdicate the throne and went in exile, leaving the country in bloodshed. Pashtun of Afghanistan are probably the only Muslim society in the world where a monarch who ran away is honoured with the title Ghazi (one who fought in the name of Allah). A ghazi, in the Islamic understanding of the term, is supposed to fight on and definitely never escape the

battle field. The Lar and Bar proponents put entire blame on the British for tribal revolt against the king's government. The fact is that the British role is only one of the reasons. The other reason is the conservative tribal society that he was not accepting his modernization agenda, and the British exploited it to pay the king in kind. Some years before 1929, the king, despite all his modernity claims, enticed against the British a violent Jihad in the tribal areas under the British control, Waziristan & Khyber. The British exhausted by the First World War and rising Indian independent movement could hardly afford another expensive war inside Afghanistan, and thus gave up its control over the Afghan foreign policy to the King through the Anglo-Afghan agreement in 1922. Some years down the road the British settled the score by bringing down the king with Jihad against him by his own 'subjects'. Both Amanullah Khan and the British used the uncritical Pashtun obsession with Jihad to settle scores with each other.

Religious extremism is a chronic social evil of the Pashtun society that is perpetually exploitable since centuries. Any state or non-state actors, foreign or indigenous can hold the entire Pashtun society hostage by exploiting it. This is the main reason of mass sufferings of religious minorities among Pashtun: Kafirs, Shias and others, and also an important cause of inwardness of the society, which beget violence upon the wider Pashtun society. The religious extremism can be controlled through social transformation in cooperation between reform minded Pashtun and a state willing to use law as agent of social change. Afghan state was never internally sovereign enough to do that and social activism in the Pashtun social universe, if any, was too weak to take roots without state support.

The notion of bravery is stereotypically associated with Pashtun and many of them often take uncritical pride in the notion. The pride has become a social evil too. It offers solace in the past that never was as beautiful as assumed. More importantly, it takes away attention from the reality that the invading empires faced resistance in Pashtun areas due to its tough mountainous terrain. Amir Abdur Rahman refused to build transport infrastructures (roads, bridges) in Afghanistan because this could compromise impregnability of Afghanistan by making its takeover easier by foreign armies. His fear proved correct much later when the Russian army used the infrastructure it helped built to occupy Afghanistan in 1979.

The legal basis of the Afghan claims on Pashtun parts of Pakistan are not tenable either. It is a myth that the Afghan government leased the Pashtun tribal areas to the British India government for 100 years. There is no textual evidence about it in all agreements between the two governments. It could be argued that Amir Abdur Rahman signed the Durand Line Agreement of 1893, which defined the border of the Afghanistan and British India, under duress. But there was no British duress on the Afghan government in 1919 and 1922 when it signed agreements with the British that confirmed the same border between the countries. Beaten by the First World War, the British were in no position to exert duress on Afghanistan. In the context of the 1947 participation of India, the Afghan government argued that the agreements signed with the British will terminate with departure of the British from India. The British government rejected, arguing that as successor state in the area, Pakistan inherits all the international agreements of the British Indian government. In response the Afghan government refused to recognize Pakistan as sovereign state in the UN, but it soon back tracked and recognizes the country. The Afghans do not question their government on why it back tracked in the UN, if its legal position is strong. If it had unsure legal stance, why did it go to the UN in first place?

The Lar and Bar proponents often ask why does Pakistan fear when it believes Afghanistan has no legal standing on the Durand Line. History shows that big international powers determined to punish a relatively weak state can artificially construct excuses to do so. The US attack on Iraq on pretext of Baghdad's possession of weapon of mass destruction, when it actually possessed none, and the US knew it, is a case in point. Pakistan is concerned that in future any big power determined to break Pakistan for whatever reason may use the Afghan claim as legitimate reason to attack Pakistan. It therefore, wants the Afghan Lar & Bar voices be silenced. Pakistan use Islamists in Afghanistan proxies to achieve this objective.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's proxy war in Afghanistan is not exclusively the function of the Lar & Bar territorial claim. Afghanistan was and is a strategic space of international and regional powers. They assemble in Afghanistan when they have to fight a war. Pakistan cannot ignore their overwhelming presence in its neighbourhood and also is no position to kick out all international and regional powers from Afghanistan. Resultantly, it has to side with one or more powers against the others in line with its own interests in Afghanistan. This implies that the holding Pakistan exclusively responsible for the violence in Afghanistan, as the Lar and Bar proponents passionately do, is wrong. Afghanistan would be in turmoil due to its strategic space status, even if there is no Pakistan.

Since decades the Afghan governments have failed to balance the international and regional power conflicts in the country, which is resulting in perpetual violence in the country. Afghan people now must now come forward in unity and peacefully protests to all states who take it for granted to use Afghan soil for proxy wars as and when they like. Afghanistan needs a robust mass movement that can peacefully mobilized people across the country, across ethnic lines to demand all the powers to leave their country in peace. Afghanistan needs a Manzoor Pashteen. That Manzoor Pashteen have to be much stronger, much more organized than Manzoor Pashteen of Pakistan, who is demanding justice from Pakistan military establishment. Afghanistan's Manzoor Pashteen will have to address the international and regional establishments to seek justice and rights for the war devastated people in the country.

A Pakistani Pashtun perspective is important in this discussion. Pakistan is a modern state due to its inherited from the British structure and legal framework. There are good reasons to believe that Pakistani Pashtun is not motivated to break away from Pakistan. Numerically, most Pashtun are in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. Pakistani Pashtun are relatively more integrated in the Pakistani state institutions as compared with other small ethnicities in Pakistan. Pashtun in Pakistan are better than their counterparts in Afghanistan in education and human development. Arguably, the Pakistani Pashtun — despite their own cultural backwardness — are relatively culturally more advanced than those in Afghanistan. Whatever Pashtun in Pakistan have achieved in education, various professions and services, economy, and culture is mainly due to educational and other state institutions of Pakistan.

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947 there was no Pakistan army in the border areas with Afghanistan up to 9/11, when Pakistan has to deploy army in the area due to the US attack on Taliban led Afghanistan. This is because there has never been any masse based secessionist movement among Pakistani Pashtun that posed threats to the territorial integrity of Pakistan. Bacha Khan, who opposed the creation of Pakistan in the pre-participation 1947 context, accepted Pakistan by joining its constituent assembly of Pakistan in the post 1947 Partition

context. Faqir of Ipi's armed struggle, although anti-Pakistan, was restricted to only certain part of Waziristan. By no means can it be describe as movement of the wider Pashtun masses in Pakistan. The movement ended with death of the Faqir in early 1960s.

At the same time Pashtun have enormously suffered due strategic polices of the federation of Pakistan, especially in the post 9/11 war on terror. Parts of their area are used as strategic space. Pashtun tribal conversation and religious extremism are nurtured to ensure constant supply of Pashtun foot soldiers for the wars in Afghanistan and beyond. Most victims of the war on terror based violence are Pashtun. The war has also badly damaged their economy. Thousands of these victims have ended up with massive injustices and rights violations that the state has not yet addressed. This also implies that the state has also failed on its human rights responsibilities; especially under the important agreements Pakistan are party to: the Child Rights Convention, Women's Convention and the Covenant Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The British Indian army in Pashtun areas now in Pakistan had more arbitrary power than the army in other parts of the British Indian Empire. Low level army officers posted in this area were allowed to kill, burn, and threat, rob and bribe at the spot at will due to the unique strategic position. Pakistan army is standing on this British tradition in the area and is not willing to give up the tradition in Pashtun areas. In general, Pakistan inherited a strong army and weak democratic institutions from the British. Pakistan came into being with this civil-military imbalance. Democratic forces in Pakistan have not been able so far to remove that displace. In essence, the strategic policy driven human sufferings in Pashtun area is a result of the civil-military imbalance in Pakistan. The military dominated strategic policy has negatively affected economy, culture and human security in most parts of Pakistan too. The sufferings can end when Pakistani political leaders take control of the foreign policy. Political leadership of main political parties, such as PPP and PML (N), are in favour of good neighbourly relations with all neighbours of Pakistan. There is a negotiating room for a mutually beneficial settlement with Afghanistan too.

It must be remembered that previous Afghan governments have a dubious, if not hypocritical stance on the Durand Line. The King Amanullah Khan negotiated with the British Empire an agreement in which he confirmed the Durand Line and in return accepted for the Afghan state favourable trade concessions and facilities from the British. If the King had wanted, he could have pressed the First World War exhausted British on the Durand Line too, but he did not. Another example of this dubious conduct if of the President Sardar Daud (1973-78), who initially raised the Pashunistan issue so much that the Bhutto led Pakistan responded with support to the Islamist insurgents against the Daud government. But when the then US ally, Iran, invited Afghanistan to regional alliance including Pakistan, President Daud, in search of financial opportunities for the cash-stripped Afghanistan, toned down his Pashtunistan rhetoric. It was around this time when a group of Pashtun nationalists from Pakistan were in exile in Afghanistan. One of those nationalists told me in the presence of two faculty members of the Wali Khan University Mardan that President Daud surprised the exiled leaders when he said he does not even know what the Pashtunistan issue was all about. The exiled leaders had thought they were fighting for a common cause with Afghanistan and the president' response shocked them.

It must also be noted that the Afghan claim on the Durand Line is not exclusively about Pashtun nationalist cause. It is also about the unhindered Afghan access to the sea. The land locked Afghanistan now depends on Pakistan for the access. If materialized, Afghanistan's territorial extension to area it claims (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Baluchistan) will give it direct access to the sea in Baluchistan for trade and strategic purposes.

This gives the hope that Afghanistan can compromise and the Lar and Bar voices emanating from the country can be marginalized if there is a massive economic treaty between Afghanistan and Pakistan cooperation with other regional countries. War exhausted people of both sides of the Durand Line would welcome new economic opportunities.

How to correct the civil-military imbalance in Pakistan is the biggest political challenge. Previously, only the smaller provinces suffered the consequences of the imbalance. The largest Punjab province, from where Pakistan army draws most of its numerical strength, stood as silent spectator when the smaller province suffered. With the recent harsh treatment meted out to the Punjab based PML (N) party, the largest Punjab province has also experienced the consequences of the civil military imbalance. This also gives the hope that the joint democratic forces from all provinces can be eventually able to assert civilian authority over the policy making in Pakistan. If this happened, Pakistan has a good chance to survive and prosperous as a multi ethnic society. Pashtun will participate in creation and enjoyment of the prosperity. As citizen of Pakistan, I prefer to see a vibrant Pakistan under the rule of law, with focus on human development and at peace with its own people and its neighbours.

In the unlikely tragedy of collapse of Pakistan, a new Pashtun state may emerge comprising both Lar and Bar. This state will be very vulnerable to collapse in tribal conservatism and Jihadi violence brought by the combination of tribal backwardness of the Pashtun on both sides and regional and international state and non-actors fighting proxy wars on the soil. The Pakistani Pashtun, being in majority and more educated and advanced, will have the prime responsibility to avoid the collapse and also build the world's first modern Pashtun state. The arrogant and incompetent Persianized Pashtun elite of Afghanistan could not even properly envision a modern Pashtun state in centuries. Any hope they can do so in the Lar and Bar in future is useless. Pakistani Pashtun will have to take up and fulfil this responsibility. Three steps are absolutely vital that must be taken care from the very start of the new state. One, the legal framework inherited from Pakistan must be applied on the entire Lar and Bar with immediate effect. Where necessary fresh legislation can be made. Laws and regulations will have to be strictly implemented across the country. In other words, on the outset the state will have to effectively use law as agent of social change to eliminate the tribal backwardness, with special focus on women, children and religious minorities. Two, Peshawar, not Kabul must be the capital of the new state. Jalalabad due to its proximity with Peshawar can be declared a sister city of Peshawar and some of the government offices may be relocated there after the two cities are connected with cheap and fast means of transport as to reduce the travel time between the two. Kabul should be left to the people it really belongs to: the Parsiban (Persian/Darri speaking people). Non-Pashtun minorities among Pashtun have to be taken onboard in all important decisions and their rights and interests constitutionally protected.

In this context the Pakistani Pashtun will have to fulfil the role of the ruling elite. They will have to rise up to the occasion no matter how hard. Failure will not be affordable. They will either rise or with them will the whole Lar and Bar or they will fall and with them will fall the entire society into Jihadi militancy for generations to come.

Note: The terms Afghan and Pashtun are interchangeably used in this article. It must be, however, noted that every Pashtun is also an Afghan, but every Afghan is not a Pashtun, such as Tajik, Hazara, among others, are also Afghans but not Pashtun.

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